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Syria

Why Syria needs better governance...and a new kind of opposition

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Large rallies in support of Syria's ruling authorities were organised last month across various cities controlled by Ahmed al-Sharaa's government. Whilst they were presented as demonstrations 'against division' and for the unity of the country, **sectarian slogans** were heard amongst protesters.

It was a similar case for the massive demonstrations celebrating the first anniversary of the Assad regime's fall. These events highlight the country's obvious political and socio-economic fragmentations today.

Since the ousting of the former Syrian regime, the political transition has served as an opportunity for the current ruling authorities, led by Hay'at Tahrir Sham (HTS), to consolidate their power over political and economic institutions. In these months, grave human rights violations have took place under their watch, notably the coastal and Sweida massacres. And, the leadership's pursuit of neoliberal and austerity measures have resulted in high levels of poverty continuing across the country.

It is unsurprising that it is within such a context that protests demanding democratic and socio-economic rights have been on the rise in recent months.

Security, democracy and inclusion

Recently, sections of the Alawite communities **protested** the ongoing violations that they've been subject to since the fall of Assad. They called for security, particularly against continuous killings and kidnappings (**particularly of women**), federalism, and denounced the disproportionate arbitrary layoffs that they've experienced at the hands of state administrations, as well as the high cost of living.

In fact, **Ghazal Ghazal, the head of the Alawite Islamic Council in Syria and Diaspora**, called for a boycott of the celebrations marking the fall of the former regime, and urged Alawites to stay home during a "general strike" from December 8-12 to protest against the "new oppressive regime".

Similarly in Sweida, there are ongoing demonstrations opposing the grave human rights violations that were committed by the ruling authority and its affiliated armed groups against civilians since the summer. Alongside the killings, the population has been **victim to the abduction (particularly of women)**, and forced displacements, often on sectarian grounds.

Meanwhile, Kurdish national rights remain ignored – even at times rejected – by the ruling authorities. Furthermore, negotiations with the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES) during what is supposed to be a **process of integration with Damascus**, have reached a deadlock over disagreements regarding military, civil and economic matters.

More generally, the ruling authorities have taken measures to strengthen their control over society, including by trying to reduce democratic rights.

In recent months, local authorities have not hesitated to impose restrictions on the organisation of political conferences. While these measures were mostly informal initially, things are slowly being set into stone. For example,

in November, the Syrian Ministry of Tourism [issued a circular](#) requesting tourist establishments refrain from hosting any events or conferences of a political nature without prior approval from the General Secretariat for Political Affairs.

This has meant that the General Secretariat for Political Affairs – which was only established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs following the fall of Assad – now has extended powers, including monitor political activities.

In some cases, there's been an outright cancellation of events, like the [Political Thought: Necessity or Not?](#) seminar that was organised for November by former political prisoner Aslan Abdel Karim. Local authorities claimed that this was because the association organising the conference was unlicensed, but the law allows associations that have applied for a license (which was the case here), to continue their activities until a final decision is made.

Similarly, in mid-October, numerous Syrian organisations and associations criticised the directive of the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour over her approach to NGOs. They [accused](#) her of using practices, “based on a repressive Associations Law that was long used by the previous regime to curb NGO activities, prosecute their members, and imprison them”.

This has added to wider questions about restrictions to freedom of expression that have been witnessed. Whilst, certainly, local and international press have had much more freedom to operate in Syria since Assad's fall, there have nevertheless been reported attacks on researchers and journalists.

Just last month, Syrian activist and political researcher [Laith al-Zoubi](#) was imprisoned and tortured by authorities, this was without any issuing of an arrest warrant or referral to the judiciary.

Protest

The country's growing socio-economic challenges have been increasingly met with criticism towards government policies from Syrians. Other than their desire to accumulate capital in large luxurious real estate projects, no reconstruction policy or plan has been put forward by the current ruling authorities. And the people are clearly not happy.

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Some have even taken to demonstrating against real estate projects like that of Kuwait-based Al-Omran Real Estate Development Co. (owned by a Syrian businessman). The “Boulevard of Victory” urban development initiative in Homs, was the target of local protest that saw people holding banners reading: “No boulevard, no to displacement”. A [comparison](#) was even made to the ‘Home Dream’, an urban redevelopment plan that was devised under Bashar al-Assad.

The organised action led the company to announce it would [cancel](#) the part of its plan that ran through the contested neighbourhood.

In education, teachers went on strike for several weeks and demonstrated in front of government institutions in Aleppo and Idlib, under the slogan [“The movement continues until our demands are met.”](#). They are demanding permanent employment, the swift reinstatement of those who were sacked, and salary increases that match the soaring cost of living.

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Strike were also organised by [minibus drivers in Damascus](#), as well as [workers at private company Madar Aluminum](#), demanding better working and living conditions.

This month, [employees of the port of Tartous](#) staged a sit-in in front of the governorate building to protest their transfer – which they were informed about via WhatsApp and without any prior knowledge – to distant locations in Jarablus and al-Bukamal border crossings in the Eastern governorates.

Additionally, with a massive increase in electricity tariffs many across the country expressed their anger, and in cities like Salamiyah and Homs, demonstrations were called. Electricity prices could [potentially increase](#) from an exorbitant 3000% to 6000% in each household, assuming a continuous supply of electricity.

Ultimately, whatever the level of the rise, many will be forced to ration their electricity consumption, and more broadly this will result a new rise in inflation rates.

Despite the rise of the minimum wage since the end of July ([to \\$68 per month](#)), the majority of the population, whether employed by the state or the private sector, cannot cover their needs with their salaries. According to estimates made by [Qasioun](#), at the end of September the minimum cost of living for a five-member Syrian family living in Damascus reached around \$645. And, large sections of society are dependent on the remittances which are sent by loved ones abroad.

The response by the Minister of Finance, has been to announce an increase to salaries (by 200%), of workers in the health and education sectors. However, this potential future rise is still insufficient to alleviate a struggling population and counter the constant increase in the cost of living.

In this context, and as we mark the first anniversary since Assad's fall, it is crucial that any authoritarian practices by the new ruling authorities are opposed. Simultaneously, an economic project that strives to achieve social justice, redistributes wealth, and implements a reconstruction process that benefits most of the population, must be built.

What Syria urgently requires as global media and leaders engage in debates over its future, is an alternative political project that combines democratic, social, and economic rights, and fosters cooperation and collaborations among various protest movements and more generally the larger Syrian population in all its diversity.

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Source: [The New Arab](#).

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