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Establishing Pluralist Citizenship in Post-Assad Syria: Transcending Sectarian and Identity-Based Divisions

Asmaa Elbanaa

Abstract

Despite the fall of the Assad regime, Syria continues to be plagued by sectarian and ethnic divisions entrenched by decades of authoritarian rule, war, and foreign intervention, undermining citizenship and participation. Pluralist citizenship offers a way to overcome these divisions, escape the spiral of violence and authoritarianism, and reintegrate Syrians into an inclusive national project. This study seeks to answer a central question: How can pluralist citizenship be built in Syria amidst sectarian divisions, and what are the main challenges and foundations governing this process? Adopting pluralist citizenship as the theoretical framework, the study employs a descriptive-analytical approach to examine the contexts in which pluralist citizenship can be established. It concludes that the process of building citizenship in Syria faces a number of systemic challenges, most notably rising violence, sectarian tensions, hate speech, and a focus on retribution. In addition, the risk of resurgent authoritarianism and centralised rule poses a major challenge to the institution of citizenship and a participatory social contract. The study shows that establishing citizenship requires building institutions to act as a foundation for pluralism and adopting a participatory approach as a mechanism for pluralist citizenship, rejecting hate speech, and achieving transitional justice.

Keywords: Syria; Pluralist Citizenship; Participatory Democracy; Sectarian Divisions; New Syria

Introduction

Anchoring the pillars of pluralist citizenship in divided, post-conflict societies, especially one like Syria, is a crucial structural challenge facing the reconstruction of state and society. With the exacerbation of sectarian and ethnic divisions stemming from the war, the degradation of state institutions, and a feeble sense of citizenship, there is an urgent need to analyse the mechanisms that can accommodate diversity and build trust among different parts of society. The present study seeks to offer an analytical framework that links the structural, political, and social frameworks to

forge a new social contract based on pluralist citizenship and to prevent the return of authoritarianism.

This study is situated within a body of work that has addressed the problems of citizenship in divided societies, especially those coming out of wars and conflicts. Prominent works here include Azmi Bishara's examination of sect and sectarianism, which discusses how social sectarianism morphs into political sectarianism; Burhan Ghalioun's analysis of the problem of minorities in the Arab world; and Kazem Shabib's work on plural identities in single states. Looking at sectarianism in the Arab region, these works link it to structural problems such as the fragility of the nation-state and authoritarianism. The literature finds that sectarianism is not merely a construct that has been exploited socially, but also a political tool employed by regimes to sustain authoritarianism.[1]

In Syria specifically, the literature has discussed how the Assad regime's authoritarian practices exacerbated sectarian and ethnic divisions, contributing to the escalation of the conflict after the 2011 revolution. Here, the most important studies include Marwan Kabalan's analysis of the collapse of the Baathist state; Badr al-Din Arroudki's discussion of the crisis of Syrian national identity; and Raymond Hinnebusch's article on the interplay between national and sectarian identities in Syria. These practices and policies shaped a system in which the power structure relied on informal patronage networks and the Alawite community, to the exclusion of other sects. This negatively impacted the development of inclusive citizenship in Syria and deepened fractures and tensions.[2]

Subsequent to the fall of the regime in Syria, research has highlighted numerous challenges, primarily those related to the transitional phase, including democratisation, state-building, reconstruction, and the integration of armed factions. Important contribution include the report by Philip Loft and Claire Mills, which examines the immediate repercussions of the fall of the Assad regime at various levels; Fadl Abd al-Ghani's study addressing the challenges of integrating fighters and armed groups into the Syrian army; and articles by Khalid Alterkawi, Dalia Rushdi, and Ibrahim Khoulani that take up issues of peacebuilding and the challenges of reconstruction.[3]

The majority of studies that address sectarianism and societal divisions in Syria or focus on the problems of post-war state reconstruction are atomistic in their approach, treating each dimension in isolation. The present study attempts to bridge this gap by linking the structural-sectarian dimension with the institutional-political and the sociocultural dimensions within an analytical framework centred on the possibility of establishing pluralist citizenship in post-Assad Syria. In its use of pluralist citizenship as a framework for understanding the paths of transformation in divided societies, this study makes a theoretical contribution, while it seeks to contribute to the applied analytical literature by taking Syria as a case study by which to test the limits of this framework in a post-conflict environment. The added value of this study lies in its analysis of the establishment of citizenship as a process of rebuilding both state and society, rather than merely legal or constitutional reform. It is thus a critical extension and development of previous research.

The problem addressed by this study stems from the exacerbation of sectarian and ethnic divisions in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime and the resulting deterioration of state institutions and erosion of the concept of citizenship. The state faces a structural challenge in the

absence of a model capable of accommodating diversity and rebuilding trust among various components of society. This study aims to analyse pluralist citizenship in Syria as a pathway to a renewed social contract that can prevent the return of authoritarianism. It seeks to answer a central question: How can pluralist citizenship be established in Syria amidst sectarian and ethnic divisions and what are the most prominent challenges and foundations governing this process? This central question entails several secondary questions: what are the historical roots and critical junctures in the development of sectarian division in Syria, and how have they deepened the current crisis? How has the collapse of the regime helped to generate structural and systemic crises that hinder the establishment of pluralist citizenship? What are the crucial structural and political challenges facing the development of pluralist citizenship after the war? What are the foundations upon which pluralist citizenship can be built in post-war Syria? The study posits that instituting such citizenship depends on institutional reform to ensure the distribution of power and representation of different groups, the consolidation of political and social participation, the rejection of hate speech and retribution, and the realisation of transitional justice.

This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach to deconstruct the historical, social, and political factors governing the establishment of pluralist citizenship in post-war Syria, and this through an analysis of the political and social frameworks necessary for reconstruction. The methodology entails collecting and analysing qualitative data (including previous studies on Syria, and official and international documents and reports) with the aim of examining the relationship between the research variables. Sectarian divisions in Syria represent the independent variable, while the potential for pluralist citizenship based on participation and recognition is the dependent variable; the mediating variables include institutional reform, the rejection of hate speech and revenge, power redistribution, and transitional justice. The study uses this methodology to identify the challenges and foundations for the institution of pluralist citizenship in Syria amidst deeply entrenched divisions.

The study is divided into four sections. The first discusses sectarian divisions in Syria from a historical and developmental perspective, while the second looks at the collapse of the regime and the structural and systemic crises left in its wake, with a focus on sectarian violence. Section three examines the risk of reproducing authoritarianism during the transitional phase and its impact on the prospects for pluralist citizenship. The fourth section discusses the underpinnings of pluralist citizenship, including institutional reform as a foundation, participation as a mechanism for achieving pluralist citizenship, the treatment of hate speech, and the realisation of transitional justice.

Theoretical Framework: Pluralist Citizenship

Managing cultural diversity in pluralist states is a complex endeavour, with implications for national security and minority rights, particularly under authoritarian regimes that rely on exclusion, marginalisation, and the absence of justice in the distribution of power and values. When the central authority fails to contain diversity, multiculturalism becomes a threat to national

unity, which demonstrates the importance of theoretical frameworks for pluralist citizenship as a means of managing diversity and ensuring mutual recognition among different groups.[4] The concept of pluralist or multicultural citizenship is thus one of the most significant theoretical contributions to contemporary debates on the relationship between the state and society in a context of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Unlike classical conceptions that sought to unify individuals under a single national identity, pluralist citizenship acknowledges the existence of fundamental differences within the body of citizenship and advocates building an inclusive identity that accommodates these differences rather than excluding them, recognising the rights of different groups within a comprehensive framework that entrenches equality and belonging.[5]

In its simplest definition, T. H. Marshall viewed citizenship as a status that gives members of society equal rights: 'All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed'.[6] In this model, citizenship evolved through the development of three elements: civic citizenship in the eighteenth century, which encompasses the rights necessary for individual liberty and equality before the law; political citizenship in the nineteenth century, which encompasses political power and practices that include rights and duties in relation to a particular political community; and by the twentieth century, social citizenship, which holds that all members of society should share basic rights and social welfare. Marshall's aim was to overcome class distinctions through universal equality among citizens, but his conceptualisation faced significant criticism for its failure to address multicultural realities.[7] Evelyn Glenn critiqued Marshall's model, arguing that it was an idealised schema based on a particular experience (white men in post-war Britain) that ignored the fact that individuals might possess all these rights and yet remain marginalised on the basis of race, gender, or culture. The assumption embedded in Glenn's critique is that citizenship is not merely a legal status or a set of abstract rights, but rather a social practice influenced by hegemonic forces, which in turn create unequal conditions among citizens.[8]

Due to the shortcomings of the classical approach to minority rights, the concept of pluralist citizenship emerged in the 1990s. The concept encompasses the demand for full social belonging, which includes recognition and the redistribution of values and power, in addition to the demand for rights.[9] Through his work, Will Kymlicka developed the theory of 'multicultural citizenship,' arguing that citizenship is not complete with mere individual legal equality; it also requires institutional recognition of the identities of cultural and linguistic groups, which is achieved by granting them special rights, such as education in their mother tongue or local self-governance. In this sense, pluralist citizenship becomes a mechanism for transcending the monolithic model that dissolves difference into a uniform national mould, in favour of a model that recognises diversity as an added value for building the political community.[10] Charles Taylor, for his part, focused on 'the politics of recognition' as the cornerstone of pluralist citizenship. He argued that the lack of recognition of cultural identities produces forms of exclusion and alienation, while recognition, conversely, generates a sense of dignity and belonging among individuals and groups. From this perspective, pluralist citizenship is linked to the state's ability to guarantee genuine equality in the public sphere, both in terms of legal rights and in terms of representation and recognition.[11]

Relatedly, Engin Isin and Brian Turner argue that pluralist citizenship represents a shift in citizenship studies, moving from a focus on individual rights and duties to a recognition of the social and cultural relationships that constitute a citizen's identity. It adds new dimensions to the legal aspect of citizenship, relating to cultural, economic, and political empowerment. Citizenship can thus be considered a social process 'through which individuals and social groups engage in claiming, expanding or losing rights.' Accordingly, citizenship is a political process, being one of the ways in which individuals interact with the state and develop their sense of belonging to a larger community.[12] Renato Rosaldo, on the other hand, views cultural citizenship as 'the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one's right to belong.'[13] While his framework focuses on the cultural aspects of citizenship, it is also useful to consider how citizens can be integrated into the national community despite their perceived cultural differences. Similarly, Jan Pakulski defines cultural citizenship as the right to be different, specifically encompassing 'the right to symbolic presence and visibility (vs marginalisation); the right to dignifying representation (vs stigmatisation); and the right to propagation of identity.'[14]

Pluralist citizenship represents a theoretical approach that aims to rectify the shortcomings of classical models by recognising cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity as a part of an inclusive national identity. In doing so, citizenship transcends its role as a legal concept to become a framework for writing a new social contract based on participation, recognition, and a balance between unity and diversity. However, this project is not without its challenges. Some argue that pluralist citizenship could entrench divisions if collective rights become tools of exclusion rather than bridge-building. Its success therefore depends on strong institutions capable of managing diversity and a constitutional framework that balances individual and collective rights.[15] Pluralist citizenship is an urgent priority in Arab societies like Syria that face structural challenges related to sectarian and ethnic divisions. In contrast to centralised state models that have imposed repressive, uniform identities, it offers an opportunity to reconstruct the social contract on foundations of equality and mutual recognition. Applying the principles of pluralist citizenship may thus constitute a way out of the cycle of sectarian violence and tyranny, through the establishment of neutral institutions that uphold the rule of law and foster participation.

Sectarian Division in Syria: History and Evolution

Since independence, successive Syrian governments have failed to establish an inclusive national identity. As resistance to colonialism reinforced Arab nationalism as the dominant identity framework, sectarian groups attempted to assimilate to it in order to secure their own legitimacy and status. At the same time, political conflict revolved primarily around class, with the political arena remaining largely confined to large landowners and capitalists. The 1950s, however, witnessed the emergence of a new force representing an alliance between the educated nationalist elite and the peasantry and middle class, the Arab Socialist Baath Party being exemplary of this development. The party successfully mobilised the middle and lower classes and restructured the

military to include officers from these groups, turning the army into an effective instrument for coups against the bourgeois elite. The institutional order of that era was thus characterised by class-based exclusion, which was reflected in the distribution of power and opportunities within society.[16]

When Hafez al-Assad assumed power in a coup in 1970, his primary focus was to consolidate his authority and end the series of coups that had plagued post-independence Syria for the preceding twenty-five years. He expanded the executive powers of the president and reorganised the army, security services, and various state institutions to ensure that each individual's interest lay in supporting and defending the regime. While all sects were represented in the Baath Party's Political Bureau and the cabinet, real power rested with Alawites, who were placed at the head of the security services, the police, the army, and special guard units.[17] Assad sought to establish an authoritarian system that relied on the Alawite sect and other marginalised communities. The power structure was based on informal networks of patronage and clientelism. Instead of fostering genuine citizenship that reflected the diversity of Syrian society, the regime exploited Arab nationalism to suppress sectarian and ethnic pluralism. This strategy manifested itself in the forced assimilation of sub-identities into a uniform Arab national identity. The regime crafted a central narrative that portrayed Syria as the most Arab nationalist state and the foremost bulwark in the defence of the Arab nation against Israel. This vision legitimised the construction of a strong security state while delegitimising any discussion of the rights of various groups (religious communities and ethnic groups like the Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians, Armenians, and others) to recognition and participation, deeming such demands illegitimate given the threats facing the nation.[18]

Upon his ascension to power, Bashar al-Assad pursued economic liberalisation, which produced an authoritarian system based on crony capitalism. The distribution of new economic opportunities was largely confined to close regime allies, specifically elite Alawite businessmen. Accordingly, wealth and influence were concentrated in the hands of this elite, which became the regime's central support network, further entrenching economic and social divisions along sectarian lines. The adoption of economic liberalisation policies also reinforced sectarianism, while the Baath Party came to play an increasingly marginal role. Although the party initially offered a measure of representation for all and thus a way to mitigate sectarian divisions to some degree, its subsequent decline exposed the extent of Alawite dominance over the levers of state.[19]

Although a legal framework for citizenship existed in Syria, actual practice contradicted the constitutional provisions for equality. In reality, the Alawite sect controlled the levers of power and the distribution of resources and privileges, marginalising other social groups. Citizenship thus became an exclusionary, sectarian institution that selectively granted rights and privileges based on individuals' proximity to the regime's inner circle, while excluding the rest of the citizenry and treating them as second-class citizens, as Glenn points out.[20] Consequently, the dynamics of the relationship between the state and the citizen in Syria lacked cohesion and any participatory dimension.[21] The regime disregarded ethnic, religious, and ideological differences, reinforcing a narrative of a homogeneous society. The empowerment of some minorities at the expense of others

deepened the cleavages between different groups. The Kurds, in particular, were denied their cultural and linguistic rights, but other groups, such as Armenians and Circassians, received special treatment, being allowed to use their languages in print and sustaining their own religious and cultural institutions that provided language instruction.[22]

It was in this context that the 2011 protests erupted, reflecting the cumulative political and social grievances stemming from the regime's failed policies. The regime's violent crackdown gradually cleared the way for the dominance of sectarian and religious organisations and militias, transforming the revolution into a sectarian civil conflict. This transformation was fuelled by several factors, including the sectarian rhetoric used by competing factions in their mobilisation and recruitment efforts. External intervention further exacerbated internal fractures and prolonged the conflict,[23] giving rise to a complex landscape of local, regional, and international factions.[24] The conflict also impacted the Syrian system of citizenship, entrenching a two-track model in which rights are granted selectively based on perceived loyalty to the regime. Citizens were divided into loyal and disloyal groups, and mechanisms such as reconciliation agreements functioned as contracts of subjugation that granted rights, particularly property rights, only to those who complied. Citizenship was thus further eroded while social and political hierarchies were solidified. The existence of multiple administrations also served to fragment citizenship, as administrations and armed groups established parallel regimes and issued their own identity documents, creating a mosaic of local citizenship regimes. This fragmentation resulted in significant disparities in rights, movement, and access to services, based on the authority in control, and it made citizenship conditional and geographically limited.[25]

The Legacy of Collapse: Structural Challenges in the Transitional Phase

On 8 December 2024, the Assad regime fell after more than half a century in power following a military operation launched by an alliance of opposition factions led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) under the name 'the Deterrence of Aggression'. The operation culminated in the capture of Damascus without a fight after Bashar al-Assad himself fled to a Russian base and his security and military apparatus crumbled.[26] Two days later, HTS announced the formation of a transitional government, to be in place until March 2025, appointing HTS leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, as interim president and declaring its intention to disarm armed groups and protect minorities.[27] On 29 March, reflecting a relative openness to pluralism, a new government was formed that included representatives of minorities, civil society, and technocrats, along with former ministers from Assad's governments. Even so, those close to al-Sharaa held a monopoly on the sovereign ministries (Interior, Defence, Justice, Foreign Affairs, and Energy), and the government included only one woman, Minister of Social Affairs and Labour Hind Kabawat, despite promises to increase women's participation.[28]

The transitional government faces enormous challenges in rebuilding the state and citizenship in a country exhausted by destruction, divisions, and armed conflict. Integrating the various factions into a unified national army is a key challenge, especially with entities like the Syrian

Democratic Forces and the Syrian National Army, given a highly complex security landscape in which disparate internal and regional powers exercise local control, posing a threat to the legitimacy of any central authority.[29] The fall of the regime also resulted in the collapse of military and security institutions and the disruption of government services. The new government inherited weak institutions, administrative corruption, and a virtually empty treasury, in addition to the need to purge former regime figures and address a long legacy of grievances.[30] Economically, the new leadership must govern a country devastated by a thirteen-year war that left infrastructure in ruins, productive sectors destroyed, and economic ties fractured. This has resulted in a deeply, structurally fragile Syrian economy that hinders reconstruction and stabilisation efforts.[31]

In addition to security and economic challenges, the new government faces the even more complex challenge of continued sectarian violence. Syria has endured a brutal civil war for the past decade, and despite the fall of the Assad regime and a relative decline in the intensity of the fighting, sectarian tensions remain a constant source of threat, liable to reignite the conflict, especially with the increasing violations committed against certain sects, most prominently the Alawites, and the growing tension between certain sects and armed factions or elements of the government. In the absence of transitional justice and the rise of hate speech and sectarian incitement, fears are mounting within the country of possible descent into a new, more complex and divisive spiral of conflict.[32]

Over the past few months, several areas in Syria have seen sectarian violence, reflecting the escalating rhetoric of revenge for the grave abuses committed by the Assad regime during the revolution, which left deep scars on the body politic and has fuelled rage and a desire for retribution, particularly in the absence of a transitional justice process. These sentiments manifested in the demonisation of the other, who is held responsible for the tragedies suffered by Syrians.[33] In recent months, most notably in the coastal regions of Syria on 6–10 March, they slid into violence following clashes between remnants of the regime and security forces of the new administration. The latter responded with an attack that included the cities of Latakia, Tartus, Jableh, and Banias, prompting the government to enlist the aid of undisciplined opposition factions, some of which committed sectarian massacres in Alawite villages in a clear act of vengeance. Hundreds of Alawites, including women and children, were killed while thousands fled to the mountains or across the border to Lebanon.[34]

In late April, sectarian clashes erupted in the Damascus countryside (Jaramana, Sahnaya, and Ashrafieh Sahnaya), inhabited by predominantly by Druze, following the circulation of an audio recording of a Druze cleric making offensive remarks about the Prophet Muhammad. The incident sparked a wave of anger and incitement on social media and armed groups attacked the city of Jaramana and clashed with public security forces, resulting in the deaths of fourteen people. The confrontations spread to Sahnaya and Ashrafieh Sahnaya and involved attacks on security headquarters, which prompted the Ministry of Interior to send reinforcements and impose a security cordon.[35] In July, Sweida saw fierce clashes between Druze factions and Bedouin tribes after a Druze merchant was kidnapped by a Bedouin group. The incident escalated into widespread sectarian violence, including retaliatory attacks and summary executions. The government

deployed security forces to restore order, but they were accused of committing abuses against Druze civilians. As Bedouin tribes mobilised on the outskirts of Sweida, the fighting transformed into a complex, multi-party conflict with regional repercussions. Seizing on the chaos, Israel launched airstrikes on regime positions in southern Syria and Damascus, resulting in hundreds of deaths and widespread displacement. The fighting ended with a fragile ceasefire brokered by internal and external mediators, though tensions remain high.[36]

These waves of sectarian violence reflect a structural political crisis and a failure to realise citizenship in Syria. After the fall of the regime, sectarian conflict has become mobile, spreading from one region to another due to the lack of official criminalisation of sectarian incitement and the absence of an inclusive national discourse that rigorously condemns it. The spread of weapons among individuals and local groups has exacerbated the risk of clashes, particularly given the regime's inability to build security forces and a national army with a national, rather than a sectarian, ideology. The absence of impartial, professional institutions has entrenched division, deepened distrust between Syrians and state institutions, and solidified a culture of impunity due to the lack of accountability for crimes and the slow pace of transitional justice processes.[37] Sectarian violations are dangerous because they may spread elsewhere, as seen in Sweida, posing a direct threat to Syria's territorial and social unity. This threat goes beyond security per se, exposing a deeper crisis affecting the regime's legitimacy, the mechanisms for establishing inclusive citizenship, and the structures of governance. The situation threatens not only political and security stability but also poses existential challenges to Syrian society and its ability to rewrite an inclusive social contract that transcends sectarian and ethnic divisions and rehabilitates the concept of inclusive, pluralist citizenship as a framework regulating the relationship between the state and society.[38]

Authoritarianism Reproduction and the Challenge of Building Pluralist Citizenship

The transitional phase following the fall of the regime saw the adoption of an approach that reproduced a closed, centralised model of political decision-making, thus emptying the phase of its participatory content. The interim constitutional declaration provided for a presidency with broad powers, transforming state institutions in the new Syria into instruments of the ruling power apparatus rather than expressions of an inclusive national will, which undermines the potential to forge a social contract based on pluralist citizenship and institutional political partnership.[39] This excessive concentration of power in the hands of the president cannot be separated from the broader problem of the nature of political transition in post-conflict societies. Several scholars observe that rushing elections amidst deep societal fractures and fragile institutions can be counterproductive. As Roland Paris explains, holding early elections in such contexts often deepens divisions and empowers narrow elites rather than serving as a gateway to compromise and trust-building.[40] Looking at the Syrian situation, where the state is exhausted, its institutions decimated, and its society torn apart by regional and international interventions, a smooth transition to a stable democracy is a difficult, complex task in the short term. From this perspective,

the transitional authority's insistence on concentrating power in the hands of a single, strong centre can be interpreted as an attempt to contain the chaos and manage the transition with an iron fist, even if only temporarily.[41] Nevertheless, the concentration of power without constitutional checks or a clear separation of powers may reproduce autocratic rule and reduces the chance of building a state based on the rule of law and implementing pluralist citizenship policies.[42]

One structural dilemma in the Syrian case is the transitional authority's continued reliance on the legitimacy of military victory or revolutionary legitimacy as the primary source of its legitimacy and right to govern. This type of legitimacy is brittle and fleeting because it is based on a past event rather than an ongoing political process, and it cannot be strengthened solely by achieving security or service-related gains. The transition to a participatory democracy requires dismantling the authoritarian structure and redistributing power horizontally and vertically in a way that guarantees the effective participation of all segments of society.[43] In other words, genuine, sustainable legitimacy can only be built through participation and effective political representation for all of society, reflecting its pluralism. Absent such participation, feelings of political alienation deepen, and the public sphere becomes a closed circle monopolised by a narrow elite. Cathy Cohen's 'citizen outsider' and Justin Berry and Jane Junn's concept of 'silent citizenship' both refer to this condition of being denied genuine integration and agency despite the existence of legal citizenship rights.[44]

While recent political initiatives proposed both in and out of the country reflect an attempt to break the political deadlock, most have remained captive to symbolic or functional frameworks without having a fundamental impact on the structure of governance. This is due to the absence of a legal environment that allows for genuine political pluralism, the disruption of mechanisms for free elections, and the marginalisation of independent civil society. Accordingly, any attempt at broader participation by social and political forces necessarily runs up against the nature of the closed, centralised, authoritarian structure. The result is the production of mechanisms for formal recognition and pluralism, while real power remains the exclusive province of the centre.[45]

The constitutional declaration promulgated by the transitional authority after the fall of the Assad regime reinforced the same trend towards centralisation. Designed to regulate the affairs of the transitional phase, it should have marked a step towards a reconstructed state and pluralist citizenship. In fact, however, the substance of the declaration reproduced centralised autocratic rule, provided for no genuine mechanisms for the separation of powers, and marginalised non-Arab groups, raising questions about the future of politics in Syria.[46] The declaration granted the president near absolute authority, including the power to appoint the People's Assembly, the judiciary, and the executive administration, making him the de facto ruler and the sole source of political legitimacy absent any effective mechanisms for accountability. A stark contravention of democratic principles, the declaration fully subordinates the legislative branch to the executive, thus reproducing the same totalitarian model that ruled Syria for decades, whereas the transitional phase should lay the foundation for pluralism, not perpetuate authoritarianism.[47]

The constitutional declaration was issued without broad national consensus: it was not submitted to a public referendum, and various political and social forces did not participate in

drafting it, thus casting doubt on its legitimacy. It also lacks clear implementing mechanisms and precise institutional levers for oversight and accountability, which makes it a symbolic document that allows the government to circumvent reforms without any real commitment. The declaration shows an exclusionary tendency towards the Kurds and Druze, disregarding their political and cultural rights and maintaining the state's identity as an Arab republic, which intensifies the sense of marginalisation and threatens to generate new tensions. Moreover, the declaration contains no coherent vision of transitional justice or guarantees of accountability for perpetrators of violations, heightening fears of continued impunity. Instead of serving as a foundational framework for the transitional phase, the declaration appears to be a tool for perpetuating the authoritarian structure. At the same time, it introduces no fundamental change to the political system, particularly in the absence of binding mechanisms for transitioning to a permanent constitution.[48]

The persistence of the authoritarian tendency in the transitional phase not only obstructs the democratic transition but also undermines the social and political foundations necessary to build a genuine pluralist citizenship, which presupposes an institutional state based on participation and the balance of powers. Meanwhile, the reproduction of autocratic rule and over-centralisation fences off the public sphere and excludes social and political actors. Instead of offering an opportunity to rebuild the social contract on the foundations of equality and representation, the transitional phase thus becomes an instrument for reviving old patterns of control in a new guise, stripping the concept of citizenship of its participatory content and leaving it a mere formality devoid of real substance.

Underpinnings of Pluralist Citizenship

The transitional phase gives Syrians the chance to repair a society torn apart by Assad's sectarian policies and divided by a thirteen-year war, allowing for the establishment of inclusive citizenship and laying the foundation for a new political system that guarantees equality, representation for all segments of society, and the rule of law. The National Dialogue Conference convened in February 2025 and the constitutional declaration issued the following March were important initial steps in this direction. For a genuine political transition and the construction of an inclusive national identity, however, it is essential to build a participatory society based on the rejection of authoritarianism, exclusion, hate speech, and vengeance, while also building institutions, pursuing transitional justice and national reconciliation, and ensuring accountability.[49]

Institutional reform as the basis of pluralist citizenship

Institutional reform is the cornerstone of a successful political transition and the consolidation of a citizenship that transcends exclusion and division. It is especially crucial given the historical legacy of chronic structural fragility and its cumulative repercussions, which culminated in an unprecedented economic, political, and social collapse after 2011. As the country enters a new era, addressing these issues and mitigating fragility is essential. Otherwise, these problems increase the likelihood of renewed conflict in more intense, dangerous forms, with significant implications for

the process of building citizenship, ameliorating divisions and sectarian violence, and strengthening security and transitional justice.[50]

Effective, legitimate national institutions are therefore crucial to prevent the resurgence of authoritarianism, exclusionary policies, and violence. Such institutions also serve as the foundation for pluralist citizenship. The state must possess the tools to enforce the law, provide services in accordance with the constitution and the balance of powers, and maintain neutrality.[51] In other words, effective institutions enhance state legitimacy and strength, precluding the emergence of sub-state entities that wield influence and authority and exacerbate divisions. Francis Fukuyama writes that state-building requires work on four fronts: organisational design and management, which encompass the bureaucratic and institutional structure of the state; the design of the political system, which entails regulating the relationship between state authorities; the foundations of legitimacy; and cultural and social factors.[52]

Rebuilding public institutions in post-conflict phases is not merely a technical process. It must attend especially to aspects of legitimacy and justice, rebuild trust in state institutions, and achieve a balance between efficiency and social and political legitimacy. An incremental, participatory approach must be adopted in order to build adaptive, responsive, innovative institutions, one that involves all segments of society and ensures that no group is excluded. Strong, effective, legitimate institutions are the key to transitioning to peace, stability, and development. Without them, it is impossible to provide services, enforce the law, or restore trust between the state and its citizens.[53]

Participation as an anchor of pluralist citizenship

The fall of the Assad regime was a historic turning point in Syria's trajectory, offering a genuine opportunity to realise political and societal participation on constitutional foundations. But Syrians face a significant challenge in overcoming the legacy of conflict and division. In this context, political and social participation constitutes a fundamental pillar in the process of building inclusive citizenship. It also represents an entry point for strengthening legitimacy based on a social contract and inclusion rather than exclusion, thus grounding it in the consent of diverse groups and their participation in decision-making. This transforms legitimacy: no longer based on military victory and the overthrow of the regime, it is grounded in a participatory, inclusive social contract that bolsters citizenship. This model must include active participation in institution-building, policy formulation, and the formation of governance structures. Broad participation plays multiple roles: it gives institutions social legitimacy, opens peaceful channels for the expression of grievances, and strengthens the social cohesion essential to consolidate democracy. Political participation is effective because it transforms institutions from structures imposed from the top down into genuine expressions of the public will. When transitional institutions create an inclusive environment for participation, they generate the perception that the government reflects collective values and preferences. Such legitimacy is essential to ensuring a commitment to democratic norms and preventing a reversion to exclusionary authoritarian structures.[54]

In this context, an alliance among social and political forces capable of producing an inclusive national project is key. Participation can serve as the practical tool to shape this bloc to include

various political and social factions and currents, including civil society, unions, cultural elites, local communities, and the private sector, transforming them from passive recipients of decisions into partners in their formulation and implementation. Without such alliances, the transitional authority is vulnerable to isolation and more liable to reproduce authoritarianism, centralisation, and marginalisation, ultimately making any state-building project more fragile in the face of internal and external pressures. Despite the new authority's pronouncements that the transitional phase will be one of building, the reality may prove more complex given the deep divisions among the various factions.[55]

Addressing hate speech

Addressing hate speech presents a significant challenge in Syria, yet it is an urgent necessity for stability and national reconciliation. To achieve it, a comprehensive approach should be adopted, implemented in phases according to the specific circumstances. This approach may include legal, institutional, media, and educational tools. Hate speech must be criminalised, with the development of a comprehensive legal and institutional framework that balances combating hate speech with protecting freedom of expression. All actors in society should participate in drafting this framework. The media can also play a crucial role in raising awareness of the perils of hate speech, promoting a discourse of tolerance and peace, and building a culture of dialogue among different groups. Civil society organisations, too, are essential partners in addressing hate speech. Civil society can launch community reconciliation programmes that help to heal past wounds and foster trust among various segments of society. Victims of hate speech must also be supported by facilitating their access to compensation and redress, particularly moral compensation, and guaranteeing their right to access justice and equality before the law. Finally, educational and cultural programmes should be developed to integrate the concepts of tolerance and non-violence into school curricula and cultural activities.[56]

Addressing hate speech, however, cannot be separated from the broader framework of transitional justice, which, in societies like Syria emerging from protracted, complex conflicts, is a historical necessity for rebuilding the social contract, not merely a political or legal choice. In such cases, societies find themselves at a crossroads: either sliding back into a cycle of violence or striving diligently to lay the foundations of stability, reconciliation, and national diversity. Transitional justice becomes a foundational act for rebuilding the social contract that institutes pluralist citizenship. A mere facelift of the political authority is insufficient for societal recovery; profound, comprehensive reforms must be adopted, as the effects and practices of the former regime do not disappear with its formal demise but remain embedded in the deep structures of the state and society.[57]

Transitional justice requires clear mechanisms for implementation, foremost among them an independent national body with sovereign powers that is not subject to political dictates or managed through appeasement. In Syria, a national body transitional justice body has already been formed, which is a crucial step towards a conscious approach to the requirements of this phase. It is insufficient, however, unless the body enjoys genuine empowerment. The body therefore faces

challenges related to the degree of legal independence it enjoys and the actual powers it exercises in documentation, accountability, and the development of mechanisms for redress and guarantees of non-recurrence.[58]

Conclusion

The fall of the Assad regime marks the beginning of a new phase in Syria and an opportunity to establish a pluralist citizenship capable of transcending divisions and conflicts through recognition, participation, and equality, rather than repression, exclusion, and centralisation. This study has examined the contexts, challenges, and foundations for achieving such citizenship in Syria, finding that deep structural and systemic challenges persist, most notably sectarian tensions and violence, the rhetoric of revenge, and the potential resurgence of authoritarianism and centralisation, as seen in the practices of the transitional authority. All of this poses a direct threat to inclusive citizenship.

The study concludes that pluralist citizenship is a necessity and a cornerstone for rebuilding the state and society and preventing a renewed slide into violence or authoritarianism, especially given the erosion of the concept of citizenship and the collapse of trust between various segments of society and state institutions stemming both from the policies of the former regime and the war. Accordingly, the most significant challenge of the transitional phase is the lack a governance model that can accommodate diversity and entrench a participatory social contract that repairs the relationship between the state and the citizen.

In an attempt to bridge gaps in the literature, this study presents a theoretical and applied framework that employs the concept of pluralist citizenship to link structural, political, and social dimensions. This approach demonstrates that the institution of pluralist citizenship in post-Assad Syria rests on three interconnected pillars: first, institutional reform as the cornerstone of legitimacy, achieved by building effective, transparent national institutions that prevent the reproduction of exclusion and domination; second, political and social participation as a mechanism for integration and legitimacy building, as broad participation in policymaking and institution-building generates opportunities for peaceful expression and fosters trust and cohesion; and third, combatting hate speech and achieving transitional justice as prerequisites for national reconciliation and the restoration of the social contract, which requires a comprehensive approach that combines legal criminalisation with the role of media and civil society to build a culture of tolerance and offer restitution to victims.

In conclusion, the study emphasises that the future of pluralist citizenship in Syria depends on the commitment of all active forces to constructing these three pillars and transforming the state-building process from a mere transfer of power into a genuine foundational project for rebuilding trust and national identity on the basis of participation, equality, and mutual recognition.

AI Assistance Statement

The author used no AI tools or programmes at any stage of this study.

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