

On the International Day of Democracy: Where Does the “New Syria” Stand on Democracy?



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Beginning in March 2011, Syrians took to the streets demanding freedom, dignity, and justice, confronting rule by the security agencies, corruption, and the monopolisation of power. In substance, these demands expressed an aspiration for a democratic system founded on popular sovereignty, the rule of law, political participation, and accountability. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 brought a historic opportunity to fulfil this aspiration. Turning this opportunity into a democratic transition depends on establishing rules that distribute power and independent institutions that constrain it, and on ensuring society’s participation in decisions that determine its future. By these standards, Syria is now moving in a troubling direction, away from democracy. This concern is reinforced by the absence of an explicit commitment to building a democratic system in the Constitutional Declaration, the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference, and the decrees and decisions issued by the transitional president and the ministers and officials of the transitional government. The problem lies not only in the absence of the term itself, but also in the processes and institutions established during this period.

The shortcomings of the participatory approach became evident early on at the National Dialogue Conference, held on 24 and 25 February 2025. Although its preparatory committee announced that it had conducted consultations with approximately 4,000 people across the governorates, the final preparations were rushed: the conference dates were announced only two days in advance, prompting some political and academic figures to decline to attend. Criticism was also raised over selective participation and the absence of influential political and ethnic groups, including major Kurdish political groups. The conference outcomes were general, with no concrete commitments, timetable, or clear mechanisms for implementation and follow-up on its recommendations. The conference therefore failed to provide an inclusive participatory process that allowed for follow-up, or to establish a broad national consensus on shaping the transitional period.

The Constitutional Declaration, issued in March 2025, then established a five-year transitional period and granted the President of the Republic broad influence over the legislative and judicial branches. The president directly appoints one-third of the members of the People’s Assembly, while the remaining two-thirds were selected through an indirect electoral process conducted by electoral bodies formed under the supervision of a higher committee appointed by the president. The problem lies not only in indirect elections, but also in the absence of universal suffrage and the president’s influence over the process of forming the Assembly, which weakens its representation of the popular will and its ability to exercise independent oversight of the executive. In addition, the president has sole authority to appoint and dismiss ministers, while the People’s Assembly has no power to grant or withdraw confidence in the government, hold the president accountable, or remove him from office. The

government is therefore accountable to the president rather than to an elected representative body.

These shortcomings also extend to the judiciary: [the president appoints all members of the Supreme Constitutional Court](#), the body responsible for reviewing the constitutionality of laws and keeping the authorities’ exercise of their powers in check. This limits the Court’s ability to perform its oversight role independently, particularly in relation to the president himself. The president also chairs the Supreme Judicial Council under [Judicial Authority Law No. 98 of 1961](#), which remains in force pursuant to Article 51 of the Constitutional Declaration, blurring the distinction between leadership of the executive and administration of judicial affairs. [Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) (STJ) and [Human Rights Watch](#) have warned that this institutional structure entrenches executive control rather than paving the way towards genuine democracy.

The democratic deficit extends beyond the concentration of powers; democracy also requires a free public sphere that enables citizens to participate effectively. Freedom of expression and of the media, freedom to form associations and political parties, and freedom of peaceful assembly are essential conditions for discussing the form of the state, developing political alternatives, and scrutinising the authorities and holding them accountable. Unless these freedoms are protected by laws that guarantee them and by independent institutions, the rights enshrined in the Constitutional Declaration remain merely formal, and the rules governing the transitional period are shaped from above. The transition then becomes a process of reorganising power within the same centre of executive centre, rather than transferring it to the people, and a further indication of movement away from democracy.

Democracy and Transitional Justice

In a country emerging from authoritarian rule and prolonged conflict, democracy is linked to transitional justice; a democratic transition requires dismantling patterns of impunity and subjecting the authorities and their agencies to the law. Uncovering the truth, holding those responsible accountable regardless of their affiliation, providing redress to victims, and reforming institutions help prevent the renewed use of state agencies and violence to exclude citizens from public life. However, [Decree No. 20 of 2025](#) restricted the mandate of the National Commission for Transitional Justice to violations committed by the former regime, excluding violations committed by other parties and those that occurred after its fall. When those in power determine which violations warrant accountability according to the identity of their perpetrators, justice becomes selective, and the belief that some actors are above the law is reinforced. This undermines equality, the rule of law, and trust in institutions, steering the transitional period away from building a democratic system in which everyone is subject to the same rules.

The direct link between accountability and democracy is evident in the impact of ongoing violations on the public sphere. During the transitional period, STJ has documented incidents of [unlawful killing](#), [arbitrary detention](#), [enforced disappearance](#), and [torture](#), alongside shortcomings in the [independence of investigations](#) and the [effectiveness of accountability](#).

When these violations are attributed to state agencies, or when the authorities fail to address them through independent investigation and effective accountability, they reinforce fear and send a message that those in power remain capable of using force outside the bounds of the law. This deters individuals and communities from expressing dissent, organising, and participating, and undermines the free and safe public sphere without which democracy cannot exist.

The concentration of powers in the president’s hands, weak societal participation, and the absence of institutional oversight and accountability applied equally to all reveal structural flaws in the course of the transitional period that signal a risk of renewed authoritarian rule, even if its structure and rhetoric differ from those of the former regime. This trajectory is particularly dangerous because the transitional period is expected to lead to the drafting of a permanent constitution that will determine the form of the state, the rules of governance, and the status of citizens within it for many years to come.

Correcting this course requires a [participatory review of the Constitutional Declaration](#) that limits presidential powers and guarantees the independence of the legislative and judicial branches, and the launch of an inclusive constitutional process leading to a constitution founded on popular sovereignty, equal citizenship, and non-discrimination, within a clear timetable culminating in free and fair general elections. It also requires opening the public sphere to independent media, associations, political parties, and peaceful assembly, ensuring the representation of women and all communities and regions, and holding perpetrators of violations accountable without discrimination. The international community must not equate the concentration of power with stability, or the mere establishment of institutions with democracy. What matters is not simply the existence of a constitution, parliament, and government, but how they are established, their independence, whether political authorities derive their power from a popular mandate and are subject to accountability, and whether the judiciary is independent of them.

On the [International Day of Democracy](#), the central message is to acknowledge that Syria has yet to embark on a genuinely democratic path and that a commitment to democracy must be translated into rules, institutions, and practice. Democracy is not a deferred promise, but a system that guarantees people’s participation in the conduct of public affairs, alternation in power, the separation of powers, judicial independence, freedom of expression and association, and equality before the law. Syrians have paid

a heavy price to emerge from a state in which one individual and a narrow group monopolised public decision-making. Any transitional period that reconcentrates powers, restricts popular participation, and postpones oversight and accountability therefore moves away from one of their foremost demands. Democracy must be the governing principle of this period from its very first day.

Article 25 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) obliges the state to guarantee citizens' right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives, and to vote and stand for election in genuine, periodic elections based on universal and equal suffrage. Democracy is therefore a necessary framework for giving effect to the rights of Syrians that the state has undertaken to respect. The [Human Rights Committee](#) affirms that giving effect to these rights is an obligation regardless of the form of the constitution or government; describing those in power as “transitional” is therefore insufficient to justify excluding society from decision-making.



ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.

