

The New Syrian Parliament: The Beginning of Democratization or Merely a Facade?

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The establishment of Syria's interim parliament marks a critical juncture in the country's institutional transition, highlighting the inherent tension between the regime's aspiration for political and international legitimacy and its tendency toward authoritarian centralization. For Damascus, the move is intended to signal a break from the Ba'ath legacy, but in practice, it reflects a sophisticated mechanism of co-optation: alongside the integration of a diverse range of representatives — from women and minorities to former opposition figures — the selection process remains tightly controlled from above, making the body more an instrument of managed inclusion than an independent legislature. The parliament's structure illustrates this tension clearly: while two-thirds of its delegates were selected through indirect "electoral bodies," the remaining one-third was appointed directly by President Ahmad al-Sharaa. This reality sharpens the central question: will the parliament succeed in developing into an independent authority, or will it remain a transitional institution that provides institutional legitimacy to a pre-planned political order? The answer is not clear-cut; rather, it exposes three foundational tensions at the core of the regime since al-Sharaa's rise to power: between presidential centralization and controlled institutional decentralization; between cautious openness toward minorities and their conditional integration; and between the managed inclusion of political Islam and the prevention of its organizational independence. In this sense, the president's appointments may broaden the boundaries of political inclusion, but the fact that they are made directly by the president indicates that this is not open political competition, but rather a carefully designed framework that functions, at the same time, as a mechanism of control.

During the five decades of the Assad family's rule, the Syrian parliament served as a centralized institution whose primary role was to provide legal validation and an institutional framework for the decisions of the executive branch. Between 1973 and 2024, 13 election cycles were held in Syria, characterized by the absence of open political competition or genuine multi-party representation. The pillar of the parliamentary system during this period was the monolithic structure of the ruling Ba'ath Party and its coalition, the "National Progressive Front." This mechanism ensured a rigid, predetermined quota system that guaranteed a permanent and automatic majority for Ba'ath representatives and allied factions, under the close supervision of the regime's apparatuses. Members of parliament were generally elected on the basis of loyalty to the regime, tribal ties, or local interests connected to influential circles, rather than an independent ideological platform. As a result, the parliament functioned in practice as a body that rubber-stamped presidential decrees and government

policy, without any meaningful capacity to exercise independent parliamentary oversight, criticize state institutions, or advance separate legislative initiatives. In doing so, the parliament reflected and preserved the centralized governance structure of that era.

Establishment of the New Parliament and the Selection Process

The process of establishing Syria's new interim parliament began to take shape in the summer of 2025, with the issuance of [Presidential Decree](#) No. 143 by President Ahmad al-Sharaa. The decree, which regulated the electoral system for the interim parliament, stipulated that the total number of seats in the legislature would stand at 210 members, distributed in the following format: two-thirds of the parliament (140 seats) would be determined as elected representatives, while the remaining third (70 seats) would be appointed directly by the president.

The elections themselves were defined as indirect and based on "electoral bodies" in each governorate. The composition of these bodies was rigidly divided between "professionals and academics," who were allocated 70% of the seats, and "notables and local leaders," who received the remaining 30% of the parliamentary allocation. The choice of this indirect mechanism reflects not only an authoritarian impulse, but also an objective structural constraint: the collapse of the population registry and the existence of millions of refugees and displaced persons make direct elections in a post-conflict state an unfeasible goal, both logistically and security-wise, in the initial transitional phase.

To ensure that the new legislature was insulated from former centers of power and from the institutions of the current government, strict eligibility criteria were established. These categorically barred members of the ousted regime, active military and security personnel, and serving ministers, governors, and judges from participating.

The first implementation phase was completed in October 2025, with the announcement of 119 elected officials out of the seats designated for indirect election. The results reflected a Sunni-male hegemony, within which the weight of diverse Islamic currents was prominent — from figures associated with Muslim Brotherhood circles to clerics and technocrats who had gained administrative and legal experience in the mechanisms of the "Salvation Government" in Idlib during the war years.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood did not participate as an organized movement or through an official list, several candidates with familial and social ties to circles associated with the movement were elected. Thus, the indirect mechanism not only produced inherent representational distortions at the expense of women and minorities, but also confronted al-Sharaa with a dilemma: how to incorporate Islamist political networks into the establishment without allowing them to coalesce into an autonomous and independent political force.

At the same time, only six women were elected in this stage, and approximately ten of those elected belonged to religious or ethnic minorities, including Kurds, Christians, Alawites, Ismailis, and Turkmens. The elections were postponed in areas where the state had not yet established full control or a stable political-security arrangement — in the northeast of the country and in the Al-Suwayda governorate.

During the first half of 2026, elections were also completed in the northeast, following changes in the balance of control and administrative agreements that enabled the process to take place. This development allowed representatives from areas previously excluded from the process to be included, but it also underscored intra-Kurdish divisions. Candidates affiliated with Kurdish currents seeking

dialogue with Damascus, including figures close to the Kurdish National Council (ENKS), viewed participation as a channel for exerting influence from within. By contrast, figures affiliated with the Kurdish organizations PYD/SDF regarded the electoral process as a framework designed to circumvent the will of the Kurdish public and incorporate representatives who do not necessarily reflect the political center of gravity in the northeast.

The case of Al-Suwayda is even more complex. Elections in the Druze-majority governorate were postponed indefinitely due to the unstable political and security conditions on the ground. To circumvent the impasse, al-Sharaa appointed two representatives from the governorate to parliament — a Druze representative identified with the government, alongside a representative from the Bedouin community. Although this move grants the governorate a minimal presence in parliament, it is far from being a substitute for an authentic local selection process. From the regime's perspective, it represents an effort to mitigate the representation gap without waiting for a full settlement on the ground. It may even serve as part of a calculated strategy of political isolation, designed to exert pressure on the power brokers in the governorate until it is fully returned to the fold of the central government.

In terms of its mandate and powers, despite its temporary term — set at 30 months, with the possibility of extension — the parliament's [formal powers](#) are extensive. It is required to propose and approve laws, review and amend previous legislation, approve the state budget and international agreements, and support the development of the legal framework for a permanent constitution and future elections. Beyond its structural role, the parliament is tasked with the responsibility of shaping reconstruction policy and stabilizing the civil sphere. This responsibility requires the development of a legislative framework for regulating investment, ensuring sound budgetary management, and combating corruption, while simultaneously establishing mechanisms to safeguard fundamental freedoms, protect political rights, and provide relief to groups harmed during the fighting.

The Presidential One-Third

On July 1, Mohammad Taha al-Ahmad, Chairman of the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections, announced the names of the incoming members of parliament, including the 70 members of the "complementary one-third" who were directly appointed by the president. This announcement paves the way for convening the parliament's opening session, during which members are expected to take the oath of office, elect the parliamentary leadership, and establish a dedicated committee to draft its internal rules of procedure. Within the quota of presidential appointments, 15 women were included, raising the total female representation in parliament to 22 members.

Analysis of the Presidential Appointments

An analysis of the presidential appointments reveals that al-Sharaa used the complementary one-third not merely as a technical mechanism to fill the ranks, but as a calculated political tool for shaping the character and institutional profile of the emerging institution. Professionally, the composition presents a relative diversity: 15 politicians and public activists, 13 academics, seven representatives from the medical sector, six educators, six businesspeople, five engineers, five economists and managers, four legal professionals, four clerics, four individuals with other professional backgrounds, and one author. This breakdown points to a conscious preference for civil, professional, and technocratic profiles, integrated in a controlled manner alongside political, tribal, and community figures.

The geographical distribution of the appointees also reflects an effort to create territorial balance, although it does not guarantee full representational equality. Aleppo Governorate received the largest share with 14 appointees, followed by Al-Hasakah with seven representatives, and Homs and Deir ez-Zor with six representatives per governorate. Idlib, Hama, Damascus, and Rif Dimashq were each represented by five appointees; Al-Latakia and Daraa received four each; Al-Raqqah three; and Quneitra, Tartus, and Al-Suwayda only two representatives per governorate. The distinct dominance of Aleppo Governorate reflects its renewed demographic and political weight in the Syrian arena (especially in light of the return of refugees from Turkish areas of influence), while the relatively limited representation of Damascus may indicate the government's aspiration to avoid establishing a parliamentary structure overly identified with the capital city and its traditional power centers.

At the individual level, the appointments map out a diverse and calculated composition, combining former opposition figures, civil activists, academics, and legal professionals, alongside tribal representatives and ethnic and religious minorities sheltered under pragmatic lines identified with the new regime. The presidential strategy is particularly evident in the symbolic inclusion of minorities who advocate for dialogue with the regime, such as the appointment of Assyrian Gabriel Moushe Kourieh, Lara Kaddour, an Armenian from Aleppo, and Abd al-Hakim Bashar, a Kurdish figure from the ENKS current, which serves as a counterweight to the PYD. The regime even recruited opposition leaders and former fighters into its ranks, including Anas al-Abdah, Badr Jamous, and Ahmad al-Jarba, alongside Hassan Soufan (formerly the leader of Ahrar al-Sham) and Yasser Dalwan (Jaish al-Islam), whose appointment signals a positive cue to Russia. These individuals operate alongside pragmatic figures such as Maher Alloush, women's-rights activist Huda Atassi, and members of al-Sharaa's close administrative circle — advisor Mustafa Abdi and legal scholar Abd al-Hamid al-Awak. Finally, the appointment of the well-known actress Rozina Lazkani represents a sophisticated communications move intended to project an image of modernity, secularism, and diversity to the international community and the West, thereby helping to deflect external criticism of the regime's character.

Conclusion and Implications

Beyond the question of the demographic representation of women and minorities, the final composition of the new parliament reflects al-Sharaa's efforts to manage the Sunni-conservative and Islamist sphere from within. As the results of the indirect elections demonstrated, the existing mechanism generated a clear advantage for conservative Sunni representatives and, in some cases, for figures with familial, social, or communal ties to the Muslim Brotherhood sphere. This reality presented al-Sharaa with a twofold challenge: on the one hand, the need to avoid alienating the broad Sunni-conservative base upon which a central part of the new government relies; and on the other, concern over the growing strength of other radical Islamist currents seeking to establish themselves as an independent and organized political force.

In this sense, the presidential one-third functioned as a political counterweight: it was designed to balance not only the gender and ethnic representation gaps, but primarily the Sunni-conservative bias that was created in the indirect electoral process. The integration of women, Kurdish representatives, and figures from minority communities alongside academics, legal professionals, and civil personalities — while deliberately limiting the number of clerics and former fighters loyal to al-Sharaa — will allow

him to present a parliament with a relatively moderate and broad-based profile, intended to distance it from the image of institutionalized political Islam.

Yet the fundamental question remains open to different interpretations: does the integration of eclectic and diverse figures herald a centralized, moderate model that genuinely aspires to represent Syrian society in all its shades, or is it a sophisticated replication of the civil control mechanisms previously implemented in Idlib? According to this critical interpretation, the establishment of an ostensibly decentralized, civil-technocratic front is primarily intended to manage the public sphere and mobilize international legitimacy and resources, while the real military and security power centers remain hermetic and sealed off behind the scenes.

The central meaning emerging from this analysis is that the presidential one-third serves a dual function: it is both a tool for correcting representational imbalances and an effective means of co-optation. The mechanism makes it possible to incorporate peripheral figures who might otherwise remain outside the system, while simultaneously subjecting them to clear political dependence on the executive authority that appointed them. This is the defining characteristic of the new parliament as a whole: expanded visibility without the decentralization of power, and openness toward minorities without an autonomous mechanism to ensure their influence.

This distinction is critical to assessing the status of minorities in the “New Syria.” While numerical representation is easily measured by the number of seats allocated to Kurds, Druze, Christians, or women, substantive political representation is measured by the ability of these representatives to act as an independent voice, raise distinct community demands, criticize government policy, and oppose centralized legislation. At this stage, the new parliament indeed expands the visibility of these groups in Syrian society, but it is too early to determine whether this will translate into tangible political influence.

This also raises the question of international legitimacy. The establishment of the parliament constitutes a calculated political signal toward the international community, intended to demonstrate a transition from a revolutionary and temporary governance structure to an orderly and permanent state system. This move is perceived as vital for the al-Sharaa regime, particularly in light of the acute need to mobilize reconstruction funds, remove sanctions and economic barriers, and create the legal stability needed to attract foreign investors and donor countries. However, long-term international legitimacy will not rest on the legislature’s mere formal existence, but rather on the institution’s proven willingness to protect civil rights, promote governmental transparency, and maintain effective oversight of the executive branch.

Ultimately, Syria’s new parliament is an important transitional institution, both structurally and symbolically, but it does not in itself indicate the beginning of democratization, even in its minimalist sense. Although the institution marks a transition from overt emergency rule and institutional dismantling toward an attempt to build a new constitutional-political framework, it simultaneously exposes the preservation of the centralized structure of governance, the boundaries of conditional openness toward minorities, and the presidency’s efforts to contain political Islam and neutralize its potential for independent organization.

If, during the transitional period, the parliament succeeds in developing autonomous internal regulations, maintaining real parliamentary oversight of budgets and appointments, advancing a progressive political parties law and a comprehensive election law, and becoming an arena in which

voices that diverge from government policy can also be heard, it may mark the beginning of genuine institutional decentralization. Otherwise, it will remain an empty vessel, intended solely to stabilize the authority of the center under a renewed parliamentary and procedural facade.

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