
Paper

Political and Societal Representation in Syria:

A Historical Review and Future Challenges

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1. Introduction

Syria is undergoing a critical juncture following the collapse of the Assad regime, one that has laid bare the depth of the sectarian, ethnic, and social fractures produced by years of latent and unacknowledged mobilization among Syria's identity-based components. The precarious balancing formulas through which the former regime managed and controlled Syrian society have unraveled, without any ready-made alternative framework capable of representing society politically and socially in a manner that is both fair and socially acceptable. Sectarian divisions have surfaced with particular intensity in the coastal and central regions; negotiations between the central government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have yet to yield a clear political framework; and the unfortunate events in As-Sweida have generated a state of deadlock that will not be easily overcome. In this climate of heightened tension, identity-based formations may appear to be the sole organizing principle of society. In reality, however, Syrian society requires more diversified frameworks of representation—ones capable of striking a balance between representing citizens as equal individuals in rights and obligations, and representing groups in their various forms, whether regional, religious, sectarian, ethnic, social, or tribal. The current levers of political representation, in one way or another, continue to mirror the very social fractures that the Assad regime entrenched.

This reality underscores the urgent need for a representative framework that is both equitable and socially legitimate—particularly in light of the criticism directed at the representative model proposed by the transitional authorities in forming the People's Assembly, and the practical difficulty of establishing a comprehensive representative framework that includes all regions after years of war, the absence of reliable population data and documentation, and the lack of security conditions conducive to democratic and representative elections. There is little doubt that political representation will remain a central subject of debate and negotiation between social and local forces on the one hand, and the transitional authorities on the other, given its pivotal importance to the country's future and to the transformation of transitional legitimacy from a revolutionary one into a genuinely representative legitimacy. This is especially true in light of the persistent—though uneven—crisis of trust between the transitional authorities and Syria's diverse communities, and the pressing need for an inclusive political process during this foundational phase, one that addresses the roots of the problem, mitigates its consequences, and prevents its recurrence in the future.

It is for these reasons that this paper is published. We proceed from the conviction that revisiting the representational frameworks established by the former regime is an absolute necessity in the transitional period—not merely as an exercise in political historiography, but as a means of dismantling the deep representational engineering through which the Assad regime governed the country for decades to construct a false legitimacy. This paper seeks to demonstrate how the former regime employed both conventional electoral systems¹ (elections) and non-conventional networks

¹ The term "conventional" here refers to the classical definition of political representation through electoral systems. The existence of elections in a given political system does not necessarily mean that the system is democratic, fair, or transparent. However, the traditional perspective in political science views elections as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for political representation.

of representation² (that is, non-electoral forms of representation, whether social—such as fostering consensus among the elites of traditional local forces—or political, such as appointments to public office) to construct a legitimacy based on performative acclamation and patronage on the one hand, while pitting social components against one another to preserve the central authority as the sole guarantor of stability—thereby weakening social and political forces and enabling the monopolization of power—on the other.

Through this analysis, the paper aims to examine the mechanisms of political representation that shaped Syria up to the fall of the regime, in order to anticipate the political and social challenges likely to arise when developing future electoral mechanisms that are more equitable, transparent, and capable of transmitting societal voices and interests. In this context, the paper seeks to address the following questions in particular:

- How can the former regime's conventional system of representation be understood within its political and social context, and in terms of the political functions it served? What electoral tools did it employ, and what political objectives—domestic and international—did these processes achieve despite the largely formal nature of their outcomes?
- What forms of non-conventional representation did the former regime rely upon to secure the loyalty of social components and influential economic classes beyond the ballot box? How were “unannounced quotas” (for minorities, tribes, major families, and women) deployed to produce a nominal representational balance that sustained social stability while keeping effective power concentrated in the center?

The paper begins by presenting a theoretical framework for understanding the challenges of conventional and non-conventional political representation in systems characterized by non-democratic institutions and traditions. It then moves on to examine levels of representation—both formal and informal—as they evolved under Baathist rule, particularly as they manifested during the years of conflict in areas controlled by the former regime, with the aim of unpacking the tools employed and the objectives pursued through each of these representational modalities.

² By non-conventional mechanisms of representation, we mean mechanisms that depart from the logic of political representation assumed by democratic political systems, which are primarily based on elections. Political systems may resort to indirect channels with local communities that do not pass through formal channels of political representation. While these mechanisms may at times invoke traditional social forces, relationships, and values, they do not follow the rules of classical democratic elections.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Institutions of Representation

As noted above, non-democratic governments rely on a combination of conventional electoral systems and non-conventional representational arrangements. By calibrating between these two sets of mechanisms, such regimes are able to consolidate control over society and public life through the rotation of public offices and manipulation of social roles, without allowing these mechanisms to generate genuine political competition. This section outlines both the conventional and non-conventional institutions of representation.

2.1.1 Conventional Systems of Representation

By conventional systems of representation, we refer to those arrangements that rely on electoral frameworks to construct political representation and acquire legitimacy through the ballot box. These include presidential elections, elections to the People's Assembly and local councils, as well as elections to semi formal bodies such as chambers of commerce and industry, professional syndicates, etc.

In non-democratic systems, these arrangements are typically formalistic in nature. Elections are organized under conditions of extensive—often absolute—control by the ruling authorities, through carefully engineered mechanisms designed to ensure the success of preselected individuals and political currents. Through such elections, authorities seek to produce a celebratory public image, accompanied by extensive media coverage that portrays popular will through orchestrated mass enthusiasm—what may be described as “legitimacy through acclamation.” Totalitarian and authoritarian systems often regard this model as preferable to genuine parliamentary pluralism, which would fragment power into multiple blocks incapable of agreeing on national policies³.

This form of representation is characterized by several core features:

- **Control over elections:**
Elections are conducted under intense state supervision. Despite the adoption of formal measures ostensibly aimed at ensuring transparency, manipulation remains possible through ballot stuffing (particularly in remote areas), vote falsification, and control over electoral committees to guarantee the victory of the ruling party and its allies across all regions without exception. Electoral system design and the demarcation of electoral districts may also be manipulated to achieve the same ends. Importantly, manipulation is not always aimed solely at securing victory—often already assured—but at inflating turnout figures or

³ Schmitt, C. (2008). *Constitutional Theory*. Trans. and ed. Jeffrey Seitzer. Durham: Duke University Press. Pp. 273–274.

sending political signals regarding the space available to opposition forces should they choose to negotiate or participate in unity governments or power-sharing arrangements. Manipulation may also be used selectively to ensure the success—or failure—of independent candidates, who are then co-opted to draw their social networks into the regime’s patronage structures.

- **Subordinated councils:**

Parliaments and other legislative or quasi-legislative bodies—such as governorate and municipal councils—do exist, but they are typically dominated by overwhelming majorities from the ruling party. As a result, they do not function as effective checks on executive power or as genuine vehicles for representing social interests. Instead, their role is largely confined to providing legal cover for executive decisions on the one hand, and to constructing patronage networks on the other, linking the regime to community leaders and business figures who are granted selective privileges in exchange for political loyalty—such as tribal leaders, prominent entrepreneurs, and local notables.

- **Political parties:**

Ruling authorities generally seek to instrumentalize party institutions in order to construct social balances that facilitate societal control. In some cases, ruling parties use elections to fragment and weaken rival political forces, subsequently co-opting them individually through power-sharing arrangements that involve secondary ministerial portfolios. In this way, elections serve to rotate leadership positions among opposition figures, preventing their consolidation around a unified political project. In the Syrian case, the Baath Party enjoyed near-absolute dominance—at least until the onset of the uprising and subsequent conflict—temporarily conceding limited space to independent figures in early electoral rounds, before reasserting its authority in an overt and forceful manner, particularly following the party elections of 2024.⁴

2.1.2 Non-Conventional Systems of Representation

Non-democratic authorities do not rely exclusively on conventional representative institutions to achieve the objectives outlined above. Instead, they expand their toolkit by constructing networks of clientelism and loyalty through a combination of appointments within military, security, civil, and governmental institutions; state-controlled civil society organizations; and party structures, among others. Through these channels, authorities seek to provide controlled representation for ethnic groups and other social formations—such as tribes, families, and sects—in ways that secure the loyalty of their leaders and notables, and, by extension, the communities they represent. Alongside

⁴ For example, in the governorates of Dar’a, As-Sweida, and Idlib, branch secretaries are appointed from families with small population size, and it has never occurred that a party branch secretary was appointed from the larger tribes such as al-Hariri, Alzoubi, or al-Masalmeh families in Dar’a, or from the al-Atrash or al-Halabi families in As-Sweida. The same applies to the major tribes in Deir-ez-Zor (with few exceptions). This is because the branch secretary wields influential power within the decision-making chain, unlike the People’s Assembly. He is selected from weaker social or tribal components to ensure his loyalty to the central authority. In practice, major families are appeased through representation in the People’s Assembly, which plays a more social than political role in Syria, while smaller families are entrusted with the real leadership positions in the governorate, in such a way that no one is able to combine both social and political power at the same time in any governorate.

these arrangements, non-democratic governments also cultivate economic alliances with influential individuals who can deliver tangible benefits to specific social constituencies.

These networks include, in particular:

- **Business networks:**

Authorities often ally themselves with networks of business elites to ensure the representation of specific social formations. For example, the head of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce has typically been drawn from a Damascene background, while the deputy heads are often appointed from Aleppo and Homs (from families such as the Tiyara or al-Sibai families), thereby ensuring both regional and family-based representation. In practice, however, influential actors often operate behind the scenes to steer these institutions. In the final years of the regime, for instance, the al-Qaterji family in Aleppo played a central role in managing such arrangements in coordination with security authorities in Aleppo and Damascus.

- **State-controlled civil society:**

Authorities frequently select or establish specific associations and civil society organizations to simulate a civic sector through which they can dominate certain fields and represent selected social interests—such as charitable associations in Damascus and Aleppo. Organizations such as the Syrian Trust for Development played a role in co-opting youth groups and economically influential actors with liberal orientations prior to the conflict, and with neoliberal orientations following its outbreak.

- **Cultural and religious leaders:**

Regimes also co-opt influential cultural and religious figures, leveraging their authority to endorse the system and confer legitimacy upon its actions among the broader population. Their selection, however, remains embedded in the same representational logic aimed at appeasing specific social groups—such as religious leaders in Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, and elsewhere. At times, authorities deliberately cultivate competition among these figures to ensure that each remains individually dependent on regime networks, preventing them from coalescing into a unified and influential bloc of interests.

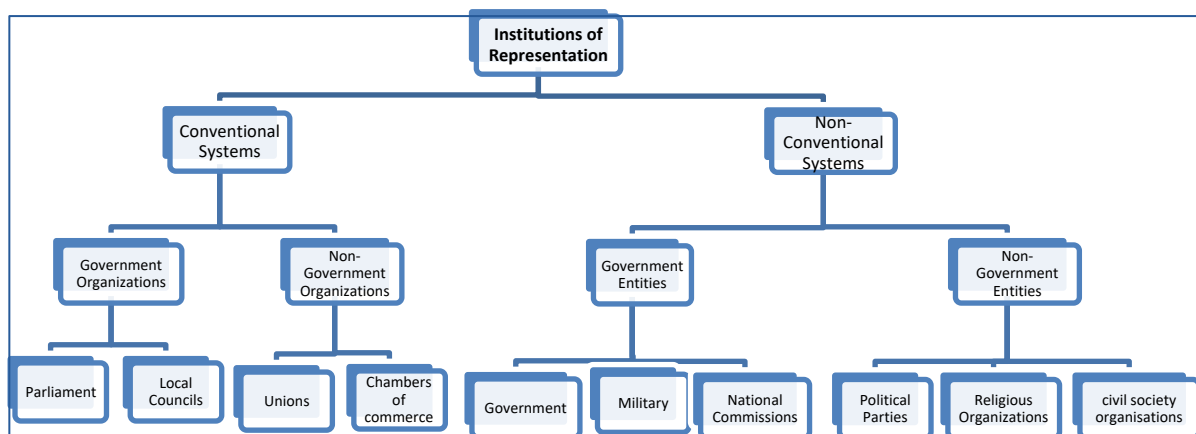


Figure 1: The Institutional Framework of Representation

2.2 Mechanisms and Instruments of Representation

2.2.1 Conventional Electoral Instruments

As in democratic systems, non-democratic regimes rely on formally legal—though substantively non-democratic—electoral instruments to manage and control electoral processes. These regimes invest in designing electoral systems that enable maximum control over both process and outcomes, while minimising the need for overt interference at the level of voting itself.

- **Electoral system**

The first of these instruments is the electoral system, by which we refer to majoritarian, proportional, or mixed systems and their various subtypes. There is no single electoral system universally adopted by non-democratic regimes. Some rely on mixed systems, as in Egypt and the Russian Federation; others use proportional systems, as in Algeria and Rwanda; while some adopt majoritarian systems, such as Belarus. Each governing system develops its own methods for exploiting the chosen electoral formula. Accordingly, this paper seeks to examine electoral systems in Syria, with particular attention to the rationale behind their selection, their modes of implementation, and the ways in which ruling structures benefit from them.

- **Electoral districting**

The second instrument is electoral districting, namely the process of defining the geographic boundaries that divide the country into electoral districts, each representing a segment of the population in the People's Assembly or local councils. In principle, districting is intended to promote fairness in representation by allocating seats based on population size and, at times, demographic composition. In practice, however—whether in democratic or non-democratic contexts—districting frequently becomes a political instrument used to preserve power within ruling elites. This practice, commonly referred to as gerrymandering⁵, involves grouping or fragmenting opposition constituencies or specific population groups across districts in ways that deprive them of electoral majorities in most, if not all, districts.

- **District size**

The third instrument concerns district size, defined as the number of seats allocated to each electoral district. District magnitude constitutes a key variable in the mathematical calculus of electoral competition. Authorities often manipulate district size to reward or punish regions based on perceived levels of loyalty, thereby transforming representation into a mechanism of political discipline.

- **Quotas**

The fourth instrument is formal quotas, meaning those stipulated in constitutions and/or

⁵ The term "gerrymandering" is a portmanteau derived from "Gerry," after Elbridge Gerry—who first employed the practice—and "mander," from "salamander", reflecting the irregular, contorted shapes of the electoral districts created through this process.

electoral laws that allocate a fixed number or minimum share of seats to specific social groups, such as women, youth, or minorities. In non-democratic systems, such quotas are frequently employed not to enhance inclusion, but to increase regime control over the representational process.

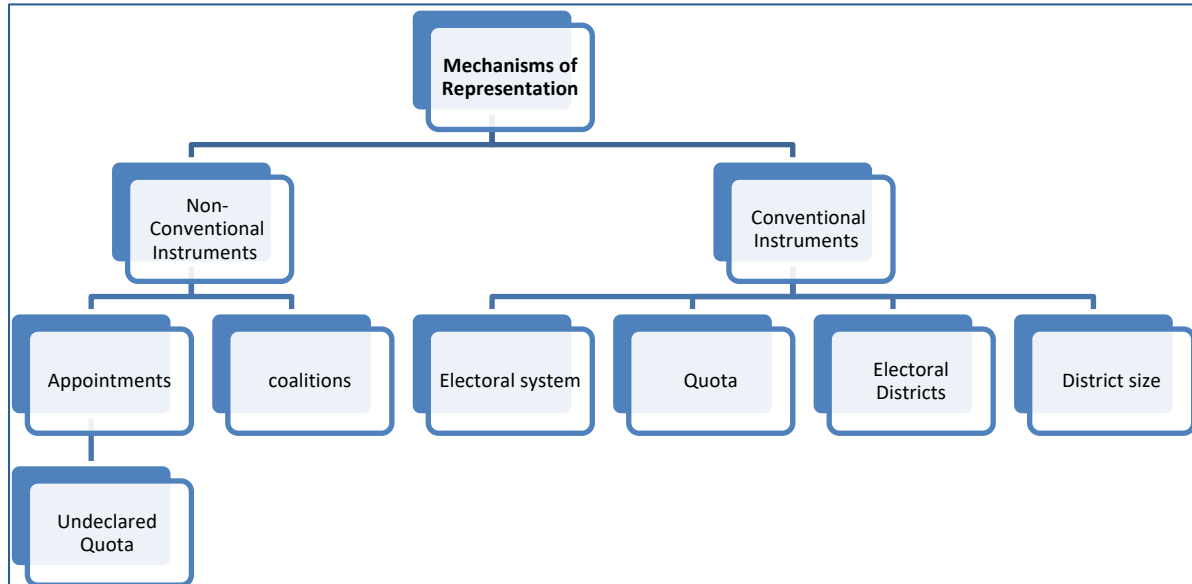


Figure 2: Mechanisms and Instruments of Representation

2.2.2 Objectives of Elections in Non-Democratic Systems

Elections are commonly understood as a cornerstone of democratic governance—serving as a mechanism for the peaceful transfer of power and an expression of popular will. Yet elections are by no means confined to democratic systems. On the contrary, they often constitute a central pillar of non-democratic governance. In such contexts, elections serve purposes distinct from genuine representation, preserving a democratic façade premised on the notion of a unified and superior popular will, while ensuring the continuity of authoritarian rule. They do not offer citizens a meaningful opportunity to change government or influence public policy; rather, they serve a range of political objectives, including the following⁶:

- **Legitimation:**

Elections provide authoritarian governments with a veneer of legitimacy. By holding elections, regimes can claim democratic mandate and leverage this claim to secure domestic and international acceptance. Displays of popular support—even when manufactured—help justify the continued dominance of ruling elites and project the state’s capacity to impose its will.

⁶ Kirshner, A. S. (2018). Nonideal Democratic Authority: The Case of Undemocratic Elections. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 17(3), 257-276.

- **Control and stability:**

In non-democratic contexts, elections function primarily as instruments of control. Through careful management of electoral processes, regimes can identify and neutralise potential threats. Elections also provide a controlled outlet through which citizens can express dissatisfaction without destabilising the system. In this sense, elections operate as a barometer of public sentiment, expressed through “safe” behaviours such as abstention, allowing authorities to monitor shifts in popular mood without jeopardising their grip on power⁷. Moreover, elections enable pro-regime actors to compete among themselves, revealing their relative social weight and coalition-building capacity. In Syria, elections historically functioned—and continue to function—as a balancing mechanism between security branches and the Baath Party at the local level, with the centre playing an arbitral role that reinforces its dominance by calibrating relations among loyalist actors.

- **International image management:**

Conducting elections can enhance a regime’s standing in the international arena. Regardless of ideological orientation, authorities seek to erect a barrier against external intervention by presenting themselves as democratically elected, broadly supported, modern, and compliant with international norms—sometimes to the extent of inviting international observers, who are typically drawn from allied states.

- **Co-optation of other political forces:**

In certain cases, elections are used to co-opt other political actors, including segments of the opposition, by allocating them a limited share of parliamentary seats. This serves to secure their loyalty, prevent alignment with rival forces, or reduce reliance on overt repression to control the political arena⁸. By allowing restricted participation in tightly managed electoral processes, regimes manufacture a form of pseudo-pluralism that diminishes the likelihood of radical opposition movements. This strategy can fragment and weaken opposition groups, making them easier to manage—as illustrated, for example, by the election of representatives from the Popular Will Party in 2012.

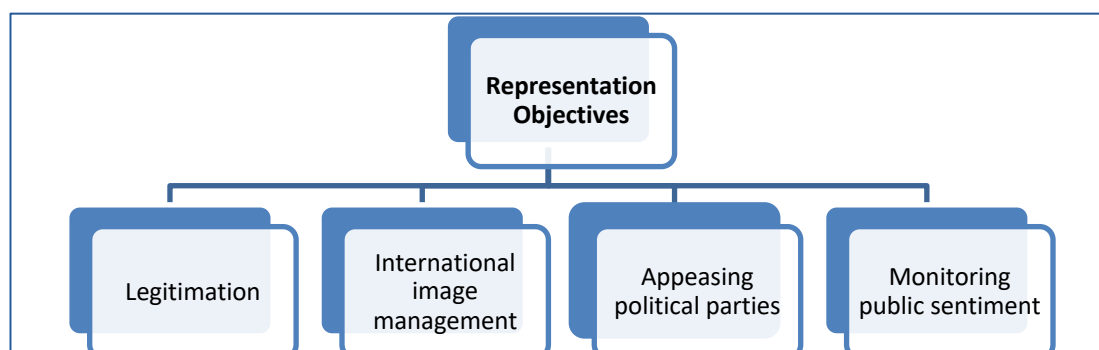


Figure 3: Objectives of Representation in Non-Democratic Systems

⁷ As occurred, for example, in 1987, when the National Progressive Front list failed to win in one of the villages of the Hauran region, prompting a tightening of the security grip over its surrounding countryside, followed by the arrest of several young men.

⁸ Svolik, M. W. (2012). *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 116 ff.

2.2.3 Non-Democratic Governments and the Management of Societal Loyalties Outside Electoral Frameworks

Non-democratic governments require a minimum degree of social acceptability to secure the acquiescence of a critical mass of the population to the sovereign role they impose; reliance on repression alone rarely suffices to ensure long-term political survival. Because such regimes are often unable to attract genuinely productive forces capable of investing and building resilient economic bases—absent robust guarantees protecting the role of producers in society—most non-democratic states resort to the distribution of state rents as a substitute for the distribution of growth opportunities and social advancement. This does not imply the absence of production in these contexts; rather, it means that the dominant share of the political economy is tied to the allocation of state-controlled resources without the generation of real added value (for example, the distribution of oil revenues, natural-resource rents, or transit and passage fees linked to a country's geographic position).⁹

The result is a rentier political economy in which the state's primary role becomes one of balancing competing national elites in the allocation of rents, which these elites in turn redistribute through their own social and political networks. These networks then sustain elite positions within what has been described above as a system of legitimacy through acclamation.

In Syria, a substantial portion of society became—willingly or under duress—directly or indirectly embedded within networks of loyalty and patronage. Access to employment, university admission, housing through cooperative schemes, agricultural loans, or even the right to establish a non-governmental organization was, in one way or another, linked to a formal economy that could only be accessed through patronage channels or institutional gatekeepers controlled by elites directly connected to loyalty networks.¹⁰ Over time, the ability to distribute rents across these patronage networks diminished, reducing the share of the population able to access the formal state economy and pushing growing numbers into the informal economy across employment, housing, and service provision.

As the equitable and competitive distribution of rents based on merit or genuine productive capacity became increasingly untenable, social elites assumed a decisive role in providing stabilizing buffers for non-democratic governments. They did so by leveraging their social standing or exploiting identity-based structures within society—sectarian, religious, ethnic, familial, tribal, regional, and others. Appeasing these elites thus became a less costly and more effective strategy for non-democratic regimes than managing formal governance or purely electoral systems. In this context, societal representation must be understood as a tool for the distribution of patronage, designed to ensure social fragmentation and to prevent the mobilization of broad social blocs capable of collectively demanding rights from the state.

⁹ Acemoglu, D., Robinson, James A. (2012). *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Business.

¹⁰ Hallaj, Omar Abdulaziz (2021). *Formality, Informality, and the Resilience of the Syrian Political Economy*. The Geneva Center for Security Policy.

In practice, non-democratic authorities often find executive, security, military, and party institutions to be more effective instruments for managing patronage than elected councils—even those that are merely symbolic. In situations of conflict, the remaining formal veneers and official labels governing recruitment within these institutions are stripped away, and state bodies come to function almost entirely as functional fiefdoms within a political marketplace, in the most literal sense of the term.¹¹ Accordingly, the structure of power in non-democratic systems cannot be reduced to the dictatorship of a single apex figure; it must instead be understood through the prism of how positions, offices, and public employment are distributed across loyalty networks. In many cases, mapping patterns of public appointments and employment offers a more accurate picture of power distribution than electoral systems, as it reflects the allocation of authority and resources rather than merely the performative roles of elites.

Naturally, non-democratic systems are deeply wary of the concentration of substantial resources or power in the hands of any potential rival. They therefore engage in the rotation of positions and offices to prevent elites from consolidating social bases capable of threatening the interests of the apex of power. Alongside this rotation, authorities often deliberately pit loyalty networks against one another to prevent the formation of broad societal alliances that could challenge central authority. Typically, the circulation of appointments is combined with the active construction of subordinate identities, enabling regimes to control the social base through narrow channels of societal representation, administered via appointments and the indirect distribution of rents.¹²

¹¹ De Waal, Alex, et al. (2020). *A Theory of Change for Violent Political Marketplaces*. London School of Economics, Conflict Research Programme: London.

¹² Statcher, Joshua. (2012). *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, California.

3. The System of Representation under the Assad Regime

Under the Assad regime, authority in Damascus remained the sole actor responsible for establishing a representative framework for the country as a whole. This framework was anchored first in the 1973 Constitution, and later in the 2012 Constitution, and was reinforced by an accumulated body of legislation developed over decades. This included the Local Administration Law, the Law on Associations and Institutions (still in force since 1959), the Political Parties Law, the Electoral Law of 2014, and, most recently, the Media Law of 2024. Together, this legal architecture enabled the central government to organize formal processes of representation at the national level—through presidential and parliamentary elections—and at the local level, through local administration elections. Notably, the government continued to conduct these elections even in governorates that lay outside its effective territorial control during the conflict, such as Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakeh, and Idlib.

In parallel, the central government relied on non-conventional mechanisms of representation—operating through the ruling party, security institutions, and state-controlled non-governmental organizations prior to the war—and expanded these mechanisms during the conflict to include irregular militias, which became an additional layer within the regime’s representational and coercive architecture.

3.1 Conventional Institutions of Representation

During Assad’s rule, representation within conventional institutions—most notably the People’s Assembly and local councils—was channelled through electoral processes that remained largely unchanged over time and were ultimately codified in Law No. 5 of 2014 and slightly amended in 2016. By contrast, elections to chambers of commerce and industry and to professional syndicates were governed by their specific legal frameworks, despite these bodies being formally designated as independent civil institutions.

The first and most central of these formal institutions was the People’s Assembly, whose name was changed from Majlis al-Nuwwab (Chamber of Deputies) to Majlis al-Shaab (People’s Assembly) after 1969. This change was grounded in the ideological premise that parliamentary “deputies” implied a ruling elite representing local constituencies, whereas a “People’s Assembly” purported to represent the entirety of the people through sectoral representation—specifically workers and peasants—without reliance on territorial or geographic constituencies. This shift reflected the broader rejection of liberal parliamentary systems by Syria’s socialist forces at the time. The renaming was intended to curtail the influence of local notables and to establish sectoral representation as the primary basis of political representation. In practice, however, the Assembly ceased to function as a body of popular

deputies and instead became an instrument for power-sharing between Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid, through the appointment of loyalists as nominal representatives of the people.

Subsequently, the 2012 Constitution did not specify the number of members of the People's Assembly, but it reaffirmed the workers-and-peasants quota, stipulating that it must constitute no less than 50 percent of the Assembly. It left to ordinary legislation the determination of the electoral system, the number of districts, and the definitions of "workers" and "peasants."¹³ With regard to local representation, Articles 130 and 131 of the Constitution affirmed the principle of decentralization in the organization of local administrative units, while leaving to legislation the regulation of their relationship with the central authority, their competences, financial revenues, and oversight mechanisms. The Constitution also allowed for either the appointment or election of local executive heads and department directors, but confined electoral processes to local councils at the governorate level, excluding the actual holders of executive authority—namely, the governors—and remaining silent on their relationship with other state institutions and on the mechanism for their selection, which continued to rest exclusively with the President of the Republic.

Presidential elections, for their part, were conducted through direct popular vote, based on the designation of Syria as a single electoral district, including citizens residing abroad. Candidates were required to secure the endorsement of 35 members of the People's Assembly (out of its former total of 250 members) and to obtain approval from the Constitutional Court.

3.1.1 The People's Assembly

In People's Assembly elections, Syria was divided—under the electoral law—into fifteen electoral districts, with one district per governorate. Aleppo constituted the sole exception, having been divided into two districts: one for the city and another for the wider "Aleppo areas" (the countryside, including Manbij, al-Bab, Azaz, and others).

While the law granted the President of the Republic the authority to determine the number of seats allocated to each district, the total number of districts—fifteen—had been fixed since 1973, the year in which members of the People's Assembly were directly appointed by presidential decree (Decree No. 1093 of 1973). Up to 2024, the Assembly consisted of 250 members representing these fifteen districts—a figure that has remained unchanged for a long time after 1990. Table 1 presents the size of each district.

Although the law specified the total number of seats, it did not define the number of seats allocated to each governorate, leaving this decision to presidential discretion. As a result, seat allocation did not correspond to population size. For example, Ar-Raqqa, with a population of approximately 944,000, was allocated 8 seats, while Tartous, with around 800,000 residents, was allocated 13

¹³ The Syrian Constitution of 2012, Articles 60–61.

seats. Quneitra was represented by five members despite having only 90,000 residents, compared to six members for As-Sweida, whose population stood at approximately 370,000¹⁴.

Table 1. Electoral Districts by Seat Allocation and Population (2011)

District	Seats	Population (2011)
Damascus	29	1,754,000
Rural Damascus	19	2,836,000
Aleppo City	20	2,132,100
Aleppo Areas	32	2,735,900
Homs	23	1,803,000
Hama	22	1,628,000
Idleb	18	1,512,000
Lattakia	17	1,008,000
Tartous	13	797,000
Ar-Raqqa	8	944,000
Deir-ez-Zor	14	1,239,000
Al-Hasakeh	14	1,512,000
Dar'a	10	1,027,000
As-Sweida	6	370,000
Quneitra	5	90,000

Elections were conducted under a bloc voting system (*nizām al-kutla*)¹⁵, which allows voters to select several candidates equal to the number of seats in their district. This system structurally favours large parties—the Baath Party in particular—while also enabling the representation of smaller parties allied with it. In practice, smaller parties were largely unable to secure parliamentary seats except under proportional representation, or through bloc voting when operating within alliances led by dominant parties, namely the Baath Party.

As noted earlier, the regime largely maintained a stable districting model in which each governorate constituted a single electoral district, with Aleppo again standing as the exception. This division likely served to tighten control over outcomes in the governorate with the largest electorate and to shield regime-aligned urban elites from being outweighed by rural voting blocs. Large district magnitudes once again favoured geographically expansive and organisationally dominant parties such as the Baath Party, effectively closing parliamentary access to other parties unless they entered alliance with it.

Formally, the law recognised only one quota: the workers-and-peasants quota, with executive regulations left to define each category. Yet the composition of the People's Assembly reveals the systematic operation of unannounced quotas linked to the political, economic, and social

¹⁴ All of these figures date to 2011, the last official census considered reliable to an acceptable degree for the number of registered residents in each governorate.

¹⁵ The bloc vote system is an electoral system in which each electoral district elects multiple representatives in proportion to the size of the district. Each voter is entitled to vote for a number of candidates equal to the number of seats allocated to the district. Voters may use a pre-prepared ballot associated with a political party, or they may write in candidates of their choosing—adding or removing names—provided that the total number of selected candidates does not exceed the number of seats assigned to the district. The individual candidates who receive the highest number of votes are elected, regardless of any party or political bloc to which they may belong.

This system differs from the party block vote system, in which voters are required to cast their vote for a fixed party list composed of a set number of candidates, without the ability to modify the list; under that system, the majority party list typically secures all or most of the seats. For further details, see:

Youssef, Imad et al., eds. (2014). *The Arabic Lexicon of Electoral Terminology*. Cairo: United Nations Development Programme.

configuration of each governorate. Governorates with a Christian presence typically received one to three seats, keeping Christian representation in the Assembly at around 3–4%, while women's representation generally ranged between 11–13%.

Unannounced quotas also reflected local social structures. In governorates characterised by strong family-based formations—such as Dar'a, As-Sweida, and Idleb—major families were routinely represented (for example, the al-Atrash family in As-Sweida, the al-Hariri family in Dar'a, and the al-Qurbi family in Idleb). In Homs, Hama, Latakia, and Tartous, representation tended—though not exclusively—to follow sectarian patterns; in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, tribal affiliations dominated; while in Damascus and Aleppo, leading business elites were most prominent. These unannounced quotas played a central role in securing the loyalty of key social formations in each governorate. The regime further exploited quota intersections to maximise symbolic inclusion and political utility—for example, allocating a seat to a Christian woman, thereby simultaneously fulfilling both women's and minorities' representation.

This representational architecture ultimately concentrated the People's Assembly into three main blocs:

- The Arab Socialist Baath Party, which typically secured around two-thirds of the seats (in the final election under the former regime, the party won 168 seats, or 67%)
- Its allies within the National Unity List—which inherited the structure of the former National Progressive Front—holding approximately 15 seats (6%)
- Independents aligned with the Baath Party, who occupied the remaining seats (around 25%).

The regime also deliberately left several seats “open” for independents not affiliated with National Unity List parties, in line with the patronage networks it had constructed. In the 2020 elections, for example, approximately 45% of seats in Damascus (13 of 29) and 40% of seats in Aleppo City (8 of 20) were left open. This created a controlled arena of competition among business elites, allowing the regime to assess relative influence across networks while making room for a key allied class—and, arguably, encouraging significant campaign spending that stimulated economic circulation. By contrast, only 11% of seats in Idleb (2 of 18) and three of Dar'a's ten seats were left open. The criteria guiding these decisions were not publicly disclosed. In addition, the regime sought to reinforce sectoral representation by incorporating leaders of professional unions and federations—such as the Head of the Bar Association and the President of the General Federation of Trade Unions—most notably during the fourth legislative term.

3.1.2 Local Councils

At the local level, electoral processes followed trajectories broadly similar to those observed at the parliamentary level. The number of electoral districts for governorate councils totalled 100 districts, distributed as follows: five in Damascus, eleven in Rural Damascus, eleven in Aleppo, twenty-five in Homs, nine in Hama, seven in Idleb, five in Latakia, seven in Tartous, three in Deir-ez-Zor, six in Al-Hasakeh, four in Ar-Raqqa, six in Dar'a, four in As-Sweida, and one in Quneitra. Elections were

conducted under an open-list system, applying the same bloc vote system used in People's Assembly elections (see above).

The representational outcomes of local elections did not differ substantially from those of parliamentary elections, with one notable exception: the marked expansion of Baath Party lists. In the 2023 local elections, the Baath Party secured 79 percent of seats, while parties on the National Unity List retained 6.7 percent, mirroring their parliamentary share. The proportion of independents declined to 13.3 percent, including parties operating outside formal lists.

District size was closely linked to the regime's level of trust in local communities and their perceived loyalty. Manbij, for example—with a population of approximately 600,000 according to the Aleppo Governorate Council website, roughly half the population of Tartous and with a larger geographic area—was allocated only one seat on the Aleppo Governorate Council, while the city of Tartous was represented by 50 council members.

Quota mechanisms largely mirrored those applied at the parliamentary level. The declared workers-and-peasants quota remained fixed at 50 percent, while the undeclared women's quota was maintained at a similar level at the governorate level (12 percent in the 2024 elections). However, women's representation dropped sharply—to no more than 3 percent—in local administrative units below the governorate level. This decline likely reflects the closer proximity of local councils to society and the regime's reluctance to confront conservative social norms in many parts of the country.

3.2 Objectives of the Former Regime in Maintaining Its Electoral System

The Assad regime pursued several interrelated objectives through the electoral system it enforced in areas under its control:

- **Legitimation:**

The Baathist authorities in Syria regarded elections as a central instrument of political legitimation, remaining formally committed to holding them regardless of political, economic, or social conditions since Hafez al-Assad's accession to power in 1970, with only limited postponements. Hafez al-Assad conducted elections in 1982, despite widespread violence and the severe challenge posed to his rule by the confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Bashar al-Assad continued this practice throughout the conflict that began in 2011, overseeing four parliamentary elections (2012, 2016, 2020, and 2024), presidential elections in 2014 and 2021, and local elections in 2012, 2018,¹⁶ and 2022. These elections served, first, to project the legitimacy of the ruling authority, and second, to signal that

¹⁶ With a slight postponement of local council elections from 2016 to 2018, which constituted the largest exception to the regularity of holding elections on their scheduled dates.

power in Damascus remained firmly in control and capable of steering the state without disruption. In both respects, the primary audience was external rather than domestic.

- **Building loyalty networks:**

Elections functioned as a mechanism for cultivating loyalty among community leaders—particularly in governorates structured around familial or tribal formations—and for reinforcing alliances with religious institutions, whose representatives often held seats in the People’s Assembly. The regime also used elections to consolidate networks of interest with business elites, especially in Damascus and Aleppo. Electoral and representative positions provided a space through which selective privileges could be extended to loyal and allied figures, whether economically or socially.

- **Appeasing allied parties:**

The system served to placate parties allied with the Baath Party, ensuring their loyalty and continued operation within the ideological and political boundaries set by the regime.

- **Managing social stability:**

Elections were used to project a broad—though carefully managed—form of inclusion across sects, denominations, and social strata. Notably, this inclusive logic explicitly excluded Kurds, who remained structurally marginalized within the representational framework.

- **Monitoring public sentiment:**

Voter turnout functioned as an indirect indicator of public mood. Low participation rates did not appear to trouble the Assad regime, as it retained the capacity to announce whatever figures it deemed appropriate for international consumption. Domestically, low turnout was often interpreted as societal despair and resignation toward political change—an outcome that did not threaten the regime.

- **Acting as arbiter among fragmented interests:**

Finally, elections allowed the regime to position itself as the central balancer among dispersed social forces and competing interests, reinforcing the center as the indispensable point of equilibrium and thereby strengthening its central role.

In a less explicit but clearly discernible manner, the regime also used elections to transmit implicit signals of political openness toward negotiation with segments of the opposition. In presidential elections, for instance, officially announced figures—bearing no meaningful relation to popular will—were carefully calibrated. In the 2014 election, the combined share of non-voters and dissenting voters was reported at approximately 25 percent, declining to around 20 percent in the 2021 election. In 2014, the regime faced its most acute military and political challenge and thus conveyed, indirectly, a greater readiness for political concession than in subsequent elections, after it had regained control over large parts of the country.

3.3 Non-Conventional Institutions of Representation

In addition to the former regime's tools of political and social representation within conventional institutions—namely the People's Assembly and local councils—the authorities actively engineered representation across party structures, government, the military, and the security apparatus. For example, ministries typically included a Christian minister, often from the Syriac community (Danho Daoud being one such example). Governments also usually incorporated, alongside independents, representatives of several parties affiliated with the National Progressive Front, who were often assigned either ministerial posts without portfolio or non-sovereign ministries. Women generally held one or two ministerial positions (rising to three in the final cabinet). The former regime also sought to include ministers from most governorates. Nonetheless, the dominant and outwardly visible character of government composition remained technical (technocratic) rather than socially or politically representative.

A similar logic applied to the leadership of the Baath Party. The composition of the party's central leadership was largely technocratic and sectoral in nature. The Assistant Secretary-General was typically drawn from a Sunni background; leadership positions were overwhelmingly held by men, with a single woman included in the final two leadership formations; and individuals from sectarian minorities were frequently present.

The picture becomes considerably more complex within the security apparatus and the military. Despite the presence of officers from a wide range of social backgrounds, decision-making authority did not rest with those formally occupying senior positions. A more in-depth examination is required to fully understand how the security and military institutions functioned as mechanisms for containing and managing societal loyalties. It is important to note that both institutions underwent significant restructuring over the course of Hafez al-Assad's rule and that of his son Bashar. Much of the existing literature on patterns of social loyalty within these institutions has failed to account for these successive transformations, often projecting assumptions drawn from earlier periods onto later phases without sustained empirical examination—and sometimes vice versa.

Overall, the system of non-conventional representation under Baathist rule was characterized by the following features:

- Regular rotation of positions, preventing appointed elites from building durable personal loyalties within their posts. Representation remained tied to the individual rather than to broader social or political constituencies that might otherwise be consolidated.
- Rotation of appointments across representatives of different social blocs, keeping elites in a constant state of competition with one another for the favor of the center.
- Avoidance of privileging any single social component within a given locality. If one tribe, for instance, was granted a position within the party, another might be compensated through appointments in local councils, the People's Assembly, the security services, or the party

itself. Traditional leaders were often placated with honorary or symbolic positions—such as seats in the People’s Assembly or local administrative councils—while their local rivals, typically from socially weaker groups, were granted positions with broader executive authority.

- Fragmentation of loyalty across multiple institutions. Social loyalties cannot be mapped through a single institution—whether the army or the security services alone—but must be understood across a wide array of local and national institutions used by the regime to absorb diverse social elites. Some actors were incorporated into government institutions, while others were co-opted through non-governmental channels such as professional syndicates and chambers of commerce, industry, and tourism. Even licenses for charitable associations and non-governmental organizations can be understood as an additional mechanism that expanded particularly during Bashar al-Assad’s tenure.

Although the regime systematically prevented the formation of broad social alliances by pitting local elites against one another and positioning them as competitors for appointments and offices, it remained acutely aware of the potential emergence of large moral or ideological blocs—such as conservative urban bourgeoisies, tribal alliances, the liberal private-sector class under Bashar al-Assad, and even the Baath Party’s own social base. Consequently, local elite balances also reflected wider ideological equilibria among major blocs within Syrian society.

4. Conclusion

This paper has presented a theoretical framework for understanding how non-democratic regimes use elections as instruments to advance their political objectives. In such systems, elections are conducted primarily to preserve the façade of democracy and to confer legitimacy on authoritarian governments. The analysis has also demonstrated how elections can be deployed as tools for controlling opposition forces, preventing the emergence of serious challenges to the regime by distributing political shares in ways that align with the interests of the ruling elite.

The paper has examined in particular the conventional and non-conventional institutions relied upon by the former Syrian regime to dominate political life. Conventional electoral institutions included elected bodies such as the People's Assembly and local councils, as well as chambers of commerce and professional syndicates. Within these frameworks, the Assad regime exercised near-absolute control over electoral outcomes, whether through direct manipulation of votes or through domination of electoral committees. As the paper has shown, the primary function of these elections was to construct networks of patronage and to secure the loyalty of influential social actors, including business elites and tribal leaders.

Non-conventional institutions, by contrast, encompassed appointments within governmental, military, and civil structures, as well as within civil society organizations controlled by the regime. Through these mechanisms, the authorities simultaneously sought to provide managed representation for ethnic groups and social formations—such as tribes, families, and sects—while ensuring the loyalty of their leaders and maintaining a balance among them. Crucially, this balancing logic kept these groups in a competitive relationship with one another, preventing the formation of critical political or social blocs capable of challenging the center of power in the future.

The paper argues that the former Syrian regime used the electoral system to pursue several interlinked objectives, foremost among them internal and external legitimation. Elections served as a means for the regime to present itself as a legitimate authority capable of governing the country and enforcing its rule, despite protracted conflict that lasted nearly fifteen years. They were also used to construct and maintain loyalty networks with local leaders, tribal figures, and business elites, securing their allegiance through selective privileges; to absorb allied parties while excluding genuine opposition; and to function as a sensor of public sentiment and an early-warning mechanism for latent threats.

From a political perspective, several key conclusions can be drawn:

- **Representation cannot be addressed through formal institutions alone.**

The question of representation in Syria cannot be addressed without reassessing both conventional and non-conventional institutions and tools of representation. Any reform process accompanying a future political settlement must recognize that a substantial share of representation has historically taken place outside formal electoral institutions, or

through non-conventional instruments such as unannounced quotas. These forms of representation must therefore be engaged with realistically, in order to avoid reproducing the root causes of conflict—most notably exclusion and marginalization. At the same time, standardized or purely electoral models of representation cannot be treated as sufficient on their own to generate broad societal inclusion; future negotiating elites will need to develop contextual and adaptive solutions to complex representational challenges.

- **A clean break with Assad-era representational models is essential.**

If Syria is to move toward a stable future, a clear rupture with the representational practices of the Assad era is essential. Those practices were grounded in exclusion—most notably of Kurds—and in the purely symbolic representation of minorities and women. This also requires moving away from cosmetic power-sharing arrangements and the model of unannounced quotas, and replacing them with a transparent electoral system capable of ensuring both political and social inclusion.

- **Rebuilding trust is a prerequisite for moving beyond revolutionary legitimacy.**

Transitioning from revolutionary legitimacy to electoral and legal legitimacy requires, first and foremost, addressing the deep roots of mistrust in representation and the fractured relationship between society and authority. This goes well beyond amending existing laws; it necessitates substantive and detailed reforms to ensure fair geographic and demographic representation, as well as corrective measures for regions that have experienced decades of marginalization under Assad's rule. Such a transition requires a comprehensive reassessment of the electoral system itself. Electoral design cannot be reduced to a set of rules imposed by authority upon society; it demands broad societal dialogue.

- **Context-sensitive and integrative solutions are required.**

Finally, Syria requires solutions that are both structural and contextual—ones that accommodate the diversity of local representational structures that emerged during the years of war and ensure representation for Syrians both inside and outside the country. This is essential to prevent the re-creation of an extreme centralization that erases local specificities and peripheral rights on the one hand, and to establish mechanisms that allow for the formation of critical political and social blocs capable of generating meaningful representation. Only through such mechanisms can Syria move from dictatorship toward effective pluralism, with political forces capable of managing major societal negotiations in the post-Assad era.