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Elections in Syria: A gift for the president

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On the occasion of his 20th anniversary as President of the Arab Republic of Syria, Bashshār al-Asad has made himself a gift: the people of Syria celebrated his birthday on July 19 with an election to the "People's Council".

Although the results of the elections have not yet been announced, the outcome is already certain: the National Progressive Front, on which the seven state-supporting parties are represented, will receive 200 seats. The list of opposition groups loyal to the regime will not receive a seat, and of the 50 "independents" to be determined, all will have taken an oath of allegiance to the regime. This also applies to the 2500 candidates who had applied for the party lists. The People's Council is a parliament without any influence. Three times a year there is a session where al-Asad gives one of his rather tiring speeches and where the parliamentarians are allowed to applaud. If the president lacks this applause, he can convene the People's Council for a special session.

Looking back

In the penultimate elections in 2012, the regime had ventured another experiment and admitted an opposition list loyal to the regime called the People's Front for Change and Freedom, which was also joined by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. This list won six seats in the election, and 27 more independents were able to win seats in the constituencies. The Syrian Ba'ath, the actual party of the regime, won the absolute majority

of seats as usual. In the next election four years later, the balance of power was restored. The opposition, which was loyal to the regime, was no longer given a seat, but the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) was allowed to rise into the illustrious circle of the National Progress Front. This list has now been granted 200 seats, 32 more than in 2016 and 2012. Ba'ath will now receive 172 seats, the SSNP seven.

The Ba'ath as state party

The Ba'ath (officially the Arab Socialist Party Ba'ath - Syrian Region) so far provides 30 of the 35 members of the government. Party leader, or in the jargon of Ba'ath the "Regional Secretary", is al-Asad. Already under al-Asad's father, many rights had been deprived from the Ba'ath cadres; it was even rumoured that al-Asad wanted to dissolve the party. But the social, political and military control over the state people by a party of privileged careerists proved to be extremely functional. It also integrated the clientelism prevalent above all in western Syria and offered the Alawite military personnel direct access to the social and economic privileges offered by the state. Unconditional loyalty to al-Asad ultimately overruled loyalty to the old ideological convictions, a critical observer said.

The transformation of the ideological Ba‘th state into a patronage network was completed in the 1990s. What remained was a state that sorted its population only according to their functionality, loyalty and effort. It took on the character of a meritocracy in the form of a dictatorship of merit and obedience, thus laying the foundations for its self-destruction. The Ba‘th party became the melting pot of the country's privileged inhabitants. In 1987, the party had only 50,000 members, in 2010 it had 1.2 million.

Patronage and succession

Already in his inaugural speech before the Syrian parliament, on the occasion of his swearing-in on 17 July 2000, Bashshār al-Asad had repeatedly spoken of "my people" who would have offered him the office of president in a referendum. Such a royalistic-looking manner of speaking makes it clear how al-Asad, then 35 years old, saw himself: a monarchical heir to the work of his father Hāfiz al-Asad, whom his subjects had elected to the position of Leviathan with almost 98% approval. At the time, the Arab public speculated that in many Middle Eastern countries the old guard would now step down and that their sons would inherit power. But the old generation (Mubārak in Egypt, Gaddafi in Libya, al-Bashīr in Sudan, Saddam Husain in Iraq, Bin ‘Alī in Tunisia) hesitated until history knocked them from the throne. The young ophthalmologist Bashshār, on the other hand, was helped by chance. On June 10, 2000, the Syrian president died of a heart attack during a telephone conversation with the Lebanese Prime Minister Sa‘īm Hoss. Six years earlier, his older brother Bāsil had died in a self-inflicted car accident at Damascus airport. The "Crown Prince" Bāsil had played a major role in the restructuring of the Ba‘th system, including the militarization of the bureaucracy, the expansion of the secret and security services and a reorganisation of the meritocracy, as the fight against corruption is called. Bashshār's Father Hafiz arranged for Bāsil to be worshipped by the people of the state like a martyr.

It was fine with the London-based ophthalmologist Bashshār to do so, because it enabled him to create his networks without getting entangled

in the apparatus of Ba‘th. Bashshār's network put the four Alawite families from the area of Qardāha, who had been privileged by al-Asad, completely in the centre of power. The main beneficiaries were the families Makhlu‘f, Shālīsh, Akhras), ‘Abbūd and Khayyār, with whom the Asads are partly related by marriage: Bashshār al-Asad's mother is a Makhlu‘f, his wife Asmā’ an Akhras. The power of the Asads was based on the fact that they had succeeded in exercising hegemony over Syria through Ba‘th the clans of the Kalbīya federation in the north of the Alawite country. At the same time, however, this required that the Asads had to use their patronage to secure their privileges for the large clans of the Kalbīya. However, this seemed to be less and less successful in the past. Between the ‘Abbūd and the Khayyār there had already been a dispute about the order of precedence in the summer of 2012, which was partly settled by force of arms. The family Makhlu‘f fell out of favour as a result of the lack of subordination of al-Asad's cousin Rāmī.

Representation

The Asads disguise the ingenious patronage system through a royal self-dramatization. Some performances by al-Asad and his British-Syrian wife Asmā’ seem like a re-enactment of the public performance of British royals. Although commander-in-chief of the Syrian-Arab army, al-Asad emphasizes his civilian role more than ever and leaves the military symbolism of representation to his satraps in the country. This includes in particular the provincial governors and army generals, who often come from privileged families outside the Alawite leadership circle. Some of them owe their acceptance into the leadership circle to the regime through a special bond of solidarity, which is accompanied by ruthless brutality. One of them is Major General ‘Alī Mamlūk, for a long time head of the National Security Bureau and today Vice President for Security. Other families, however, were unable to maintain their position in the al-Asad system. The families by marriage Tlās, al-Jabīr and al-Khayr from Homs, Aleppo and Damascus, who were still close allies of Hāfiz al-Asad, have since fallen from grace altogether.

The electorate

For constituencies not under the sovereignty of the Damascus regime, voting was made possible in neighbouring regions. In this way, the regime wanted to demonstrate that the whole of Syria had elected the new People's Council. The Syrian media competed to demonstrate normality. There was such a crowd of people in the polling stations that the distance rules issued due to the corona pandemic should have been pointed out again and again, it was said. However, the elections for the new People's Council, which celebrated the president and his regime, will only have a short-term effect: For a moment, the elected officials may be convinced that they truly represent the "people". But soon the regime will recall whose mandate the parliament represents: not that of the people, but that of the regime. In keeping with the Leviathan model of power, the regime will declare its elected representatives to be the real "people", who have taken on the historic burden of fighting the rebellious population and eradicating terrorism.

Presidential elections are then to be held next year. The patronage system will require al-Asad to stand for re-election and he will of course comply with this request. The regime will then not just put two more bogus candidates in the

race, as in the last election in 2014, but five, six or perhaps even more. In this way, the regime wants to show that the Syrian people actually had an election and that al-Asad will be re-elected with over 90% of the votes, despite the competition.

So what next?

But this is dreams of the future. The elections cannot gloss over the structural crisis of the Syrian patronage and representation system. Russian influence is growing in domestic decision-making processes as well; Shiite Hezbollah units and Iranian militias have secured niches in various municipalities in central Syria that are no longer controlled by the regime. In southern Syria, the war threatens to flare up again, and in the southeast and east, American and Russian units face each other. The fighting that has been going on for months west of the town of Hama shows that the regime currently has no military strategy to extend its sovereignty in the south of Idlib if it does not want to risk conflict with Turkey. Almost 80% of the population is dependent on international aid, the infrastructure has collapsed, the economy is functioning only for the privileged groups of the state. Syria's secret reserve, the Lebanese economy, can no longer step in, as it is itself on the ground.