

Why Syrian Elections Matter

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This month, Syria has been in the headlines in Washington. First, there was the ill-fated early April visit of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Damascus. Then last week, American-Syrian businessman Abe Soleiman traveled to Jerusalem pitching an unauthorized plan -- according to Damascus -- for renewed peace talks between Syria and Israel. And this week, Syrian President Bashar Assad threatened war with Israel if a peace agreement is not reached.

Largely absent from the reportage during this media frenzy was news of the impending Syrian parliamentary elections. Indeed, outside of Syria, the fact that Syrians will go to the polls this Sunday (April 22) to elect a new parliament has gone virtually unnoticed. In a sense, this is understandable: Syria is a dictatorship, the legislature holds little power, elections are neither free nor fair, and the opposition is boycotting the race. Nonetheless, Syrian elections are significant, not only as a bellwether of the ongoing repressive nature of the Syrian regime, but because these elections highlight Washington's continued difficulties in pressuring the Assad regime to modify its pernicious domestic and foreign policies.

The Syrian elections won't be much of a horserace. Elections will neither change the status quo in Syria nor in the legislature itself. During the last elections in 2003, all 167 candidates fielded by the National Progressive Front (NPF) -- a coalition of the ruling Baath party and the only other legal political parties -- won seats. The remaining 83 seats in the 250-person legislature were taken by regime-approved "independents," with pro-democracy opposition candidates boycotting the election. This apportionment of 167 out of 250 seats to the NPF is mandated by Syrian law, ensuring that the ruling party controls over two-thirds of the seats. Among other things, this super-majority ensures the legislative dominance of the Baath, and prevents the minority "independents" from requesting an indictment of the president under the Syrian constitution.

In the run-up to elections, the opposition pressed for changes in the election law. In particular, civil society groups and human rights organizations in Syria called for an end to the "quota" of seats allocated to the NPF, an end to the emergency law limiting political expression, and for a transparent and fair election process. Instead, the Assad regime issued an amendment to the 1973 election law focused on campaign finance "reform." The new provision limited expenditures on campaigns for parliament to \$58,000 per person and mandated the appointment of a

financial auditor responsible for reporting expenditures to the Syrian election commission.

Some pro-regime Syrians and academics suggest this new financial limitation is designed to prevent corruption and level the playing field for Syrian candidates. More likely, the new law is intended to limit potential outside funding for Syrian reform candidates. Assad's concern, of course, is money from Washington and in particular, the \$5 million in funding the Bush administration pledged in 2006 to support Syrian reformers. To date, almost none of this money has been disbursed, and Syrian civil society organizations such as the National Democratic Gathering -- a coalition of five pro-democracy Syrian civil society groups -- have been loath to consider accepting outside funding, fearing persecution and undermining the credibility of their pro-democracy efforts at home.

Washington, it appears, has decided to stay clear of the Syrian elections, neither funding its reformer allies nor condemning the entire charade. No doubt, the administration debated the merit of wading into Syrian electoral politics -- pressing for international election monitors, for example -- but in the end, decided against it. Perhaps the decision against weighing in reflects the administration's new, more circumscribed view of the priority of democracy promotion. Given the increasingly long -- and growing -- list of U.S. grievances against Syria, however, the administration's disinclination to tangle with Damascus on the democracy issue is troubling.

Syria remains a problem for U.S. policymakers. This week's elections are yet another reminder, both to the administration and Congress, that Washington should harbor no illusions as to the true nature of the Assad regime. At the same time, good U.S. policy options on Syria are limited. For decades, Washington has been in search of elusive leverage vis-a-vis Damascus. And while democracy hasn't always been a winning issue, it does resonate with some of our European allies who are currently weighing a rapprochement with Syria. At the very least, democracy would be another arrow in the U.S. policy quiver. In this regard the U.S. tact on the elections represents a missed opportunity.

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