

SYRIA'S PATH FROM CIVIC UPRISING TO CIVIL WAR

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Initially, the uprising in Syria was not fueled by sectarianism, but rather by unifying political and social grievances, largely stemming from the failed economic reforms of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Sectarian divisions that were established over five decades of dispersed, authoritarian rule and reinforced by a legacy of violence quickly changed the narrative of the conflict. Unless Syria's longstanding system of rule is changed fundamentally and the unchecked power of the security services is curtailed, political solutions that adopt sectarian power sharing as the cornerstone of a postconflict order will likely cement instability and deep divisions in the polity.

The Divisive Rule of the Assad Regime

- The Syrian uprising's transformation to civil war is a result of the Assads' ruling practices, which embedded sectarianism in social relations.
- A system of dispersed, authoritarian rule allowed successive regimes to wield power through local intermediates to either co-opt or marginalize groups from all sectarian backgrounds according to political expediency.
- Political violence, which peaked in the 1980s, infused social relations with fear. The anticipation of sectarian violence in 2011 helped trigger sectarian reactions that unleashed cycles of further violence.
- Violent repression pushed many protesters to adopt a Sunni Islamist idiom and undermined cross-community appeal.
- Postconflict Syria is unlikely to be genuinely pluralistic, let alone democratic. Sectarian representation will likely substitute for genuine reform, facilitating the integration of militia leaderships into the postwar order.
- Without a fundamental change in social relations and in particular security sector reform, any political solution to the conflict is unlikely to effect change. Conceivably, a single dictatorship would be replaced by that of several power centers maintaining a precarious balance.

Moving Toward a Pluralistic Order

- Rebuilding community relations will require replacing existing regime-controlled security structures with fully accountable institutions.
- Civil self-government structures in areas currently not controlled by the regime may help attenuate sectarian tensions, and hence, these areas should be protected from a return of the regime's unreformed security agencies.
- External actors contributing to a new postconflict political order should prioritize mechanisms of bottom-up accountability rather than a "correct" balance of power between sectarian groups and their leaders.
- External actors should work with Syrian exile communities to build up political movements and create space for previously marginalized endeavors and dissenting voices.
- Excluding from representation those members of Syrian society that subscribe to forms of political Islam will open inroads for extremists. External actors should insist on the participation of all parties in favor of a pluralist order.
- Nominal sectarian inclusiveness should not be the only criterion external actors use when choosing Syrian partners. For genuine pluralism to take hold, the ability of parties, activists, and nongovernmental organizations to challenge engrained hierarchies is more important.

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