

# Teim



## TEIM Election Watch Analysis

**ELECTORAL REPORT:**

**SYRIA/Parliamentary elections**  
22 and 23 April 2007

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## Background of the elections:

The Syrian parliamentary elections were held in an atmosphere of some tension. They were preceded by a call to boycott them made by all of the opposition parties in the regime. The strongest opposition organisations inside the country, the Syrian Democratic Coalition (SDC) and the Damascus Declaration bloc (a coalition of 16 parties and independent intellectuals), called for voters to abstain, with the aim of demanding a project for democratic reform which would include a new electoral law and the legalisation of all political parties. From exile, the Syrian National Salvation Front, a coalition made up of the Muslim Brothers and ex-Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam, joined this initiative with the goal of bringing about the collapse of the system. Finally, a few days before the election, the Kurdish parties also joined the boycott.

## Quantitative indices of democracy:

Syria was classified in the following democratic performance rankings before the elections:

Measurement	Name and year of report or database	Institution	Index	Points, ranking and classification
Political rights and freedom	<a href="#">Freedom House Report</a> 2007	Freedom House (FH)	PR: political rights CL: civil liberties	PR: 7, CL: 7 (Scale of 1, free to 7, not free) <b>Classification: Not Free</b>
Degree of democracy in earlier elections	<a href="#">Polyarchy 2.0</a> 2004 (referring to 2000)	Peace Research Institute of Oslo and Tatu Vanhanen	ID: Synthetic democracy index, Part: participation, Comp: competition	ID: 1.4, max. 49 Part: 51, max. 70 Comp: 2.7, max. 70 (Democracy minimum: ID: 5, Part: 10, Comp: 30) <b>Classification: Non-democratic</b>
Consolidation of authoritarian and democratic institutions	<a href="#">Polity IV</a> 2004	Center for International Development and Conflict Management, Univ. of Maryland	Democracy: consolidation of democratic institutions Autocracy: authoritarian consolidation Polity: synthesis of both	Democracy: 0 Autocracy: 9 Polity: -9 (Scale of +10, very democratic to -10, very authoritarian) Classification: Non-democratic
Perception of corruption	<a href="#">Transparency International Corruption Perception Index</a> Nov. 2006	Transparency International (TI)	TICPI: corruption perceptions index	<b>TCPI: 2.4 points out of 10</b> (Scale of 1, very corrupt to 10, not at all corrupt) Rank: 138 out of 179 countries
Management of political and economic change	<a href="#">Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI)</a> 2006	Bertelsmann Foundation	MI: Management Index, quality of transformation management	<b>MI: 2.85 points out of 10</b> , Rank: 114 out of 119 countries Classification: Management with weak success
Democracy, including press status and corruption	<a href="#">World Democracy Audit</a> May 2007	World Audit	World Democracy Rank: political freedom (FH) + press and corruption (TI)	World Democracy Ranking: <b>134</b> out of <b>150</b> countries, <b>division 4</b> out of 4

## Quantitative analysis of electoral democracy:

The elections analysed in this profile produced the following electoral democracy quantitative results:

Degree of democracy in these elections	Measurement of democracy in these elections according to the Polyarchy 2.0 index, calculated by <a href="#">TEIM Election Watch</a>	ID: 0, max. 49 Part: 21.4 <sup>1</sup> , max. 70 Comp: approx. 0 <sup>2</sup> , max. 70 (Democracy minimum: ID: 5, Part: 10, Comp: 30)	Classification: <b>Non-democratic</b>
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## Definition of the electoral system and parties:

In theory, Syria has a multi-party system with direct one-round elections for both parliamentary and municipal elections. In practice, however, the party system is hegemonic: the law on parties restricts electoral participation to the parties that form part of the National Progressive Front<sup>3</sup> (NPF), a coalition of 9 or 10 parties (the number has changed over the years) with an Arab nationalist tendency. Since 1980, the electoral law has established that 167 of the 250 seats in parliament, i.e., 2/3 of the seats, must be assigned to the NPF. The remaining 83 seats are in the hands of independent candidates. This coalition, however, is completely controlled by the Ba'ath Party. According to Article 8 of the Constitution, the Ba'ath Party must lead the Syrian state and society. This means, among other things, that the Ba'ath Party alone has around 131 of the seats assigned to the NPF. Similarly, this party, led by the President, is responsible for designating the Presidential candidate.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Article 53 of the Constitution stipulates that 50% of the seats must be held by farmers and members of the working class.

Furthermore, the Syrian electoral system works according to the Block Vote formula,<sup>5</sup> in which electors have as many votes as candidates to be elected in their constituency. Therefore, voters vote for candidates rather than parties. The electoral threshold is 5% with respect to the total voters registered per constituency.

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<sup>1</sup> Participation was calculated out of 4,157,626 voters and an estimated population of 19,405,000 inhabitants in 2007, according to the United Nations Population Division.

<sup>2</sup> Although 78 seats went to independents, this does not really form an opposition to power, first because the independents come from the same elites in the regime and are in line with them and secondly, because they cannot compete for victory since they cannot surpass a fixed percentage of representation, equal to one third of the total. For this reason, competition nears 0 or is very low (2.7 in 2000 and always since 1957 near 0, according to Polyarchy 2.0).

<sup>3</sup> The founding charter of the NPF dates from 1971, and the government decides whether or not a party can enter the NPF through the law on parties. However, around 15 other small political parties exist which, while not illegal, do not have access to the institutions.

<sup>4</sup> This candidacy must later be approved by the Peoples' Council and finally submitted to a popular referendum.

<sup>5</sup> The names of the electoral systems are those used by IDEA, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. For details, see the Electoral System Design on their webpage: <http://www.idea.int/esd/world.cfm>

## Impact of the electoral process and size of the constituency on the elections:

Syrian electoral law divides the country into 15 constituencies. These correspond to 13 governorates and the cities of Aleppo and Damascus.<sup>6</sup> Both of these cities form a single electoral district apart from the province in which they are located. The constituencies have an average of 14 seats, meaning that they can be designated as large. In theory, when a constituency has more than 10 seats, there is no impact on the degree of proportionality in the system.<sup>7</sup>

In the specific case of Syria, the opposition has been very critical of the size of the constituencies. They believe that the current size makes access to parliament more difficult for local and regional elites and favours economically stronger candidates or those supported by the Ba'ath government, i.e., those who have the means to promote themselves.

Regarding the electoral process, it is important to bear in mind that the characteristics of the Block Vote system are intensified by the particular characteristics of the Syrian system. The voter must remember the 50% division between farmers and members of the working class on one hand and members of other professions on the other. To this end, ballots have two empty areas, one for candidates belonging to the farming and working sectors and the other for the rest. Following this distribution, the voter must clearly write in the names of the same number of candidates as the seats assigned to the constituency. If the ballots cannot be read clearly, or do not meet the required proportionality, they are cancelled, which makes fraud easy.

In practice, the importance of the electoral process is quite relative, given that the results are distorted as a consequence of the aforementioned distribution of seats in parliament. Whatever the result, a minimum 2/3 of the deputies are from the NPF.

## Election results:

People's Council	No. of Seats
<b>Arab Socialist Renaissance (Ba'ath) Party</b>	135
Arab Socialist Union	
Arab Socialist Movement	
Syrian Communist Party	
Unionist Socialist Party	
Syrian Social Nationalist Party	
Arab Democratic Socialist Union Party	
National Vow Movement	

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<sup>6</sup> This means that the provinces of Damascus and Aleppo form a total of 4 electoral constituencies. In Damascus, there is the city of Damascus with 29 seats and the Rif Dimasq *muhafazat*, the rural part of the province, which has 19 seats. In Aleppo, there is the city of Aleppo with 20 seats and then the province of Aleppo, which has 32 seats.

<sup>7</sup> Agustí Bosch explains it thus: "It is estimated that systems with uninominal constituencies produce a malapportionment index that is almost double that of small [proportional] constituencies (with 2-6 seats) and that they produce malapportionment indices that are also almost double those of medium-sized constituencies (6-10 seats). (A. Bosch, *Guía del sistema electora [Guide to electoral systems]*, Autonomous University of Barcelona Publication Service, Barcelona, 2004, p. 21.

<b>Total National Progressive Front (NPF) seats, not including Ba'ath</b>	37*
<b>Total NPF seats</b>	172
<b>Independent Candidates</b>	78
<b>Total seats</b>	250
<b>Participation</b>	<b>56.12 %</b>

Source: Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), 26/04/2007

\* The NPF seats are shown without the Ba'ath Party, since these are the only official figures to date

The independent candidates lost 5 seats, decreasing from 83 to 78. As a consequence, the Ba'ath and NPF parties now control 172 seats. In this respect, the standard practice of reserving 83 seats for independent candidates was broken in favour of the NPF.

Furthermore, according to the opposition, almost no new elements entered parliament. Even many of the new deputies were well-known commodities in the regime and have played important political and institutional roles before. Ammar Sa'ati, for example, is the head of the Union of Students while Abou al-Shamat is the head of the Damascus branch of the Ba'ath Party.

### **Evaluative analysis of the elections<sup>8</sup>:**

#### Participation:

The polls were open from 7:00 to 20:00 on Sunday the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 7:00 to 14:00 on Monday the 23<sup>rd</sup>. 10,903 polling places were set up.

According to the country's official news agency, SANA, of the 11,967,611 citizens with the right to vote, 7,924,816 obtained a voting card. Of these, the government denied the right to vote to 516,360 citizens. In the end, 4,157,626 voters cast their ballot. All in all, the participation numbers are controversial; while the government spoke of a 56.12% participation rate, the opposition mentioned numbers as low as 7%.

#### Competition:

The electoral law specifies that a minimum of 167 seats be assigned to the NPF. Therefore, real competition only exists for one third of the seats, those reserved for independent candidates. However, according to the opposition, not even the competition for these seats was real since the government impeded access to any candidates that it considered as undesirable through various mechanisms: the creation of electoral lists, public support and logistics provided by the Ba'ath Party for very select candidates in very specific areas, challenging undesirable candidates through the Home Office, etc.

#### Transparency:

Even before the elections were held, the opposition called attention to several anomalies. Early on, SANA put the number of candidates at 9,000.

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<sup>8</sup> This section uses TEIM's 6 election criteria which are: Participation, Competition, Transparency, Representation and Debate, Openness and Significance. See the home page for an explanation of each of these criteria.

However, on Friday the 18<sup>th</sup>, this agency began to speak of 2,500 candidates without any type of clarification. After the elections, the webpage [http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/syrianelector\\_english/](http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/syrianelector_english/), which had been monitoring the election process quite exhaustively, gathered together the irregularities which the regime had committed during the election. On one hand, it stated that the Ba'ath Party had forced its members to vote for specific independent candidates in order to weaken the candidates who were undesirable from the government's point of view. Similarly, many polls, especially in the north and in rural areas, did not respect the pre-established schedules, closing their doors before the established time.

The same site asserts that a series of serious altercations took place at different points in the al-Rikkah province which were sparked by internal rivalries between the local elites.

#### Party representation and debate during the campaign:

The representation of parties in Syria continues to be one of the most criticised elements of the elections in this country. The political parties with institutional representation are only those that the government considers appropriate, i.e., the 10 that make up the NPF. Political debate in the media was practically non-existent. In January 2007, there was a reform of the electoral law, which permitted access by independent candidates to the official media. However, the media barely covered the campaign which, in the end, was basically limited to putting up posters.

#### Openness:

In the last Ba'ath congress in 2005, there was talk of a possible opening in institutional participation for new political parties. Two years later, however, no change had taken place. The only political parties with access to the chamber are those that form the NPF.

Additionally, on 3 January 2007, the government introduced two reforms to the election law. First, as noted above, independent candidates were allowed to present their candidacy in the official media. Secondly, the amount of money that each candidate can invest in an election campaign was reduced to 3 million Syrian lira (around \$60,000). The government alleged that the intention of this act was to curb corruption and limit the differences between workers and farmers, on one hand and the candidates belonging to the free professions, on the other. However, the real reach of these measures, for all intents and purposes, was negligible.

#### Significance:

These elections were of scant significance, given that the few changes that occurred did nothing more than strengthen the government and its control over the legislative body.

#### **Consequences and impact on the political system:**

These elections had no notable impact on the Syrian political system which will continue to function as before.

#### **International political reaction:**

The parliamentary elections in Syria received very little attention from the international community. Most of the western administrations either did not comment on them or criticised the lack of credibility in the process.

On 24 April, White House Deputy Press Secretary Dana Perino said, "On April 22 and 23, President Bashar failed again to deliver on his long-promised reforms, rendering Syria's parliamentary elections a meaningless exercise".<sup>9</sup>

Governments including Canada and even neighbouring Jordan also expressed their disagreement with the Syrian electoral process, as presented on the webpage [http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/syrianelector\\_english/](http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/syrianelector_english/)

In short, the election results had little effect on Syria's international position.

### **Implications for Spain:**

These elections had no implications for relations between Syria and Spain. They did not imply any change in the country's internal policies, meaning that the government's foreign relations will not undergo any changes, or at least any changes resulting from the election results.

Spanish diplomatic activity in this country takes place within the framework of Spanish policy towards the Middle East with special attention paid to Lebanon in the last year. With this aim, Miguel Angel Moratinos has visited the country several times beginning in summer 2006, trying to achieve greater collaboration with Syria in stabilising the area. In this respect, it must be said that the head of Spanish diplomacy is a well-received intermediary in Damascus, probably thanks to the attitude that the Spanish diplomat has shown towards Syria. Moratinos has always publicly defended the need for dialogue with the Syrian regime, even at times of greater international isolation for the country.

### **Conclusions:**

In brief, the April 2007 parliamentary elections were no more than theatre, with little real impact on the social, institutional and political evolution in the country. The only change brought about by these elections was the 5 seats now under the control of the NPF, and the resulting increase in the government's control over the chamber.

Moreover, it is important to note the high abstention rate, which the opposition spoke of, although even if true, it cannot be seen as a protest against the regime. The extremely broad support that the President received after the referendum held on 27 May, i.e., only one month after these parliamentary elections, puts paid to this theory.

### **Reference to other Internet analyses of this election:**

Analysis by the Syrian Elector opposition platform:  
[http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/syrianelector\\_english/2007/05/the\\_syrian\\_legi.html](http://tharwacommunity.typepad.com/syrianelector_english/2007/05/the_syrian_legi.html)

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<sup>9</sup> *L' Orient le Jour*, 25/04/2007

Analysis by *Intekhabat*, the body that analyses electoral processes in the Arab world:

<http://www.intekhabat.org/look/en-article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=1&NrArticle=2638&NrIssue=2&NrSection=4>

Analysis from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:  
[http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Syria\\_APS.doc](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Syria_APS.doc)

**Résumé (en français):**

En synthèse, les dernières élections législatives en Syrie n'ont apporté aucun élément de changement sur le système politique en place. Tout au contraire, le parti Baath, et le FNP, dont il fait partie, ont obtenu plus de sièges parlementaires que lors des élections précédentes: maintenant ils ont 172 députés, alors que en 2003 ils en avaient 167. Par conséquent, les candidats dits indépendants sont moins nombreux; et la plupart des élus sont d'ailleurs, proches du gouvernement. Ainsi, ces dernières élections législatives en Syrie, ont définitivement limitée d'avantage l'indépendance du pouvoir législatif, déjà sous le contrôle de fer du gouvernement.