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'A political solution in Syria is a long way off'

Human rights activist Joumana Seif on the re-election of Bashar al-Assad — and why there is nonetheless hope for the Syrian people

Syria's strongman Bashar al-Assad was re-elected in elections deemed illegitimate by the West, supposedly with 95.1 per cent of 14 million voters at a turnout of 78 per cent. What does this result mean under the current circumstances?

The result announced by Assad is an outrage. All experts and research confirm that only about 9.4 million people live in the areas controlled by the regime, and according to the statistics authority, 45 per cent of them are under 18 years old. So the maximum number of eligible voters could only be about 5.2 million people. And as for the result of allegedly 95.1 per cent for Assad, the intention is to convey that Assad is legitimised to rule the country again as harshly as his father did in the 1980s, because back then the election result was never allowed to be below 95 per cent either.

Assad is the undisputed ruler in Syria. Any political competition was eliminated in advance. What message does he want to send with the election?

Assad wanted to send several messages with this bad performance called elections, the result of which was a foregone conclusion. On the one hand, after his military victory thanks to Russian intervention, he wants to respond to the pressure of the democratic world by saying to the West: “I am the winner and the elected president, and like in your countries, there were even other candidates.”

Moreover, he sends a message of power as an unrestrained ruler who is still loved by the people. For ten years he has committed crimes, killed, bombed, and displaced people, and yet he can still impose his will on everyone and does not have to bow to any pressure. Despite all these crimes, he can rely on the fear of the majority of the

disenfranchised who had to go and vote in order not to get a negative endorsement that can cost them or their relatives their lives, dignity, and integrity.

Moreover, Assad wants to use this to announce that he has become "acceptable" again, especially since some Arab states have indicated that they would like to normalise their relations with him again. The United Arab Emirates, for example, wants to reopen its embassy in Damascus. And in a speech to the people after the elections, Assad said: "Whoever stands with me is a patriot, and whoever stands against me is a traitor for whom there is no place in Syria."

Assad has gone from being a beacon of hope in 2001 to a despot who has plunged his country into a civil war that has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions. The country lies in ruins. In the meantime, he has become the leader of a mafia state. How could this happen?

Hafiz al-Assad, the father of the current president, seized power in a military coup in 1970, declared a state of emergency and gave the secret services the power to arrest any suspect with impunity and often make them disappear for years. He also introduced brutal torture. Moreover, he ordered massacres, such as the one in Palmyra prison in 1980 or the mass murder of Hama in 1982, when his troops were not content with destroying whole neighbourhoods but killed, tortured and arrested thousands. Women were humiliated and raped. After that, Syria was subjugated and silenced for many years.

After his father's death in 2000, Bashar inherited power. In his inauguration speech, he promised Syrians to introduce democracy and to respect other opinions. Therefore, many believed in him and democratic opposition members founded political associations and initiated the so-called Damascus Spring, although the emergency laws were still in force. But this soon found an end. Opposition leaders were jailed for five to ten years and their sympathisers were threatened with arrest. In the years that followed, all critical voices calling for human rights and democracy were silenced, even if they only blogged or engaged in civil society activities.

But when the Arab countries rose up, the repression and intimidation could not prevent the Syrian people from following the example of Tunisia and Egypt – they rose up. The Syrian revolution of 2011 demanded democracy and justice, freedom and dignity. The regime responded with shootings, arrests, torture, and rape. Tens of thousands of women were affected by the brutal crackdown.

For ten years, Bashar al-Assad killed and displaced people and destroyed cities and infrastructure, not stopping at schools and

hospitals. He used outlawed weapons such as chemical warfare agents in the process, and his policy of arrests and disappearances, culminating in crimes against humanity and war crimes, continues. The “Caesar photos” prove that thousands have died in Syrian prisons since 2011 under torture, through illness, neglect, or hunger.

Even the sanctions imposed on Assad by the West and the alliance of the “Friends of the Syrian People” could not stop him from committing further crimes, because Russia's and China's veto in the Security Council and their direct military aid protected him. The Syrians ask themselves what good is a world order that can’t do anything against a tyrant like Bashar al-Assad.

What are the chances of a political solution in Syria? Will the elections have an impact on the UN-backed negotiations between Assad and the opposition?

I think that a political solution in Syria is a long way off. As long as there is no real political will internationally and no effective political pressure against the regime and its allies to force Assad to commit to a political solution based on the Geneva 1 communiqué and UN Resolution 2254 to end military violence against civilians, he will feel confident of victory. Iran and Russia are supporting him militarily, the West is holding back. Assad is bolder than ever these days and will not accept concessions or a political solution.

It’s enough to look at what has become of the political initiatives of the past eight years. One can see that Assad only accepts political solutions under pressure. At the first Geneva Conference in 2012, hosted by Kofi Annan as special envoy for Syria, the US, China, Russia, France, Great Britain, Germany, Turkey and the Arab states agreed in principle on a transitional phase, but Russia and China did not want to touch Assad's rule in the process. So, while the opposition and most of the parties were of the opinion that a post-Assad phase had been ushered in, Moscow and Beijing insisted that Assad's fate had to be decided “by the Syrians”.

Today, after eight rounds of negotiations and four UN special envoys to Syria – Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Ibrahimi, Staffan de Mistura and Geir Pedersen – all attempts at a solution have been sat out by the regime. The situation is no better for the Syrian Constitutional Committee, which was set up by the regime after a long delay. It has not been able to present any results to date.

The European Union and the USA have levelled harsh criticism at the elections in Syria. What does the Syrian opposition expect from the West?

We demand from the West not to give legitimacy to the Syrian regime and not to rehabilitate it. It must be held accountable for its crimes, its violations of international law and for the suffering of the Syrian people, which is considered the greatest humanitarian disaster of the 21st century.

Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011 and the Assad regime's violent crackdown on peaceful protesters, European states such as Germany and France have begun structural investigations into crimes against international law in Syria, in accordance with the principle of universal jurisdiction. In Germany, this was followed by an arrest warrant for Jamil Hassan, the former head of air force intelligence, and the arrest of two former intelligence officers of the Assad regime, who are being tried in Koblenz. In this trial, the world's first on crimes committed by the Assad regime, much evidence of torture, killings and sexual violence against men, women and children in Syrian prisons was presented and testimonies heard.

Moreover, a number of international statements were issued demanding that Assad be held accountable, including a joint statement by the foreign ministers of Germany, France, the UK, Italy and the US affirming that there must be no impunity. There are also statements by the Canadian and Dutch foreign ministers. All these statements express support for the Syrian people and emphasise the need to hold Assad accountable for his crimes.

Here lies hope for the long-suffering Syrian people. The establishment of a special court for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria – modelled on the trials on Yugoslavia and Rwanda – would be a necessary step towards peace after all the death, bombing, torture and rape Syrians have experienced, especially since there are hundreds of thousands of compelling pieces of evidence against the Syrian regime. Without justice, there can be no peace.

Finally, the Assad regime must not be rehabilitated by admitting it to international organisations. Outrageously, the World Health Organisation admitted the Assad regime to its 34-member Executive Committee at the end of May. This comes after the regime has systematically and deliberately attacked the health sector in its own country, including hundreds of clinical facilities and hospitals, over the last decade.

This interview was conducted by Salam Said and Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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