Polity IV Country Report 2010: Syria

Score:	2009	2010	Change
Polity:	-7	-7	0
Democ:	0	0	0
Autoc:	7	7	0
Durable:		47	
Tentative:		No	

Authority Trends, 1946-2010 Syria

SCODE	**SYR**	CCODE	**652**	Date of Report	**15 October 2011**

Polity IV Component Variables

XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP
2	1	4	3	4	1

Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)

End Date	1 February 1958		Begin Date	9 March 1963

Polity Fragmentation: No

Constitution	1973
Executive(s)	President Bashar al-Assad (Ba'ath); initially nominated by the People's Assembly and confirmed by popular referendum, 10 July 2000; reconfirmed by referendum, 27 May 2007
Legislature	Unicameral: People's Assembly (250 seats; directly elected; 170 guaranteed for parties associated with the Ba'ath-dominated National Progressive Front; only parties in the National Progressive Front are permitted to participate in elections; most recent elections, 22-23 April 2007) Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party: 134 Other parties in National Progressive Front: 35 Non-partisans: 81
Judiciary	Supreme Judicial Council; Supreme Constitutional Court; Court of Cassation

Narrative Description:[1]

Executive Recruitment: *Designation* (**3**)

With the death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000 and the emergence of his son, Bashar al-Assad, as president, it is tempting to treat executive recruitment in Syria as being hereditary in nature. However, while Syria, like many Arab counterparts in recent years, is showing a tendency toward the creation of a "republican dynasty," this is an incomplete picture of Syrian politics. In many important ways executive recruitment continues to be "designative" in nature. While it was clearly the wishes of President Hafez al-Assad to

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handpick his son as his successor, it was ultimately up to the ruling Ba'ath party whether or not his wishes would be fulfilled. Only by using the hegemonic powers of the Ba'ath Party was Bashar al-Assad able to consolidate his power (at least temporarily) and secure his position at the top of the Ba'ath hierarchy. Prior to being selected president through a popular referendum, Bashar was made head of both the party and the armed forces. For all practical purposes executive recruitment remains a designative process orchestrated by the Ba'ath Party. This fact is most clearly evident by the uncertainty that surrounds Bashar's future hold on political power. It is commonly understood that the greatest challenge to the tenure of Basher al-Assad comes not from pro-democracy activists (which there are few) or rival ethnic/religious factions (which there are many), but from within the ranks of the Ba'ath Party itself. Since his ascension to power in 2000 the "old guard" within the Ba'ath Party have worked diligently to slow the proposed economic reforms of President Bashar and have been instrumental in leading the charge against dissident voices within Syria. However, in 2003 Bashar al-Assad flexed his political muscle over conservative Ba'ath members by appointing a new prime minister, Muhammad Najli al-Otari, who he has assigned the task of leading a new reformist government. President Bashar was reconfirmed president by referendum on 27 May 2007.

Executive Constraints: *Slight to Moderate Limitations* **(3)**
For more than forty years Syria has operated under an almost continuous state of martial law. After a series of military coups throughout the 1950s and a short-lived union with Egypt and North Yemen in the United Arab Republic, in 1963 the Ba'ath Party became the ruling party of Syria. The hegemonic position of the Ba'ath Party in Syrian society was further consolidated with the military seizure of power by Hafez al-Assad in 1970. Under the leadership of President Assad political power in Syria became highly centralized. Neither the legislative nor judicial branches of government provided a serious check to his authority. The National Assembly was largely a rubber stamp institution for policy initiatives formulated by the president and his increasingly small circle of loyal supporters. In order to ensure the subordinate role of the legislative branch in Syrian politics, the Constitution mandates that the Ba'ath Party be allocated a majority of seats in the National Assembly. By actively promoting a cult of personality around himself and using state repression to ensure Ba'ath hegemony, President Assad was able to consolidate virtually all political power in Syria in his own hands.

Despite this long history of centralized power, it is not at all clear that President Bashar al-Assad maintains, nor desires, this position of ultimate authority over Syrian society. As it currently stands, President Bashar al-Assad's authority within the Ba'ath Party remains tenuous at best. The Alawite elite in the Ba'ath Party, who control a majority of key posts in the army and the intelligence services, seem to view President Bashar al-Assad as a stabilizing force that will allow them to maintain their grip on political power. However, if the President's reform efforts begin to challenge the political and economic security of these officials, his rule will likely become increasingly precarious.

Political Participation: *Repressed Competition* **(1)**
Political opposition to the Ba'ath Party is not tolerated. For many individuals in Syria the lack of political rights seems a reasonable tradeoff for political stability. Even President Hafaz al-Assad's most vehement detractors concede that his greatest accomplishment was to maintain stability in Syria's ethnically and religiously fragmented society. Deep cultural, political and economic divisions separate the country's Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, Alawite (Shi'ite Muslim), Druze and Sunni Muslim communities. While Syria takes on the guise of a multiparty polity, all legal parties, organized under the banner of the National Progressive Front (NPF), simply serve the interests of the chief executive and the Ba'ath party. Syria is in reality, if not in the strict legal sense, a one-party state which, until recently, was dominated by a personalist dictator. Despite this hegemonic control, since 1990 the government has permitted "independents" to run for a limited number of seats in the People's Council. However, the threat posed by these "independents" is small and their autonomy is highly questionable. The current allotment of non-NPF deputies in the National Assembly is eighty-three, thus ensuring a permanent absolute majority in the 250-seat legislature for the Ba'ath-dominated NPF.

With the ascension to power of Bashar al-Assad in 2000 many political observers held out hope that he would follow through on his proposed agenda of liberalizing the political realm. While the President seems to have more interest in economic reforms than political reforms, nevertheless, during his early months in office he made some small steps to liberalize the media and released numerous political opponents from jail (many from the banned Muslim Brotherhood organization). However, as the events of the past few years indicate, it is still too early to tell if these "reforms" mark a serious break with the

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repressive policies of the past. President Bashar's efforts to liberalize the political arena have come under increasing resistance by "old guard" members of the Ba'ath Party who are resistant to any changes to the political system of Syria. The power of the "old guard" was most clearly demonstrated when the government decided to crackdown on pro-democracy forums in February 2001 after two liberal members of parliament, Maamun Honsi and Riad Seif, decided to resist government efforts to silence democratic voices. Both members were subsequently jailed in September 2001. Despite the crackdown on pro-democracy dissidents, the government continued to relax its position vis-à-vis the banned Muslim Brotherhood organization. In November 2001 two senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood were released from jail as the organization increased its efforts to resume political activity after twenty years of political silence. Most of the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood were imprisoned or exiled after the government violently crushed an uprising in the city of Hama in 1982. Over 25,000 individuals are believed to have died in this incident. Despite some relaxation of government repression against Islamist organizations, nevertheless, human rights groups estimate that more than 1,200 political prisoners still sit in Syrian jails.

As of mid-March 2011 the wave of political protests sweeping the Arab world had very limited impact on the rule of President Bashir al-Assad of Syria. Repeated calls for a "day of rage" had largely gone nowhere and the regime made only cosmetic concessions on the price of basic economic necessities. The absence of any real opposition groups inside the country and a pervasive fear of the security services were largely cited as the culprit behind the seeming passivity of the Syrian people. However, unlike the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the young president continued to wield a relatively high degree of popular support and legitimacy. Ten years after his inauguration, President Bashir al-Assad appeared to have a firm grip on the seat of power. Competing interests to his rule, both inside and outside the Ba'athist regime, had largely been marginalized. The Sunni-dominated Muslim Brotherhood, who resent the Ba'athist power system dominated by Assad's Alawite minority, had long been unable to present a sustained threat to the President's power. This inactivity has proven to be the calm before the storm which began in mid-March 2011 and has spread across Syria with systematic and sustained demonstrations calling for reform and met with violent repression by government security forces with no end in sight as of mid-October 2011.