Institutionalisation of Electoral Authoritarianism : A Study of The Syria's Assad Regime

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ABSTRACT

Authoritarianism is a prevalent form of political system in the world where democratic political ideals are limited through advocating strict obedience to a single ruler or group arbitrarily. Electoral authoritarianism is a form that falls between democracy and authoritarianism. They practice authoritarianism behind the institutional façade of representative democracy. The formal structures, guidelines, and practices that make up a political system evolve through a process called institutionalisation. Institutionalisation serves authoritarian regimes' purpose of establishing stability and legitimacy. Establishing long-lasting laws and policies to support the authoritarian government can institutionalise authoritarianism. Electoral authoritarianism became a major form of political system in the post-Cold War era. The institutionalisation of electoral authoritarianism is visible in various countries, especially in West Asia. Syria is the best example, which has a long history of institutionalisation of authoritarian practices. This was most visible during the period of Hafez al Assad in 1970 and continued during his son Bashar Al Assad's tenure. This institutionalisation is practised by manipulating the country's constitution, institutions like the army, Judiciary, media, political parties and electoral laws.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Electoral authoritarianism, institutionalisation, Syria

Authoritarianism and Institutionalisation: A Conceptual Framework

Unlike democracy, authoritarianism is a doctrine and a form of government typically associated with dictatorship. This ideology rejects human autonomy in thinking and behaviour and bases it on submission to authority. Authoritarianism is a political system in which a leader or, occasionally, a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined but entirely predictable limits(Bolme,2019). It also needs a more sophisticated guiding ideology but has distinctive mentalities and limited political pluralism(Linz,1964). Democracies, in name only, may exist in authoritarian nations despite the existence of legislatures, elections, and political parties.

Moreover, authoritarianism frequently supports the unofficial and uncontrolled use of political authority. This leadership is 'self-appointed and, even if elected, cannot be displaced by citizens' free choice among competitors(Przeworski,1992). The classification of authoritarianism in the 1950s and 1960s was narrow and concentrated only on totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Juan J Linz and Alfred Stepan added post-totalitarianism and sultanism to the classification. Growing optimism about the prospects of democracy in the non-democratic world was evident in literature at the start of the 1990s. Before democracy, authoritarianism was thought to be only a transitional state. The new terminology originated from democracy in the 1990s, leading to a phenomenon known as "democracy with adjectives.". Scholars have labelled these regimes as "authoritarian democracy," "military-dominated democracy," "neo-patrimonial democracy," "proto-democracy," and so on. But in the 2000s, this tendency reversed, with "authoritarianism" replacing the word "democracy"(Collier&Levitsky,1997,). Thomas Carothers rejected the idea of the transition paradigm by describing it as a product of the early phase of the third wave of democratisation(Carothers,2002). To fill the gap of this transitional phase, In 2003, Marina Ottaway spread the notion of "semi-authoritarianism," which is now known as "electoral authoritarianism," and advanced thought on the subject by addressing the divide between authoritarian and democratic regimes using case studies. Electoral authoritarianism exists in a conceptual area between genuine democracy and non-electoral authoritarianism. Because they conduct elections that fall short of democratic norms of freedom and justice, incumbents can win elections repeatedly. Elections for a national legislative assembly and the chief executive are often held under electoral authoritarian governments. However, they so severely and consistently transgress the liberal-democratic ideals of justice and freedom that elections are no longer considered instruments of democracy but rather are tools of authoritarian control. Electoral authoritarianism is characterised by the following: legislatures that are either entirely controlled by the ruling party or do not exist at all, the media that is wholly owned by the state, the judiciary that is also under the regime's influence, and elections that produce no meaningful contestation. These features of electoral authoritarianism keep the autocratic government in power while disguising it as a representative democracy. However, this can also be a double- edged sword because it upholds authoritarianism while planting the seeds of its demise by arming the opposition with resources and offering incentives to elites to break with the established order.

The formal structures, guidelines, and practices that make up a political system evolve through a process called institutionalisation. It is the method by which systems and processes gain value and stability. Its strength and breadth of institutions, which are reflected in the quantity, variety, and efficiency of its political system organisation, serve as indicators of its level. Huntington developed four criteria to assess the institutionalisation of political institutions: coherence, autonomy, complexity, and adaptability. Huntington believes that using a system of political institutions to harness popular power is the answer to solving all of politics' problems. By

institutionalising political power, mass pressures for inclusion and participation in the political system can be directed and made to comply with desired levels of stability and order(Ben-Dor,1975). A crucial stage in the evolution of politics is institutionalisation. It is, therefore, a characteristic feature of democratic political systems and is seen as a more advanced stage of political evolution.

Institutionalisation serves authoritarian regimes' purpose of establishing stability and legitimacy. Establishing long-lasting laws and policies to support the authoritarian government can institutionalise authoritarianism. Institutionalisation gives the administration legitimacy and value by stifling criticism and continuous calls for democratisation. It also helps to get rid of the uncertainties of regime change. This is most pronounced in electoral authoritarianism, in which the ruling class creates institutional frameworks to present democracy to the populace while utilising it to secure its hold on power.

The electoral authoritarian regimes use institutions of domination and institutions of representation to remain in power. The institutions of domination are instruments of arbitrary power imposition and compliance. This includes repressive institutions like secret police, powerful military, some financial sustenance, and ideological agents like state-controlled propaganda media. Institutions of representation are concessions to societal pluralism. In electoral authoritarianism, all formal political institutions like legislature, court, parties, and civil society are allowed, while the authoritarian ruler ensures constraint and controls them. They consider these institutions to be subordinate to the authoritarian ruler. These institutions are constrained or controlled by disempowering them, manipulating the selection procedures, or setting up rules that demand arbitrary compliance(Schedler,2013)

Institutionalisation of Electoral Authoritarianism: The World and West Asia

The history of electoral authoritarianism can be traced back to east central Europe in 1920s and Argentina during 1946 to 1955. However, it became widespread in the post-Cold War era. The proliferation of Electoral autocracies was mainly in the global south, which includes Africa, post-communist Eurasia and Latin America. The post-Cold War World witnessed a domination of liberal democratic ideology represented by the USA, which compelled the Authoritarian regimes to shift to democracy. However, these attempts at complete democratisation failed due to a lack of effective opposition, and the authoritarian rulers adopted manipulated democratic practices to convince the protesting civilians and get international respectability. This was the case in most of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Apart from this, the domestic mass mobilisations and protests against authoritarian regimes also resulted in the formation of electoral authoritarian governments. This transition was seen in post-communist countries like Armenia, Croatia, Romania, and Serbia after 1994. there were also countries like Venezuela and

Peru where the existing democratic regimes collapsed due to political and economic crises (Levitsky&Way,2002)

The autocracies during the Cold War, like single-party systems, military rule and personal dictatorships, have become electoral authoritarian systems in the post-Cold War era. Even though there are some instances of democratic erosion, most of the electoral authoritarian countries evolved from non-electoral autocracies. As of early 2012, an incomplete list of electoral authoritarian regimes includes, in the post-soviet region, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan; in Northern Africa and the Middle East, Algeria, Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen; in Latin America, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, and Nicaragua; in sub-Saharan Africa, Burkina-Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Congo (Kinshasa), Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, Togo, and Zimbabwe; and South and East Asia, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Thus, globally, electoral authoritarianism is a prevalent form of political system. Morse called it "an era of electoral authoritarianism (Schedler,2013).

Multiparty elections have always been used as an instrument of authoritarianism in history. Even the ancient Greeks considered it a tool of aristocratic rule. In the 19th century, competitive elections were used by European monarchs and Latin American caudillos to exercise their tyrannical power. Thus, democratic political institutions have been utilised as an instrument by authoritarian regimes since time immemorial. The electoral authoritarian regimes in the post-Cold War era set up a wide range of republican democratic institutions and manipulated them to hold onto power for extended periods. Based on the available data from 1986 to 2002, the regions of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America were prominent in conducting competitive elections and, at the same time, sustaining authoritarian regimes. Only after the 2000s did this practice emerge in the post soviet countries because they became independent from the soviet union only in 1990 and were in the initial stage of nation-building (Schedler,2013)

Middle Eastern countries have strong authoritarian regimes. Near-absolute control is held by a few influential individuals who suppress civil rights, free and fair elections, and any other perceived challenge to their authority. However, these totalitarian regimes exist in a variety of forms and sizes. In half of the countries in the region, the President is not chosen. In countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, kings and sheikhs have governed for decades, frequently transferring authority from father to son. Eight of the ten extant absolute monarchies in the world are found in the Middle East. Many other authoritarian nations, including Egypt and Syria, display themselves as democracy while, in reality, they have skilfully or clumsily orchestrated their elections. In these countries, generals and strongmen employ the military and oppressive security agencies to uphold their autocratic governments. The theocrats control the government of Iran. Constitutional monarchies exist in Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco, and Jordan. Only Israel,

Iraq, and Turkey in the region claim to be democratic.

Following the Gulf War 1991, most Arab nations carried out hitherto unseen political reform projects. They removed restrictions on civil society, especially on democratic NGOs and human rights organisations; almost half of them reorganised or founded elected legislatures. The institutional foundation of these authoritarian states, which executive offices demonstrate with powerful coercive authority, bloated public bureaucracies used to buy social compliance through patronage, and a complicated web of legal restrictions that effectively stifle most forms of dissent, has not been undermined by this brief period of political liberalisation.

Following 9/11, the U.S. assumed responsibility for democratising the region and launched a campaign to promote democracy, including support for independent media, anti-corruption initiatives, and grants to civil society. Nevertheless, by focusing on the structural foundation of Arab authoritarian regimes, that is, the dearth of organised political opposition coupled with egregious human rights violations, these strategies are unable to "directly" promote democracy. For example, unsolved gender equality issues will cause U.S. policymakers to sour relations with regional allies such as Saudi Arabia. As a result, initiatives to promote democracy have minimal effect in undermining the political capital of incumbent leaders.

The world was filled with immense expectations when the Arab Spring broke out in 2011 that autocratic regimes would fall and democratic governments would take power throughout the Middle East, ranging from Tunisia to Egypt. According to Freedom House's 2014 Freedom in the World report, the Middle East has the worst civil liberties scores of any region(Freedom,2014). No attempts of political liberalisation in the area led to overthrowing authoritarianism, but it is often seen as a strategy of authoritarian adjustment rather than regime transformation.

An authoritarian system does not become unstable when some supposedly liberal or democratic components are introduced; instead, they are used to devise policy concessions, distribute patronage and spoils, and sustain a credible commitment from supporters. So, multi-party elections and other institutional practices commonly associated with liberal democracy have been incorporated into authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. As a result, electoral authoritarianism started to emerge, where civilian governments exist but are abusing the power to their advantage. Authoritarian governments use democratic institutions to their benefit and reduce the prospects of losing power(Kaya&Bernhard,2013). Although Arab constitutions declare that the rule of law is supreme and protected, Arab citizens appear to have limited protections since executive powers and security forces operate freely. Even though there are parliaments, which are not entirely elected bodies, they function as advisory bodies and forums for debate in semi-authoritarian states. To put it briefly, they serve more as a minimal public

space than a tool for executive branch supervision and legislation.

Today, most Arab political systems permit the election of parliaments, but they all employ a range of legal and extralegal measures to guarantee that the opposition stays in the minority. Debates on public problems can be vigorous and diverse during plenary sessions, but several circumstances limit their influence. First, the executive branch's opaque speaker's office usually restricts the authority to set their agenda for parliamentary deputies. Second, there needs to be more public access to parliamentary debates. Third, legislative committees typically receive little support and accomplish little work outside plenary sessions.

Today, most Middle Eastern countries have periodic elections and some form of political party structure. However, because multi-party elections are not highly contested and political power remains firmly in the hands of the state, their existence does not indicate a move towards democratisation in these regimes. As long as opposition parties don't endanger the regime's security, they can contest in elections. They thereby obstruct free and fair elections. Opposition parties are often prohibited from competing in elections, and their leaders are imprisoned when they represent a threat to the government. Because third parties cannot independently confirm results, there are several potential for vote manipulation. Between 1975 and 2000, limited multi-party elections were held in 44 states, but authoritarianism continued. Consequently, election-based authoritarianism has developed into a modern type of autocracy.

Towards Electoral Authoritarianism in Syria

Under the French mandate, the Syrian parliament was democratic. Syria became a democratic nation and regained its independence in 1946. The elections law was modified by Law No. 325, which was published in 1947, making it direct and accessible. After the law was passed, Syria had free elections in which candidates from every political party ran. The failure of Arabs, including Syria, in the Arab-Israeli War and the consequent Nakba, which led to the large-scale migration of Palestinians to Syria, resulted in an eruption of mass protests in Syria against the democratically elected Quwatli Government. The corruption charges against military General Husni al-Za'im by the Government triggered him to plot a military coup which was allegedly backed by the CIA. The U.S. intervention was a reaction to the rejection of the passage of the Trans-Arab pipeline through Syria, which was an ambitious U.S. project. Husni al Za'im, the first authoritarian ruler, came into power not through military action; instead, he was elected as the president of Syria, which was facilitated by the abolition of all political parties, enabling him to be the only candidate. Thus, the institutional mechanisms were rigged to facilitate the establishment of an electorally authoritarian government in Syria in the early periods of its political history. This was the first instance of authoritarianism in Syrian history and also the first U.S. intervention in the Middle East. The approval for the Za'im government from the political

opposition, Urban masses and, most importantly, the British, French and U.S. governments displayed the widespread and international recognition of an electoral authoritarian government. It was followed by a second coup headed by General Sam al Hinawi, who established a provisional government under Hashim al Attasi, a former nationalist leader. He reinstated elections and the democratic system; notably, he passed new electoral laws giving women the right to vote. This cleared the path to free and fair legislative and presidential elections in 1949. But the army remained a significant power centre during this period, too. The army remained a parallel power centre in the country to exercise arbitrary control over civilians directly or indirectly.

Colonel Adib Shishakli conducted a third coup in 1951 and appointed his follower, Major General Fawzi Silu, Prime Minister. Shishakli controlled the civil service and courts and abolished all political parties. 1952, he founded the Arab Liberation Movement, Syria's only recognised political party. He approved a new constitution in 1953, making Syria a presidential republic and himself a president. Thus, authoritarian rulers controlled and manipulated the institutions or created new mechanisms like their own political party to wield power in their hands without destroying existing democratic institutional systems like the constitution, parliament, political participation, judiciary or bureaucracy completely. In 1954, an army campaign against Shishakli led to the end of Shishakli's dictatorship and the return of political life. The military takeovers strengthened the army and elevated its status as the ruling party's top leader. After Shishakli, democratic politics blossomed in the country again between 1954 and 1958. Even though it was unstable, This period's parliamentary elections are regarded as the most equitable in Syria's electoral history. In the parliament, labourers, peasants, nationalists, and communists had significant representation. Even though this period witnessed unstable cabinets, the different ideological spectrums, from conservatives to communists to Baathists, got space for more extensive political participation.

From 1958 to 1961, Syria was part of the United Arab Republic and Egypt under the dictatorial rule of Nasser. Political parties were dissolved, including the Baathist party, which supported Nasser's rule. Even though there were presidents, vice presidents, and cabinet and executive councils, intelligence and military services supervised it. Due to the division between Syria's and Egypt's security forces, military chief Abdal Karim al Nahlawi staged the subsequent military coup of the country in 1961 and seceded from UAR. The period between 1961 and 1966 witnessed unstable governments under different rulers, including the later authoritarian ruler Hafez al Assad. During this time, there were two coups; one among these coups was put down by Hafiz al Assad, which consolidated his power in the country—this period also marked the start of Syria's total Ba'athist domination, which was justified based on the frequent coup attempts by pro-nassarites. Syria has periodic presidential and parliamentary elections despite

military takeovers and periods of political stability(Collelo,1988).

Hafez al-Assad took over Syria in 1970 after toppling his competitors and ending party politics. Any attempt by the people to overthrow Assad's government was met with opposition. He brings his party's supporters together within the National Progressive Front, the nation's lone legislative coalition. He also ensured that the nation's different religions and foreign allies like Iran and Russia would support him. Hafez al-Assad's lone opponent came from the Muslim Brotherhood and a rebel faction, Fighting Vanguard. However, the 1982 massacre and its cover- up handed Assad complete authority over the nation. Institutional reforms and new institution- building marked this period to ensure mass support for the rule, including adopting a new constitution and committees to look into governmental corruption. But he maintained absolute control over military and security organisations. The Baath party monitored all political activities of the countries. Bashar al-Assad, his son, took over as President following his death in 2000. Political reform became quite popular after Bashar al-Assad took office in 2000. Amidst the "Damascus Spring," which the Ba'athist administration put an end to under the pretext of "national unity and stability," civil society members, human rights advocates, and confident lawmakers became increasingly outspoken. Although there were brief attempts at reform, the nation swiftly reverted to its previous status as a dictatorship, which persisted even after the 2011 Arab Spring.

As a result, Syria has encountered several types of authoritarianism since achieving independence. Syria's authoritarianism was not theocratic or monarchical like most West Asian countries. Syria was dominated by military leaders from the beginning of its totalitarian era until 1970. Even though the rulers were military rulers, they often remained in power by rigging the existing democratic mechanisms. So, there was no complete abolition of the democratic system in Syria, whereas the existing democratic institutions and processes were used to maintain their dictatorial power. Since 1970, the Assad family has ruled Syria dictatorial, taking over the family business father and son. After twenty-four years of swift and frequently violent power shifts, intense social struggles over the nature of the Syrian state and the structure of the country's political economy came to an end with Assad's ascent to power in 1970. Before Asad's ascent to power, Syria was seen as a symbol of the Arab world's egocentric, inadequately institutionalised, and coup-prone politics. Even though Syria has been ruled by a father-and- son authoritarian government since 1970, regular elections have been held for the parliament and presidency. However, since the 1973 election, the Ba'athist party has always controlled the parliament; since 2003, the National Progressive Front, led by the Ba'athist party, has also done so. Since 1970, there has only been one contender for President: Hafez al-Assad, who ran in 1970; since 2000, Bashar al-Assad has done so. Only in 2021 did opposition candidates run for President, but Assads won handily, with a majority of over 90% in each election. Elections were, therefore, only a front for the autocratic monarchs who maintained their hold on power. Consequently, it is

possible to view this time as a clear example of electoral authoritarianism in Syria.

Institutionalisation of Electoral Authoritarianism in Syria During the Assad Regime

Officially, Syria is classified as a parliamentary republic, along with Israel and Iraq, its neighbours. The parliament and the President share decision-making authority. However, several institutional frameworks have been built by the Assad regime since it came to power in 1970, which has made the executive more powerful. Before his rise to power, Syria lacked state institutions deserving of the title. A small group of highly influential individuals and ambitious troops controlled the President, the council of ministers, and the judiciary. A cabinet minister's office was reportedly like a local coffee shop where friends would stop by at any time to request favours, generally an exception from a law or rule for themselves or their family. On the other hand, Asad has made public life more formal. He wants people to have faith in his institutions— the People's Assembly, the popular organisations, the National Progressive Front, local government agencies, and, most importantly, the validity of his presidential election, which he has held for three consecutive seven-year terms. This institutional building was adopted to increase public credibility for himself and the Baath party, which was lacking in the 1970s. This ensured mass mobilisation behind the Baath party, essential to hold power. However, the institutional mechanisms were built or reformed to facilitate his consolidation to power, later followed by his son.

In the majority of democracies, the authority is sanctioned by the Constitution. Therefore, the primary means of institutionalising authoritarian inclinations was to include it within the Constitution. Syria drafted its first Constitution in 1920, followed by a second in 1928 that was revised in 1930 and 1949, and a third in 1950. Every one of these constitutions contains a democratic component of one kind or another, particularly the 1950 constitution that declared Syria to be a representative state. However, authoritarian aspects have gained legal support since the country's 1953 constitution. This Constitution is referred to as the first presidential Constitution. It gave the President broad executive authority and eliminated the prime minister's office within the cabinet(Constitutional,2021). In 1973, Syria adopted a permanent constitution that gave the President a monopoly on power and welded the state apparatus to the Baath Party, which was enshrined as "leader of state and society" in the Constitution's Article 8. The President was given extensive authority under the Constitution whereby he is not only the head of state but also the general secretary of the Ba'ath Party, the supreme commander of the army and the armed forces as per Article 103, and the head of the Central Command of the National Developmental Front. Thus, he consolidated his Government, army and party power through the constitution, which made it legitimate. Furthermore, the President has both executive and legislative authority due to his ability to dismiss the People's Assembly (Article 107), act as the council's substitute legislator when it is adjourned (Article 111), and enact laws (Article 108). By Article 95, he also

has the authority to designate and remove the prime minister, his deputies, and ministries. Even though people can freely choose their representatives for the parliament, The president can control their decision-making as he can remove them at his own will. He can also declare war in accordance with Article 100 and establish and modify a state of emergency as per Article 101. Thus, the emergency powers allow him to withdraw all fundamental rights. The power of the president of Syria is not checked by the parliament in any way by the constitution(Syria,1973)

He even has the power to alter the Constitution whenever he pleases. Article 150 of the Constitution was amended in 2000 to lower the age restriction from forty to thirty-four, enabling his son to become President(Syria,1973). The 2012 constitution resulted from the nationwide pro-democracy rallies that began in 2011. Despite efforts to make it more democratic, the new Constitution strengthened the authoritarian framework and placed it under the control of a powerful presidency. Only six small political parties are permitted to exist legally despite the Constitution's explicit recognition of a multi-party system. These parties are all members of the National Progressive Front, led by the Ba'ath party, which is in power. Under Article 87, the incumbent president must stay in office "if no new head of state is elected," which means that Bashar al-Assad will be able to continue in power after this period has passed. In the event of a severe threat to the integrity and independence of the nation's territory or the country's unity, the President of the Republic may, under Article 114, prohibit state institutions from performing their duties. This authority enables him to act quickly to address the threat. Still, this article's ambiguous wording significantly increases the President of the Republic's ability to abuse his position of authority and disrupt the function of institutions, which may threaten his power. The prime minister and his deputies, as well as the ministries and their deputies, are appointed by the President of the Republic, according to Article 97. In addition, the President accepts their resignations and removes them from office. As a result of his authority, the President of the Republic is now directly in charge of overseeing the operations of every ministry and the government as a whole. Except in cases of severe treason, the President's acts are unquestionable, even though he is nominally answerable to the People's Assembly. Article 111 grants him the authority to dissolve parliament if it rejects his revision. Therefore, the Constitution gives the President unlimited authority over the legislature(Constitution,2012).

As a result, Syria's new Constitution is set up to support Assad's rule until 2028 and allow his family to continue holding political power indefinitely. At least 21 provisions provide the President of Syria unfettered authority over all three branches of government, including the ability to veto legislation, declare emergencies, and dissolve people's assemblies. Like most democratic nations, the Constitution guarantees the freedoms of speech, expression, assembly, association, and movement. However, it also gives the government unrestricted authority to restrict these rights. The government has wide latitude in defining what constitutes an illegal

expression, and the procedures for obtaining authorisation for an assembly or organisation are intricate. Therefore, by granting the President extensive authority, the constitutional provisions aid in institutionalising the authoritarian tendencies of the Assad administration.

The configuration of Syria's security institutions contributes to the regime's consolidation of power. The four primary security forces in the nation are not under the jurisdiction of any civilian authority. The President is designated as the army's top commander by Article 105 of the Constitution, giving him authority over the second-most powerful institution in the nation. Adnan Makhluf, the son-in-law of President Hafez Al-Assad, led the Presidential Guard. At the same time, Rifat Al-Assad, the brother of the President, oversaw the internal security forces and the Defence Companies, Syria's paramilitary force(Kassab,2015). Alawi clients of President Assad held most of the senior operational commanders within the regime. Thus, his constitutional power over the army was used to appoint his loyal men to major military positions. The dictatorship institutionalised several local militias that had emerged during the Arab Spring to guarantee their allegiance. Most significant is the National Defence Army, founded in late 2012 as a citizen army in Homs to fight alongside the Syrian military and security forces. The NDF now has official stamps, uniform standards, a flag, a motto, training facilities, leadership administrative buildings, and monthly salaries. The orders, the wages, and the money all originate in Damascus. Assad also instituted institutional redundancy, an additional command line, and overlapping responsibilities for significant military formations. The several organs of the regime's coercive apparatus were built with multiple layers of allegiance to compete and cooperate for regime survival.

Syria has many laws that have kept the autocratic government in place. Under the guise of a conflict with Israel, the authoritarian Assad dictatorship invoked the oldest emergency rule, which was in force from 1963 until 2011, to impose restrictions on civil and political rights. The administration was able to carry out preventive arrests under emergency law, which also superseded laws against arbitrary governance and the Constitution. Additionally, it gave security personnel permission to search without a warrant. There was no record of how long someone might be detained without being charged. Consequently, the Assad regime was allowed to continue because the Emergency law was often employed to silence critics of the government. Even though a constitution was in place and democratic processes were followed, the existence of Emergency rule for extended periods has taken away people's civil and political rights. This is how authoritarian practices were exercised by the rulers and made it look legitimate. Recently, the Syrian government passed a severe new property law that essentially takes away the houses and lands of thousands of people who have been forced to flee the battle and may potentially obliterate evidence of war crimes. Permission has been granted to the Syrian government to demolish squatter settlement areas in the countryside and around Damascus and replace them

with urban development zones featuring open spaces, markets, and housing complexes(Q&A,2020). Alawites who have ties to the ruling class are disproportionately Alawite and are given preference in the judicial system; those who do not have these ties are significantly less likely to benefit from any special treatment.

The government also controlled the media by enacting laws that forbade the publication of anti-government materials. The severity of these rules was demonstrated by the detention of Al Jazeera journalists and writer Raghda and the blocking of more than a hundred websites, including popular media like Facebook and YouTube(Activists,2008). Therefore, the government or the Ba'ath party owned most of the media, including newspapers, magazines, radio, and even publishing businesses. It even outlawed publications written in the Kurdish language. As a result, the Assad dictatorship took full advantage of the media establishment to disseminate its propaganda. Thus, the country had no free public sphere, and civilians were forced to follow pro-government propaganda. Even though dissent is allowed, it is subjected to selective repressions.

Syria's civil society has likewise been severely curtailed since the country's independence. The Law governs the formation of any kind of association or organisation in Syria Associations and Private Societies 1958. One of the main features of this law established the notion that associations might perform the same type of job without having to exist in multiples and permitted the government to "merge" associations that perform comparable tasks. This idea has been used by the government frequently to reject the registration of new nonprofit organisations—another critical provision allowed for the non-judicial dissolution of associations. The authoritarian regime often conducts raids and searches to apprehend political and civic activists and typically denies registration to nongovernmental organisations with human rights or reformist agendas. In parallel, the government supported organisations that disseminated Ba'athist doctrine through various laws. Subsequent Ba'athist governments have encouraged the establishment of general unions for workers, youth, and women in particular demographics, but the allegiance of organisations to the Baathist party was ensured. For example, any further women's associations are forbidden under Law No. 33, which created the Women's General Union.

In a republic, an independent judiciary is another necessary institution. Although the independence and impartiality of the national judiciary in Syria are affirmed in the 2012 constitution, the government controls this institution and uses it to uphold its rule. In addition, the country's President has extensive constitutional authority over the judiciary. According to the Constitution, the President leads the Supreme Judicial Council, which surprisingly preserves the court's independence. The Supreme Judicial Council has the most power over the judiciary because of the Judicial Authority Law, issued by Decree No. 98 of 1961. Article 67 of this law

gives the council the ability to, among other things, appoint, promote, discipline, and dismiss judges on the recommendation of the Minister of Justice or the President of the Supreme Judicial Council. Legislative Decrees No. 14/1969 and 64/2008 are two further instances of how the executive branch has infiltrated the judiciary. These directives provide that police and security personnel who commit crimes while on the job will not be prosecuted unless their directors or the presidents approve. In clear violation of the Constitution and the rule of law, these decrees give the executive branch the power to halt prosecutions and, consequently, the courts. Furthermore, the Ba'ath party enjoys the loyalty of 95% of the judges in Syrian courts. Accordingly, the President and his obedient Ba'athists in parliament came to rule the judiciary entirely. The regime abused this on several occasions during elections to stifle dissenting opinions and consolidate power.

Despite the nation's electoral laws, the elections served as a means of rewarding Ba'ath supporters by elevating them to positions of authority and securing the party's ascendancy beyond 1970. Elections are formally defined as a ceremony for "renewing the pledge of allegiance" to the Assad family, and the state mandates voting for all citizens(Syria's,2021). Even so, Even though Syria has had electoral legislation since 1949, Bashar al-Assad changed it in 2011 in several ways to strengthen the authoritarian government. Candidates for President are required to be residents of the Syrian Arab Republic continuously for ten years before applying for the candidature. According to Article 30 of the revised General Election Law. Due to their convictions for "spreading false or exaggerated information" and "weakening national sentiment," the majority of formerly detained political prisoners do not meet these requirements. Furthermore, the majority have departed the nation following years of imprisonment or being forced into exile amid the ongoing hostilities. The Supreme Constitutional Court is also authorised to oversee, contest, and declare the results of presidential elections under Article 34 of the Election Law(Georges,2020). The President appoints and nominates the members of this court in accordance with Article 141 of the Constitution. The members are sworn in before the President, making it evident that the President has authority over the court. Governors designated by the regime have the authority to "form electoral committees to manage polling stations," according to Article 15 of the Election Law. Each of these committees has three members chosen from among government servants for each station. This enables the regime to control the electoral process and its outcomes in the name of the absence of unbiased oversight. The Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Local Administration may assign several of its staff members to operate under the direction of electoral committees throughout the election period following Article 123. This might make it possible for these workers to tamper with the election results in the ruling party's favour. The new electoral law's provisions will indefinitely guarantee the nation's electoral autocracy. In addition, the judges, party loyalists, and other national institutions assist in rigging the electoral process.

Following the adoption of the 2012 constitution, which recognised political pluralism, the first election was rigged so that the leading opposition candidates, Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib and Michel Kilo, could not be elected. The counterterrorism court, made up of three judges nominated by the president-headed High Judicial Council, upheld this decision per Article 133 of the Constitution. Three individuals, including Assad, were limited by the Supreme Constitutional Court to contest for President in the 2021 election. Specific articles of the Syrian Constitution, such as article 84, which states that a presidential candidate cannot have been found guilty of a dishonourable offence even if he is rehabilitated, are further constitutional measures that uphold electoral despotism. As per Article 85 of the Constitution, a candidate for President cannot be approved unless at least 35 members of parliament back them. Due to the Ba'ath party's dominance in the parliament, it was hard for members of the other parties to submit nominations. In effect, authorisation to participate in elections in areas under the control of the executive authorities is granted or denied by the military security apparatus working on their behalf. As a result, accountability and transparency are lacking in the official electoral process. The authoritarian regime has undergone careful scrutiny and is affiliated with, or is a member of, all respectable political parties and independents. Thus, the elections conducted in the country were minimally democratic and pluralistic in nature.

Thus, Since assuming power, Hafez al-Asaad has deliberately shaped Syria's institutions, laws, and Constitution to serve his interests and solidify his position of authority. All of these contributed to the country's effective presentation as an elected republic. The Assad regime's ability to maintain power is strengthened by constitutional voids that grant the President enormous authority. The nation's second-most powerful institution, the security apparatus, was explicitly created to uphold the authoritarian government. Another significant institution in the country, the judiciary, was used by the authoritarian government as a tool to silence the opposition and rig elections. The careful formulation of legislation, particularly those pertaining to elections, ensures the country's continued existence of the electoral autocracy.

Conclusion

Syria was one of the few countries in West Asia to choose a republican system of governance over the then-dominant monarchy in the area when it became an independent republic in 1947. However, up to 1970, the nation saw military takeovers and political instability. But there was definite optimism for a democratic administration with political stability when Hafez al Assad, the leader of the Ba'athist socialist party, came to power. During this time, elections were held for both the presidency and the parliament. Still, they were arbitrary since Hafez al-Assad was the only contender, and Ba'ath supporters controlled the parliamentary elections. In this sense, the administration held regular elections while consolidating its hold on power, signalling the start of Syria's electoral authoritarianism. His son Bashar al-Assad took over as President. in

2000 and made promises of a modernising administration. Even though he organised regular elections and made significant revisions to the laws and Constitution, this was all only a façade for the ruler's authoritarian goals. When Bashar Al Assad took office, he pledged to renounce his domineering ways and implement progressive reforms. However, novel approaches to institutionalising authoritarian inclinations evolved throughout his rule. He drafted a new constitution that allowed for pluralism and a multi-party system, although this was only an attempt to calm down the nation's pro-democracy protests. Several exceptions were made to strengthen his influence. The 2012 election, when it was held, was also an attempt to demonstrate democracy to the demonstrators. With his overwhelming victory, Assad brought electoral authoritarianism to the country.

The totalitarian government of Hafez and Bashar Al Assad ruled the country for more than 40 years. In order to preserve their autocratic systems, both leaders have established a multitude of formal structures, laws, and procedures. The authoritarian characteristics of the dictatorship were carefully justified by the skillfully crafted constitutional articles. Another powerful institution in the country's political structure, the security apparatus, was established to consolidate authority in one place. The nation's judicial system served as another tool to institutionalise tyranny. In particular, the Assad government had an extended period of comfortable dominance owing to the nation's complicated and manipulated electoral system. In addition, the support of a few of the most influential figures on the global scene also helped to institutionalise authoritarianism in the country. Throughout the civil war, the Assad government received material support and backing from Russia and Iran, as well as advocating on international platforms, which boosted the regime's legitimacy and credibility. Following the Arab Spring, attempts at democratisation in Syria never really succeeded in establishing a democratic government; instead, they increased Assad's hold on power and ushered in a period of electoral authoritarianism. In addition to reducing the likelihood of democratic reform, civil conflict has sparked an authoritarian reorganisation process that has strengthened the Assad regime's capacity to withstand large-scale demonstrations, put down an armed insurrection, and withstand international sanctions. As a result, electoral authoritarianism grew more robust and more tenacious, and it still exists today with little opposition. Consequently, the authoritarian regime uses the institutionalisation that characterises mature democracies as a mask to hide the pro-democracy demonstrators while simultaneously using it to maintain its hold on power.

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