

Syria

Political Rights:	7
Civil Liberties:	7
Status:	Not Free

Overview:

Political and civil liberties in Syria continued to deteriorate palpably in 2004 for the fourth year in a row. Although President Bashar Assad freed several hundred aging political prisoners jailed during his father's 30-year reign, he showed no such clemency to those opposed to his own autocratic rule. Some 2,000 Kurds were jailed for weeks or months without charge following antigovernment riots in March, while dozens of intellectuals were detained during the year for peacefully expressing their opinions.

Located at the heart of the Fertile Crescent, the Syrian capital of Damascus is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world and once controlled a vast empire extending from Europe to India. The modern state of Syria is a comparatively recent entity, established by the French after World War I and formally granted independence in 1946. The country's precarious democratic institutions survived nominally in the face of persistent military coups until 1963, when the pan-Arab Baath Party seized power and amended the constitution to guarantee itself "the leading role in society and in the state."

The Syrian government has been dominated by Alawites, adherents of an offshoot sect of Islam who constitute just 12 percent of the population, since a 1970 coup brought General Hafez Assad to power. For the next 30 years, the Assad regime managed to maintain control of Syria's majority Sunni Muslim population, brutally suppressing all dissent. In 1982, government forces stormed the northern town of Hama to crush a rebellion by the Muslim Brotherhood and killed as many as 20,000 insurgents and civilians in a matter of days.

In 2000, Assad's son and successor, Bashar, inherited control of a country with the region's most stagnant economy and highest rate of population growth, with unemployment estimated at well over 20 percent. In his inaugural speech, the young leader pledged to eliminate government corruption, revitalize the economy, and establish a "democracy specific to Syria." The first six months of Assad's tenure, known as the "Damascus Spring" witnessed dramatic changes. Informal networks of public figures from all sectors of civil society were allowed to openly discuss the country's social, economic, and political problems. Assad released more than 600 political prisoners, closed the notorious Mazzeh prison, allowed scores of exiled dissidents to return home, reinstated dissidents who had been fired from state-run media outlets and universities, and allowed the establishment of the country's first privately owned newspaper.

In February 2001, however, the regime abruptly reinstated restrictions on public freedoms and launched an escalating campaign of threats, intimidation, and harassment against the reform movement. Ten of the country's leading reformists were arrested during the year and eventually sentenced to heavy prison terms. Economic reform also fell by the wayside as dozens of reform laws remained unimplemented, were put into effect half-heartedly, or lacked supporting regulatory changes needed to attract international investment.

The regime's renewed assault on political and civil liberties initially elicited little criticism from Western governments, in part because of Assad's cooperation in the war against the al-Qaeda terrorist network. However, Assad's covert efforts to assist Saddam Hussein's

rearmament prior to the March 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and his unwillingness to disrupt the flow of foreign terrorist infiltration into the country after the war led to rapid deterioration in his relations with the administration of U.S. president George W. Bush, culminating in the May 2004 imposition of American economic sanctions on Syria. Meanwhile, Assad's refusal to relax Syrian control over Lebanon severely alienated France, which co-sponsored a September 2004 UN Security Council resolution calling on Damascus to immediately end its lucrative occupation altogether and opened the way for tough diplomacy by the European Union (EU).

Scenes of Iraqis celebrating the downfall of a government so strikingly similar to the Assad regime inspired Syria's pro-democracy movement to reassert itself. After the fall of Baghdad, nearly 300 intellectuals signed a petition demanding the release of all political prisoners, the cancellation of the state of emergency, and other political reforms. However, while the regime was willing to adjust the manner in which its control over society is legitimized and reproduced—most notably by reducing the two-million-member Baath Party's oversight of policy decisions—it remained unwilling to substantially loosen its grip on power.

Notwithstanding its claim to be threatened by radical Islamists, the Assad regime's behavior indicated that it feels most threatened not by religious fundamentalists, but by secular opposition forces seen as prospective allies of the West. In March 2004, security forces fired on a crowd of Kurdish soccer fans who had hoisted posters of Bush, touching off eight days of riots throughout Kurdish-inhabited areas of the country. At least 30 people, mostly Kurds, were killed as security forces suppressed the riots and arrested some 2,000 people.

While hundreds of Islamists and radical leftist political prisoners were released during the year, secular liberal activists were subjected to a steadily intensifying crackdown. The president of the Committees for the Defense of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights (CDDLHR), Aktham Naisse, was arrested in April after he organized a petition and rally calling for the lifting of emergency law. In September, the security forces detained the outspoken leader of a newly established liberal movement, Nabil Fayyad, and held him for 33 days. Fayyad, who had condemned the country's political leaders as "intellectual terrorists" for their intolerance of free speech just months earlier, emerged from prison broken and subdued, praising Assad for "defending public liberties."

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

The Syrian people cannot change their government or exert influence over policy making through democratic means. Under the 1973 constitution, the president is nominated by the ruling Baath Party and approved by a popular referendum. In practice, these referendums are orchestrated by the regime, as are elections to the 250-member People's Assembly, which holds little independent legislative power. The only legal political parties are the Baath Party and its six small coalition partners in the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF). All 167 of the NPF's candidates won seats in the March 2003 parliamentary elections, with heavily vetted independent candidates taking the remaining 83 seats.

Syria was ranked 71 out of 146 countries surveyed in the 2004 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. Key regime officials and their offspring monopolize many lucrative import markets and benefit from a range of other illicit economic activities.

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. Vaguely worded articles of the Penal Code and Emergency Law give the government considerable discretion in punishing those who express views or publish information that "opposes the goals of the revolution" or tarnishes the

image of the state. Apart from a handful of non-news radio stations licensed in 2003, the broadcast media are state-owned. While there are a few privately owned newspapers and magazines, a press law enacted in September 2001 permits the government to arbitrarily deny or revoke publishing licenses for reasons “related to the public interest” and compels privately owned print media outlets to submit all material to government censors on the day of publication. The country’s leading independent newspaper, *Al-Doumari*, closed in 2003 in the face of recurrent bureaucratic harassment. Satellite dishes are illegal, but generally tolerated.

Muhammad Ghanem, a Syrian journalist for two newspapers based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), was detained for 13 days in March 2004 after he wrote an article arguing that all Syrian Kurds should be granted citizenship. Even local journalists who publish material in foreign publications under pseudonyms have been unable to escape prosecution because of the government’s extensive surveillance of telephone and Internet communication. In July, three journalists who wrote articles using pseudonyms for a UAE-based online newspaper—Muhammad Quteish, Haytham Quteish, and Yahia al-Aws—were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to four years. In June, Abdel Rahman Shaguri was sentenced to two and a half years in prison on charges of “harming the image and national security of Syria” for sending e-mail copies of a dissident newsletter to friends and relatives. In October, Masoud Hamid was sentenced to five years in prison for sending e-mail photos of a June 2003 Kurdish demonstration in Damascus to a number of dissident-run Web sites.

Syrians are permitted to access the Internet only through state-run servers, which block access to a wide range of Web sites. Shortly after the outbreak of the March 2004 Kurdish riots, the authorities blocked access to two Kurdish-language Web sites that carried news, photos, and video clips of the violence. E-mail correspondence is extensively monitored by the intelligence agencies.

Although the constitution requires that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion in Syria and freedom of worship is generally respected. The Alawite minority dominates the officer corps of the military and security forces. Since the eruption of an Islamist rebellion in the late 1970s, the government has tightly monitored mosques and controlled the appointment of Muslim clergy. Academic freedom is heavily restricted. University professors have been routinely dismissed from state universities in recent years because of their involvement in the pro-democracy movement, and some have been imprisoned.

Freedom of assembly is largely nonexistent. While citizens can ostensibly hold demonstrations with prior permission from the Interior Ministry, in practice only the government, the Baath Party, or groups linked to them are allowed to organize demonstrations. Security forces forcibly dispersed a small crowd of activists who staged a demonstration against the state of emergency on March 8, arresting six people and briefly detaining two foreign journalists and an American diplomat who attended the rally.

Freedom of association is restricted. All nongovernmental organizations must register with the government, which generally denies registration to reformist groups. Although a few unregistered human rights groups have been allowed to operate in Syria, individual leaders of these groups have been jailed for human rights related activities. In addition to Aktham Naisse, two other leaders of the CDDLHR were detained in 2004 for more than a month.

All unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). Although ostensibly independent, the GFTU is headed by a member of the ruling Baath Party and is used by the government to control all aspects of union activity in Syria. Strikes in nonagricultural sectors are legal, but they rarely occur.

While regular criminal and civil courts operate with some independence and generally safeguard defendants' rights, most politically sensitive cases have been tried by two exceptional courts established under emergency law: the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) and the Economic Security Court (ESC). Both courts deny or limit the right to appeal, limit access to legal counsel, try most cases behind closed doors, and admit as evidence confessions obtained through torture. The ESC was formally abolished in 2004; henceforth, economic crimes will be tried by criminal courts.

The state of emergency in force since 1963 gives the security agencies virtually unlimited authority to arrest suspects and hold them incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge. Many of the estimated 3,000 remaining political prisoners in Syria have never been tried for any offense. The security agencies, which operate independently of the judiciary, routinely extract confessions by torturing suspects and detaining members of their families. There were scores of reports of torture by the security services during the year, and according to local human rights groups, at least four people (all of them Kurds) died from suspected torture by the security services. At least four people who returned from exile in 2004 were arrested and detained upon their arrival. The government carried out two major releases of political prisoners during the year—around 120 in January and more than 250 in late July and early August.

The Kurdish minority in Syria faces cultural and linguistic restrictions, and suspected Kurdish activists are routinely dismissed from schools and jobs. Some 200,000 Syrian Kurds are deprived of citizenship and unable to obtain passports, identity cards, or birth certificates, which in turn prevents them from owning land, obtaining government employment, or voting. The September 2001 press law requires that owners and editors-in-chief of publications be Arabs. Scores of Kurds arrested during and after the March 2004 riots remained in detention as of November 30. Following the riots, the authorities explicitly banned all major independent Kurdish political groups.

Although most Syrians do not face travel restrictions, prominent activists living in Syria, as well as relatives of exiled dissidents, are routinely prevented from traveling abroad. Many Kurds lack the requisite documents to leave the country. Equality of opportunity has been compromised by rampant corruption and conscious government efforts to weaken the predominantly Sunni urban bourgeoisie.

The government has promoted gender equality by appointing women to senior positions in all branches of government and providing equal access to education, but many discriminatory laws remain in force. A husband may request that the Interior Ministry block his wife from traveling abroad, and women are generally barred from leaving the country with their children unless they can prove that the father has granted permission. Syrian law stipulates that an accused rapist can be acquitted if he marries his victim, and it provides for reduced sentences in cases of "honor crimes" committed by men against female relatives for alleged sexual misconduct. Personal status law for Muslim women is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. Violence against women is widespread, particularly in rural areas.