United, Not Homogenous

Democracy and Secularism in Syria's Revolution

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On 19 December, photos circulated on social media of a protest in Umayyad Square in Damascus calling for a secular, civil and democratic state. The photos stood out immediately because, unlike other mass gatherings in Syria in recent days, very few revolutionary flags could be seen in the crowd. As the day went on, it transpired that many of those participating in the demonstration had in fact been regime partisans, those who had previously expressed their support for Assad's militias, barrel bombs and chemical attacks. Revolutionary Syrians were understandably outraged to see such people exercising the rights they had long denied to others.

Yet I also took some hope from this protest. The demonstration was permitted by the new transitional government, no-one was arrested, no-one was shot. An armed fighter from the HTS-led Military Operations Administration spoke at the demonstration. Amongst the crowd's chants of "secularism, secularism" – a goal he clearly didn't share – he eloquently expressed the need to stand united against sectarianism.

Impassioned debates erupted over social media and in Syrian chat groups between supporters of secularism and supporters of a state utilizing an Islamic framework. A feeling of unease swept over me as revolutionaries argued amongst themselves. It's much easier to be united when you are standing against something than when you must articulate what you are standing for. But then I realized that this was precisely the Syria that revolutionaries had been fighting for: a country where debates could be had together in the public sphere, sharing differing opinions, and listening to each other respectfully. The hard work of political co-construction has just begun.

The debates, however, largely missed the point. The dividing line in Syria was never between religion and secularism, but between authoritarianism and democracy.

Syria has a large Sunni majority, comprising some 70 percent of the population. It is understandable that religious Muslims want to organize their societies and politics in accordance with their own culture, values and traditions. In the West, Islamism is seen as a monolith of reaction – associated with enforced gender segregation and severe punishments for transgression – but to most Muslims it means a just government and a clean social space free of corruption. Islamism can have many faces: it can be liberation theology, bourgeois democracy, dictatorship, or apocalyptic nihilism. It should not be assumed that democracy in the Middle East will resemble liberal Western democracy, which – following the full backing many Western states have given to Israel's genocide in Gaza – has lost what little credibility it still had.

As a result of the former regime enforcing its own vision of 'secularism' on the population – as a means of social control up to and including genocide – many Syrians cannot help but feel antipathy towards the concept. The regime played on sectarian divisions and pitted communities against each other – divisions which revolutionary Syrians worked hard to overcome. On Twitter, a young woman posted a photo of herself, her bright blue hair tied up in a ponytail, wearing a leather bomber jacket emblazoned with the free Syria flag. "I'm a young, unveiled, free Syrian woman," she wrote, "and I'd rather be ruled by conservative God-fearing Muslims than by Assad's genocidal militias." Someone else commented in a chat group, "Seriously, whether Syria is Muslim or secular, I just want a country with electricity, food, reasonable prices, no corruption, unity, safety; a country I can actually be proud of and call home."

Today, a large part of the secular, democratic opposition are either outside the country or were slaughtered in Assad's gulags, and the organized opposition in exile has limited popular legitimacy on the ground. The divide also has a clear class dimension: the Sunni majority were among those who suffered most under the rule of both Hafez and Bashar Al Assad, as minority groups rose to positions of power. The Syrian revolution started on the peripheries, including amongst more socially and religiously conservative communities. Those who took up arms and sacrificed their lives played a key role in liberating Syria from a tyrant, and they rightfully want to participate in the future direction of the country. The question is to what extent they will allow others to participate too, support the transition to civilian rule, and not divide power between various warlords. Anyone who claims to represent Syrians must prove it at the ballot box.

The West, meanwhile, has been displaying its Islamophobia. In a BBC interview with Ahmed al-Sharaa (al-Jolani) one of Jeremy Bowen's first questions was whether the new Syria includes "tolerance for people who drink alcohol." Meanwhile, mass graves are still being unearthed around the country, Syrian mothers are still frantically trying to search for news of their detained loved ones, and Israel occupies more territory on Syria's southern borders. Likewise, white feminists began expressing concern over women's clothing – some of whom had never said a word about the regime's organized rape campaigns targeting dissident communities, or the women whose bodies were abused and slaughtered in prison. Assad's supporters in the West expressed their concern about minorities – the same people who remained silent as Assad systematically exterminated those who opposed his rule.

There are clear double standards on display. Representative democracy (if that is what Syrians achieve) represents the aspirations of the majority and excludes dissident minorities. The Christian Democrats in Germany do not represent Germany's sizable Muslim population, yet no one suggests that they should not play a role in the country's politics. On the other hand, representative democracy can also lead to authoritarianism. Syrians should take care not to repeat the same mistakes as Trump's America, where authoritarian, conservative, religious factions are gaining strength and consolidating power, infringing on women's rights, threatening the rights of minorities, eroding the democratic space, and leaving less room to organize an alternative.

For the sake of clarity, it is my personal belief that a secular society can best represent Syria's diverse social fabric. Secularism is the separation of state and religion. It does not seek to stop people practicing religion; it respects their wishes to practice or not practice as they see fit. It does not impose its vision on society or grant one religious group privileges over another. Minority groups do not want to be paternalistically bestowed a few rights, they want an equal chance to participate in their country's political, cultural and economic life.

Secularists in Syria are not one homogenous group. They include supporters of the regime and members of the opposition, and that secular opposition is further divided into numerous political leanings: leftists, liberals, conservatives, and people of different religious faiths, including many Sunni Muslims. Conversely, many Sunni Muslims, in Syria and around the world, supported the Assad regime.

But in order to be credible, the discourse of secularism must be reclaimed from the Assadists and not co-opted by counter-revolutionary forces. Secularists must learn the lessons of Egypt, where Egyptians – in opposition to any form of Islamist democracy, however imperfect – ushered back in a 'secular' fascism that is now worse than under Mubarak. Islamists too must ask whether the Islamic state they defend is one which could really guarantee the values of the revolution, dismantle the repressive structures of the state and not replicate authoritarianism under another name; one which could truly represent all of Syria's diverse communities and not lead to feelings of exclusion and create further political instability. Indeed, fundamentalist visions of Islam may threaten Sunni Muslims above all: those who do not conform to the interpretations expressed by those in power are at risk of accusations of apostasy. Every step towards greater freedoms should be encouraged, every step backwards fiercely resisted.

Some condescendingly proclaim that Syrians are not ready for democracy. Yet the last 13 years have seen a rich Syrian democratic legacy take shape. The Local Coordination Committees which organized protests against the regime were horizontally organized bodies which included women and men from all of Syria's diverse communities. In liberated areas, communities self-organized and established Local Councils to administer services to the population, and in many cases held democratic elections to choose their representatives. This was a democratic system that could contain people of many different faiths, and people of none: a grassroots democracy that allowed communities the autonomy to organize in accordance with their own local values and traditions. This community autonomy does not equate to territorial division, but can in fact create a more organic unity – united, but not homogenous. Further, revolutionary Syrians defended these hard-won gains from authoritarians and were quick to protest against anyone who impinged on the people's freedoms, including people who today hold positions of power.

Syrians face many challenges. It will take a long time to bring the country back from political and economic destruction. There must be justice and accountability, and a period of reconciliation. There must be time to rebuild a vibrant civil society and political culture. Syria now faces many counter-revolutionary threats. Syrians need not look to grand ideologies to frame their future. They should look at their recent experience and continue the revolution, which was always about more than toppling a tyrant. The authoritarian legacy the Assad regime left behind must be dismantled, and the democratic space must be defended at all costs.

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