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THE SYRIAN WOMEN'S
POLITICAL MOVEMENT

Policy Paper

“No Elections Without Our Participation”

A safe environment for
fair, impartial, and legitimate elections
from the perspective of Syrian women

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Please note this publication was drafted independently by SWPM based on the National Consultations; the views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the aforementioned organizations.

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Introduction



“Elections are a truly noble idea! Being able to choose and hold accountable the person I see fit to represent me in decision-making positions is great. However, we have never experienced real elections in Syria. They were all farcical [elections] in which we were forced to vote for predetermined names! When the candidates are forcibly imposed on us, we will not be able to hold them accountable.”¹

Amid an uncertain political, military, social and economic landscape in Syria, it may seem premature to discuss the prospect of fair elections in the country. However, the topic of democratic elections, in and of itself, is a complex one, let alone when discussed in the Syrian context where many have been systematically deprived of access to fair electoral experiences for decades. This makes the discussion of this issue urgently needed at the present time. Highlighting the optimal environment conditions for safe and legitimate elections is essential in preparing for any democratic political transitional period in Syria.

Women have historically been the most marginalized group in democratic processes, including electoral ones. This remains true today despite the radical changes that some legal and institutional frameworks underwent. The deeply rooted patriarchal social structure is reflected in the many gaps that lie within democratic frameworks, producing an exclusionary and discriminatory environment that continues to restrict women from democratic participation.

The Syrian Women’s Political Movement consulted with 150 Syrian women through 15 consultative sessions between May and June 2021 in various regions both inside Syria and in neighboring countries. In these sessions, impacted women shared their perspectives on the conditions that govern elections, considering both their personal experiences and their future aspirations for their nation. This was done with the aim of clarifying the most important factors to

1- One participant who is a refugee woman in Turkey.

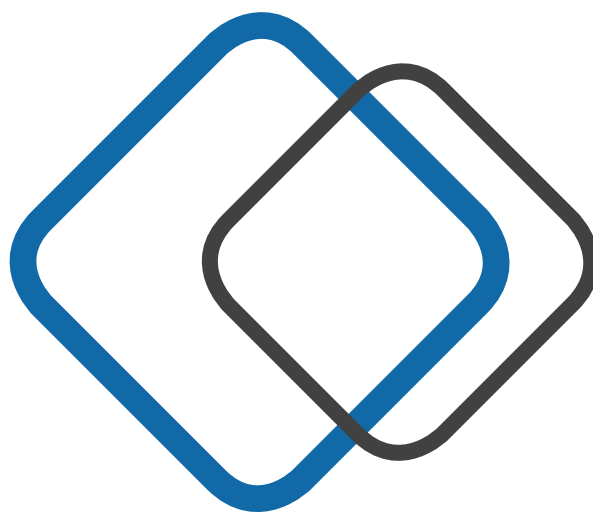


address when designing future electoral systems in Syria to foster a safe and equitable environment that enables fair participation for women and thereby yielding legitimate results.

Thus, while acknowledging that any electoral process must be designed in accordance with the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 concerning the political transition in Syria, this policy paper does not necessarily discuss the types of electoral systems that can reasonably be implemented during the course of a political transition in Syria. Rather, this paper primarily seeks to establish the underlying determinants and necessary conditions of a safe environment that can enable the development of fair, impartial and legitimate elections.

Specifically, this paper discusses the initial challenges that may face future elections in Syria and delves into some of the problems with the current state of participation and representation. The aim is to identify the most important factors for a secure environment for future elections. These factors include the initial conditions for holding elections, their administrative mechanisms and entry points to ensuring inclusive and effective participation and representation.

The primary challenges to fair, impartial, and legitimate elections



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“How can we talk about fair elections when we have not yet reached a political agreement? We are still displaced. We live in an unresolved state in which we fight to secure our livelihoods while trying to avert the dangers of murder, kidnapping and security threats. We do not know when the regime, separated from us only by the river, will attack, or when ISIS sleeper cells among us will be activated. Elections held in this context are held at the expense of our stolen lands, our destroyed homes, and our missing children!”²

At this time, discussing fair elections in Syria feels premature to many of the consulted women, even when projecting a future political transition. Many of them believe that crafting an ideal political structure that may be attained in the future is not possible without first repairing the chaotic and deteriorating political, military, social and economic realities that the country is experiencing. However, this enormous task will require a great deal of time, and it is unlikely that we will have such time before it becomes necessary to develop the underlying structure of a new electoral process.

Participants reaffirmed the above throughout various sessions, citing challenges rooted in the past and stemming from the war. These include the following:

A missing sense of security

Deteriorating security conditions are a major obstacle in Syria that could hinder the ability of women to participate effectively in any future elections, even following a political solution. Many of the women consulted on this topic shared their fear that militarization could persist in Syria in a chaotic way. They detailed how this can impose restrictions on daily life, which may be exacerbated in the context of elections. **“In any attempt to organize ourselves or improve our daily**

2- A participant who is a displaced woman in Deir Ezzor



reality, we are confronted by the armed authority in the hands of gangs, without any deterrence from the regime's security forces, as most gangs work under an undeclared cover from the security," one of the participants from Suwayda said. Another participant from Afrin affirmed this, referring to the authority of armed men in her area, stating that "Even when visiting a doctor, an armed man may enter, interrupt the queue and give himself priority, while we watch helplessly."

These concerns are directly relevant when considering future elections in Syria, as there is reasonable fear that this environment will produce a culture of intimidation by armed parties against voters and candidates, shaping the results of elections by force. In Daraa, a participant recounted her experience in the recent presidential election: "The regime's military checkpoints were spread on many roads, forcibly confiscating our identification cards and forcing us to vote." Some authoritarian opposition forces engage in similar practices, by which they seek to impose their political agendas through armed force. In the same recent presidential election, another participant from Daraa explained that "Some armed factions prevented the placement of electoral boxes in some areas, and they blocked roads leading to areas where the boxes were located to impose a boycott of the election."

Several refugee women in neighboring countries witnessed similar events in which armed groups used intimidation to force refugees to participate in elections held by the Syrian regime. A refugee woman in Lebanon recounted her own difficult experience: "Armed groups in our areas in southern Lebanon forced us, including my partially-disabled mother, to participate in previous Syrian presidential elections, threatening us with deportation from Lebanon if we oppose."

Intimidation by armed groups is not aimed exclusively at voters, but also extends to practices that aim to force or prevent the participation of candidates. Some of the women from Idlib's displaced population affirmed this fear, recalling events prior to their displacement. One participant detailed how "In one local council election, a faction stormed the area to prevent the winning of a candidate supported by another faction, which led to clashes between the two factions."

In addition to concerns of direct interference in the electoral processes by armed groups, many participants recounted experiences of arrest and enforced disappearance by controlling parties, as threats to future elections. Using this kind of force against different groups of Syrians has impeded the participation of forcibly disappeared persons, while indirectly restricting the participation of other groups for fear of arrest, or in protest against it. A woman from Suwayda said, “Today, many are missing in the regime’s prisons. They are unfairly deprived of the right to participate in elections, and they may continue to be deprived of this right even if they are released, unless the legal frameworks address this issue effectively.” In the same vein, a displaced participant originally from the Eastern Ghouta region, and now in Lebanon, outlined her own situation: “I may vote when I know whether my husband, who has been disappeared by the regime for years, has been imprisoned or killed. If this issue is not addressed, and those responsible for it are not held accountable, I will not participate in any electoral process.”

These issues of safety amidst the unknown are correlated with the multiplicity of parties that control Syrian geography. The delineation among geopolitical spaces is itself a delicate reality in which the lines may change on any given day, which further contributes to the already limited and discouraged state of voter uncertainty. One participant from Afrin said, “We are facing a lot of pressure even to register a newborn or a marriage certificate, not to mention voting in elections. Such incidents require dealing with the forces that are currently dominant here, which may reflect negatively on us if control shifts in the future.” Another participant added, “Measures have already been taken against some who participated in elections run by the Autonomous Administration [of North and East Syria] after the Turkish-backed National Army seized power. We are afraid that this will reoccur if we participate in any future elections in case the forces in control change later.”

Within this persistent state of chaos and insecurity, participation in any electoral process has become fraught with risks that affect voters and candidates alike.

These factors, which are unlikely to entirely disappear for quite some time in Syria, call into question not only the fairness of future processes but also the legitimacy of any results, if not addresses properly.

Diaspora, displacement, and division

Considering the challenges posed by security issues in Syria today, the participants discussed forced displacement as an obstacle to fair and legitimate elections. The problem becomes especially evident in regard to local and parliamentary elections, where the relationships of the internally displaced voters with their electoral districts become more complex. “I am a local of Aleppo, but today I am displaced in Idlib, so where will I vote?”, one participant asked. “How do I determine my constituency?” another woman, now living in Azaz, affirmed the same. “Our displacement may last for years to come, even after a political solution is reached,” she said, “Does this mean that I have the right to vote in my place of residence, or in my area of origin?”

Refugees outside Syria face similar uncertainties about their right to vote and their ability to participate, either as voters or candidates, in future Syrian elections. In addition to potential restrictions imposed by the legal frameworks of elections in Syria, or the institutional frameworks of the governments in host countries, there is significant concern over issues related to identification papers and official documents. This could affect many women and may limit their access, as well as their children’s access to participation in any future elections. “When I left Syria, all I could take with me was the family ledger,” a refugee woman in Jordan said. “I don’t know if this will be enough to allow me to participate in any elections in the future... My children, who were born in Jordan years ago, are still not officially registered to this day. The issue requires me to obtain identification papers for them from Syria, which I cannot do due to security restrictions.”

The requirements of official documentation have become more complex in today’s context of a divided Syria. This affects both the residents of areas in Syria that are outside the regime’s control, as well as the residents of areas



over which the regime has regained control. Access to identification papers, and recognition of papers issued by *de facto* authorities, is an especially problematic issue when combined with fears that the regime will manipulate civil records to impose its own political agendas. One participant, a displaced woman in Azaz, shared her experience: “Many of us have lost our identification papers during the war and displacement. Will the alternative papers we obtained from the civil records in the areas of our displacement be recognized?” Another woman from Damascus affirmed the same: “Over the past ten years, many people in areas outside the regime’s control have been unable to register their civil events such as marriage, birth and death due to security and military complications. Providing legal protection for these people and addressing this issue by a trusted authority and not by the existing Syrian regime are urgent requirements to organizing fair elections.”

A state of frustration and despair

The discussion participants frequently cited frustration and despair as factors that may discourage engagement in fair and legitimate elections. This is intertwined with the deteriorating security conditions and the failures of the various *de facto* forces in ending or diminishing conflict in Syria. “After ten years of killing, displacement, destruction and political alignments,” one woman from Latakia lamented, “I have lost confidence in all parties.”

This persistent state of frustration, however, is rooted in the experience of past and present elections in Syria where, for many, the ceiling of expectations has been lowered after being denied the effective exercise of their electoral rights for so long. One participant from Aleppo recalled her experience supervising a ballot box before 2011: “Some affiliates of the regime used to come to the polling station with many IDs belonging to unknown people, some of them dead, and used them to vote as they wished. When I tried to object to this, I was threatened and expelled from the station.”

Beyond instances of this type of blatant fraud, other types of illegitimate and unengaged voter participation were similarly coerced. A participant from Qamishli claimed that: “All previous election experiences were forced, imposed, and totally undemocratic... we used to vote out of fear of harm that might befall us if we did not participate, not out of belief in the utility of the elections.”

There is legitimate fear that the culture of elections has lost its meaning in the context of today’s Syria, requiring extensive effort to restore and rebuild faith in the concept itself. As one woman from Suwayda said, “Elections are a culture, a tradition and a practice that we have been denied for decades. Our ability to conduct future elections in an impartial manner is not granted.” Another participant agreed, highlighting the substantial rebuilding that would be required before voting could be understood as legitimate in Syria: “One should be educated on the importance of elections to participate, as the matter requires restoring confidence in the electoral process. During the political transition, we may have to live through one, two or three elections so that we can build confidence in elections, change our perception of them, and feel the importance of our votes.”

This state of despair is inherently tied to the participants’ sense of their own citizenship. One woman said, “I think that the biggest challenge facing us as women and men in holding fair and impartial elections is our lack of a sense of citizenship. Voting is a right and a duty, and I, as a citizen, am deprived of the most basic rights in this country. Hence, I do not feel motivated to carry out my duties. The sense of non-citizenship produces passive citizenship!” This problematic state of citizenship which hinders the prospects for holding fair and legitimate elections does not merely stem from a lack of civic rights; it also extends to highlight the systematic deprivation of legal citizenship statuses to several groups within Syria. Many of the discussion participants reflected on this issue, often citing cases of the Kurdish population as well as the many exiled persons who have been deprived of their citizenship for political or legal reasons. These cases will be discussed in more detail later, within the section on the state of participation and representation.



A dire economic reality

Linked with frustration, despair, and distrust of the electoral process they have witnessed over the years, several participants cited economic deterioration as a significant obstacle to Syria's ability to conduct fair and legitimate elections. On the one hand, most families struggle to make ends meet, and participating in elections simply is not a top priority. One participant from Daraa said, "People are 'fed up' and they do not have the luxury of participating in elections. Why would I incur the trouble and cost of participating? What will I gain from it?" Another participant from Aleppo reflected the same antipathy: "I do not have time for this. My biggest concern is how to feed my children."

On the other hand, economic conditions can also play a crucial role in making elections vulnerable to fraud if they are exploited to attract voters. Several participants spoke on past experiences in which candidates used offers of food and cash assistance to buy votes. "Poor and marginalized groups will be courted by some lobbies that may pressure against certain candidates," one participant from Idlib said, "not necessarily by force, but by seizing upon the suffering of those in need."

The remnants of social structures

Jaded by the customary distributing of positions of power through nepotism, many participants spoke on how options for the candidates themselves in previous elections had been deliberately limited. This structural order persists and is seen by many as likely to affect any future elections, potentially even undermining the legitimacy of their results.

"Local administration is shared by specific families," one participant from Suwayda said, "the governorate for this family, the municipality for that one, and so on... Then, suddenly, we may hear that so-and-so has become a member of the People's Council simply because he is the son of the so-and-so family, and

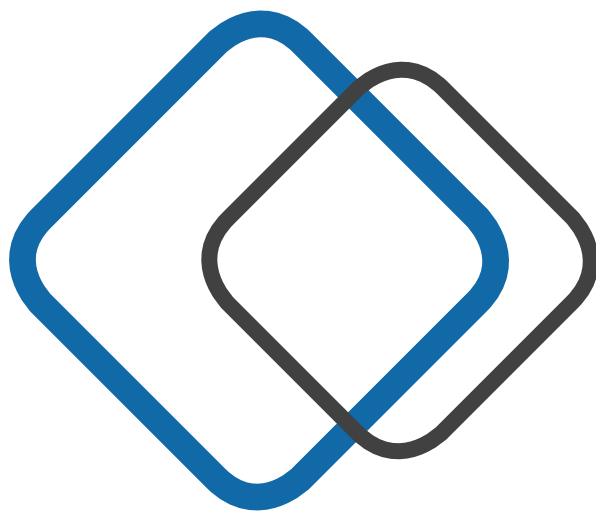


an owner of a large wealth.” This familial control takes the form of clans in other regions. “With the pretext that we are from a tribal area, candidacy is limited to the representatives of tribes or clans,” a participant from Deir Ezzor said. Another woman recounted her experience in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria elections, saying, “we, the displaced to the countryside of this region, who are deprived of the weight of tribal affiliation, cannot run for elections despite our great experience and qualifications. Yet, incompetent people, who enjoy the weight of their clan, are simply nominated.”

In the context of elections, deeply rooted family and clan structures often intersect with the dominant patriarchal structure, which results in the systematic exclusion of women from the electoral process and necessarily leads to illegitimate results. This was confirmed by one of the participants from Raqqa who noted that the exclusion caused by tribal polarization is not limited to those who have no tribal weight behind them, but to women of all affiliations. “In this tribal environment,” she said, “I would probably receive many votes if I ran for local elections, as I hail from a large and prestigious clan. However, it remains at the discretion of the clan to allow me, as a woman, to run!”

In fact, the patriarchy in general was an essential factor that the participants referenced when discussing the obstacles that may limit their participation in fair and legitimate elections, both as voters and candidates. This will be discussed in detail later within the section on women’s lived realities.

Participation and representation



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“Half of our people have been displaced or forcibly disappeared. Many among us are undocumented, of unknown parentage, or were born to Syrian mothers without being able to obtain Syrian citizenship due to the absence of the father. The status of these people, among many others, must be reconsidered so they can participate.”³

Many of the initial challenges to running fair and legitimate elections in Syria’s future revolve around questions of participation that would enable equitable representation that does not contribute to reproducing or strengthening pre-existing conflicts by empowering military or economic warlords. This is not easily attainable in the context of Syria as it now exists. Persisting pre-war frameworks were constructed upon many forms of systematic exclusion. Over the years of conflict, grave violations were committed by parties that still enjoy great power through force of arms. Moreover, Syria’s demographic composition has witnessed radical changes resulting from forced displacement and disappearance which has affected many groups with different political, ethnic, or religious affiliations. From this standpoint, the question of who has the right to participate in which future elections becomes a difficult one that is not necessarily self-evident in many cases. The participants addressed this question with great caution, outlining some broad strictures that must be adhered to in order to create a state of participation that is conducive to the organization of fair and impartial elections.

Participation within a problematic citizenship context

A great number of complications persist when discussing the rights of ‘Syrian male and female citizens’ to electoral participation, specifically in relation to the complexities of defining citizenship and its relationship to the Syrian nationality which tends to have been granted or denied arbitrarily or through often unjust laws.

3- A participant from Suwayda



During the discussions, participants were able to cite many cases that would warrant special attention when working on a framework to organize future elections. One such problem concerns the issue of undocumented people which was only exacerbated by the war. This issue impacts many Kurdish men and women from al-Hasakah who, under an exceptional and unjust 1962 census in the governorate, were designated as foreign nationals or stateless individuals (*maktoumeen*). Even with Decree 49/2011 granting Syrian nationality to those registered in al-Hasakah records of foreign nationals, or with the subsequent decision to give the *maktoumeen* the same status as foreign nationals, many other affected people remain undocumented.⁴ “Many of us were not covered by the decree issued in 2011 that gave us the ‘good tidings’ of Syrian citizenship after a long deprivation,” a Kurdish participant from Qamishli said, “many of us are still designated as foreigners or as *maktoumeen*.”

In addition, Palestinian refugees in Syria have also not been permitted to participate in local, parliamentary, or presidential elections as per the current legal framework. They were never granted Syrian citizenship although many were born in Syria and have lived there for decades.⁵ “Palestinians have lived among us for many years, and have lived through what we have,” a participant from Aleppo said, “they have the right to citizenship that entitles them to political participation.”

Other such problematic instances include those exiled for political reasons and who are under threat of being deprived of their Syrian nationality on the grounds of past⁶ or present⁷ political activities. On the bureaucratic side, there are great complications surrounding the issuance and renewal of identification papers or

4- According to a [report](#) prepared by Syrians for Truth and Justice in 2019 on the exceptional census of al-Hasakah in 1962, until 2018, nearly 20,000 Kurdish people in al-Hasakah were designated as “foreign nationals,” and more than 40,000 of its Kurds were stateless and had not yet obtained Syrian citizenship.

5- The number of Syrian-Palestinian refugees residing on Syrian territory reached nearly half a million in 2021, according to what was [published](#) by the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria.

6- The number of people deprived of Syrian citizenship for political reasons in 2004 reached approximately 27,000, without taking into account their descendants of the second and third generation, according to a [study](#) published in 2004 on stateless persons in Syria with the Arab Committee for Human Rights.

7- Many fear that the new Civil Status Law approved by the People’s Council in March 2021 threatens many Syrian refugees with long-term deprivation of citizenship, as it limits the validity of the Syrian identity card to ten years – subject to renewal, which many will not be able to do due to political, security and technical reasons.

retrieving documents that were lost altogether. Such complications put many Syrians at risk of losing their rights to citizenship and by extension their right to political participation.⁸

Considering the political and security conditions as well as the current levels of displacement discussed earlier, citizenship issues get exacerbated by the fact that women cannot pass their nationality to their children according to current Syrian laws. This complicates the reality of children born to Syrian mothers by fathers who are foreign fighters whose original names were usually unknown. Such children would often not be recognized as Syrians, despite being born on Syrian territory, given that their fathers and their nationalities are unknown. The same applies to children whose fathers cannot necessarily be proven to have Syrian nationality. Many marriage certificates are not properly registered or are lost, and many fathers have been displaced or forcibly disappeared, which makes it difficult to obtain legal evidence proving the identity of the father in many cases. This complicates the child's own proof of nationality, or even have their birth registered in some neighboring countries.⁹

On the other hand, participants cited groups that were given Syrian citizenship arbitrarily during the recent years of war. These include fighters from Iranian, Lebanese and Afghan militias that continue to fight alongside the Syrian regime.¹⁰ Many of the participants believe that such decisions on citizenship may deprive elections of their legitimacy. **“Iranians who entered Syrian territory as a military force to support the regime have received Syrian citizenship under exceptional and unlawful circumstances,”** one of the participants from Suwayda said, **“and therefore we cannot accept their citizenship.”**

8- The Right of Syrian Refugees to Legal Identity is the title of a report published in 2007 by NRC. The report, which was based on interviews with more than 3,000 Syrian refugees (580 families) in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, Shows that 70% of the participants lack basic identity documents (such as an ID card, family booklet, etc.). Researcher Lama Qunoot points out that, of the 734 IDP families in the governorates of Daraa and Quneitra, 25% of the children who have reached the age of 14 and are eligible to obtain an ID card do not have it. furthermore, nearly 50% of all children under the age of five are not registered in Family booklets, and approximately 25% of these children do not have an official birth certificate except for what their parents obtained from the forces controlling their regions when they were born.

9- According to Lama Qunoot more than 50% of the aforementioned 734 IDP families do not have their marriage certificates (as they were lost, confiscated or destroyed).

10- Some reports (for instance [Memiri 2018](#), [Sky News 2018](#)) estimate that hundreds of thousands of Iranians had obtained Syrian citizenships during the war years.

The participants stressed that, for all groups concerned, the issue must be addressed and all cases attaining to deprived or granted Syrian citizenship during the years of conflict must be reevaluated. This is understood as necessary by the consulted women to rectify the current unjust and manipulable legal frameworks and ensure that only and all legitimate Syrian citizens can participate in future elections.

The participation of military personnel

In addition to the complex state of citizenship in Syria, the conflict has also produced groups whose participation or non-participation in future elections could be an issue in ensuring fairness, integrity, and legitimacy. The participants discussed whether armed personnel and members of official and unofficial military organizations throughout the Syrian geography should be entitled to participate in elections. While participants recognize that many men and women were forced to enlist in different military bodies due to forced conscription or in defense of themselves or their land during war, they also affirmed that any involvement in human rights violations or the many war crimes and atrocities documented in Syria shall not be tolerated. **“We cannot accept the participation in elections of war criminals or those whose hands are stained with our blood, or complicit in our displacement,”** a refugee woman in Lebanon said. Another participant from Latakia agreed: **“I am afraid that our fate would be like that of Lebanon: Criminals and warlords washed their hands of the blood of civilians and continued to hold political office. Therefore, we must not allow those who were involved in crimes to participate in elections, neither as candidates nor voters.”**

As for the participation of military personnel in general, some participants expressed fear that soldiers will not be free or objective in their votes as their allegiance is to their affiliated forces. Their participation as either candidates or voters becomes difficult to fairly regulate, as their large blocs could unfairly tip the scales. Involving military personnel was also seen as a potential problem due

to previous experiences of both voter- and candidate-intimidation. A participant from Suwayda said, “those who bear arms will impose corruption with their weapons.” A refugee participant in Jordan added, “if we elect the military, we will strengthen their power, and if they take power, they will be tyrannical, and if we revolt against them one day, they will kill us again.”

The participants generally reached consensus that the participation of military personnel and those who bear arms should be contingent upon the reform of the security sector in the transitional phase and the return of those who forcibly carried arms to their civilian status. They also believe that the initiation of accountability efforts will be required to prevent the participation or access of any of those accused of involvement in war crimes and human rights violations. This was summed up by a refugee participant in Turkey who said, “the participation of those who bear arms is determined by transitional justice efforts that will enable holding criminals and violators accountable, whether they belong to official or unofficial armed organizations. After that, those whose involvement [in crimes] is not proven have the right to return to work, study, and civil life, and consequently the enjoyment of their rights as a citizen to participate in elections.”

The participation of displaced persons

A frequently discussed category in the context of Syrian elections is the eligibility of displaced persons whether internally (IDPs), or those in countries of asylum (refugees), to participate in future local, parliamentary, or presidential elections. The participants agreed that the voluntary return of IDPs and refugees to their places of origin is a right. However, they also made it clear that displacement has been a protracted reality for years, and that the current situation does not herald a return anytime soon, even if a political agreement is reached.

Given this reality, the participants concluded that it is important to give IDPs the right to participate in local, parliamentary, and presidential elections as voters and candidates in their places of displacement, which may be prolonged, as well

as in their places of origin, in order to provide them with better living conditions during their displacement and preserve their right to return. “Return is a right!” a participant from Latakia said, “until this right is achieved, the internally displaced should have the right to participate in elections in their areas of displacement, as the decision to return is not in their hands alone. It is also their right to participate in the elections in their areas of origin because they have the right to return to them.”

This issue becomes more delicate in areas where the number of IDPs is close to or greater than the area’s local population. This imbalance creates the need to organize the participation of IDPs within their places of displacement in a way that helps minimize societal tensions that may arise concerning representation issues. The participants indicated that this may require intensive community efforts to facilitate, and necessitates a review of the current legislative frameworks for elections to reconsider the relationship of voters to their original electoral districts.

The participants also focused on the participation rights of refugees and their children who were born in countries of asylum and hold other nationalities, regardless of the length of their asylum. They see enabling participation for these people within their places of asylum in all Syrian elections as a necessity for facilitating their return to Syria. This will require a review of the current legislative frameworks that may deprive these people of their right to participate due to multiple factors, including their absence from the country for many years, and the complexity of acquiring citizenship. This will also require international efforts to organize fair participation in Syrian elections for refugees in their countries of asylum. The participants made it clear that, as voters, they may or may not prefer voting for refugee candidates depending on the specifics, but they emphasized that the refugees’ right to participate in elections must be preserved. A participant from Damascus said, “many of us, at home and abroad, have become captives of foreign agendas. I think accountability and transitional justice efforts should be able to examine this to highlight the intersections with potential human rights abuses. Only then can the ballot boxes arbitrate among us.”



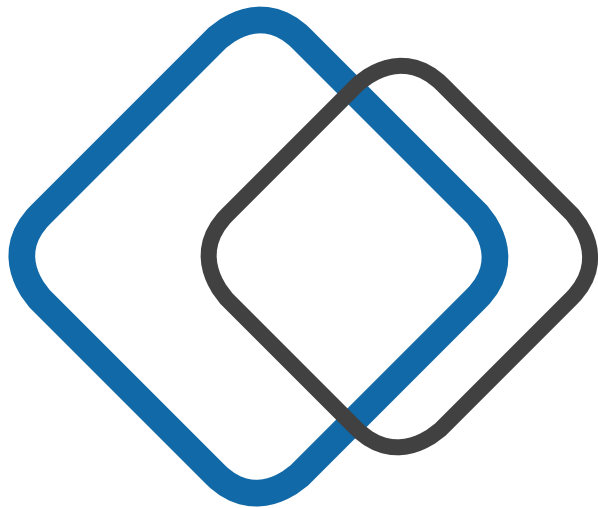
Representation mechanisms

When discussing the design of election systems and determining the environments of future elections, the participants agreed on the necessity of acknowledging issues of representation that exist in the present context, as well as those that could arise in the future.

Commenting on the current state of representation, the participants confirmed the necessity of fair representation for all components of Syrian society. In both local and parliamentary elections, they insisted, representation must not be caught in the pitfall of sectarian or ethnic divisions. “All different components of society have the right to be represented in a manner that suits them,” a participant from Latakia said, “that does not mean, for example, that those who represent me have to belong to my religious sect... What best determines my representatives are the political programs of the candidates. If we address representation according to our various identities and affiliations, it only means the reinforcement of our disunity and the differences between us.”

The participants emphasized that marginalization does not always necessarily stem from sectarian or ethnic affiliations. Rather, it intersects with multiple other factors, mostly based on gender, age, class, family and clan affiliations, geographical origins (whether in relation to the urban/rural divide and/or the discrimination among different cities), as well as political and military affiliations, which the current reality of displacement experienced by the participants has reinforced. Noting this, the participants discussed the necessity of creating tools for fair representation by reconsidering the boundaries of the electoral districts, the number of seats assigned to them and the mechanisms of nominating and voting which would guarantee better chances for the representation of marginalized groups in the current political, economic, social, developmental, and demographic realities in Syria.

The women's reality



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“When it comes to the participation of women in the transitional phase, present indicators do not foretell great outcomes. It seems that patriarchal structures will continue to dominate. This is what we can conclude from the state of women’s representation in the current political bodies, even opposition ones.”¹¹

In the problematic context surrounding participation and representation in the Syrian context, the environment dictating women’s participation seems to be one of the most pertinent factors that could directly impact the success or failure of future elections. The participants addressed this directly, sharing their experiences as candidates and voters prior to and during the conflict in Syria. They specified factors that impacted their effective participation as follows.

Societal restrictions

The continued existence of societal restrictions remains central in excluding women from political participation in general, and elections in particular.

“Women’s participation is profoundly associated with social and cultural heritage,” said a participant from Turkey, “it assigns men as guardians for women, and stereotypes women’s roles as wives and housekeepers, not as active citizens.” Another participant from Idlib affirmed the same, explaining that the custodianship of men in many societies has directly prevented women from being a part of political processes: “I will never be able to participate in the elections because of social obstacles. Men in my area will not allow us.”

This same authority is also applied indirectly, with some men confiscating the votes of the women in their families and voting on their behalf. “My father used to collect all of our electoral IDs and vote on behalf of us,” a participant from Daraa said. “My husband used to vote on my behalf without consulting or asking me for whom I wanted to vote,” a participant from Suwayda confirmed.

11- A Participant from Ar-Raqqa



The control of men goes beyond hijacking women's voices and into suppressing their efforts and experiences. Participants believed that most men would not opt to elect women if they were to run for office. They explained that this occurs not necessarily due to a lack of confidence in the candidate herself, but because they, as men, would simply not accept being governed by women. "We have many competent women among us who are capable of taking several positions," said a participant from Daraa, "lots of men will not vote for them though. Not because they do not trust the candidate's abilities but rather from a power perspective. Men do not want women in positions of power."

This idea was reaffirmed by some participants who recently ran for political office. A participant from Idlib spoke about her experience coordinating the local council election before she was displaced, saying, "it was the first time we got into a real electoral process. Three women ran for the local council. No one actually voted for them other than a few women."

In addition to direct interference with women's political participation, patriarchal control is ingrained in the misogyny of social traditions which deprives many women from access to education, work, and opportunities for developing their competencies, given the prevailing stereotyping of women's roles. This situation has led to an unbalanced societal power structure in which men have better opportunities to build their capacities, and hence, more chances to participate. "The social role that is forced on Syrian women restricts them," said a participant from Damascus, "while a man is allowed to build his skills and present himself in a better shape, women find themselves lacking experiences that allow them to participate effectively."

Worst, patriarchal attitudes have created patterns that consider women's political participation as socially eccentric, which has in turn led to limited access for women to decision making positions. The participants confirmed this with some of their personal experiences. "The common experience we have from men when it comes to our political participation is their disapproving question: what do you know about politics as women?" a participant from Idlib said.



This combination of exclusionary reality and general skepticism of women's competency has had a cumulative effect on the self-confidence of many women, causing them to internalize the idea that they are less politically competent than men. The participants noted that the deeply rooted patriarchy gave better opportunities to men than women, enabling men with better access to decision-making roles. These social patterns have had a catastrophic effect on the self-evaluation of women, resulting in them excluding themselves from most political participation. "The lasting systematic marginalization of women, through decades, certainly contributed to diminishing the culture of political participation among us as women," a participant from Deir Ezzor said, "this means that we have lots of work ahead of us to claim back our roles."

The legal and institutional reality

The authority of the patriarchy appears to be rooted in both legal and institutional contexts, further diminishing the ability of women to participate. The consulted women asserted that their exclusion begins at the legal structure, where the language of the constitution itself repeatedly limits the participation of women. This expands to include many discriminatory laws that deprive women of their rights, including their right to political participation.

Laws that are supposed to protect women suffer largely from lack of enforcement, rendering them futile in most cases. "The deeply-rooted idea about the inefficiency of women in decision making comes from what we were raised with and what was reinforced by the legal systems," said a participant from Damascus, "how can we fight this mentality if a woman's legal testimony has never been accepted up to now?" Another refugee participant in Lebanon agreed: "Even the laws that are supposed to protect us as women stay only in theory. They are given neither supervision nor enforcement."

In addition, institutional male domination has deprived women of representation in political bodies. Even when women are granted access to decision making positions, their experiences are undervalued. "A woman is always in the shade of

a man,” said a participant from Deir Ezzor. She added, “Through my experience as a co-president in the governance structures enforced by the Autonomous Administration [of North and East Syria], some people would come in my office and refuse to deal with me, even when my male counterpart is not there. They would think I was his assistant. Even when I explain that I was a co-president, enjoying the same levels of expertise and authorities, they would prefer to come back at another time, when he, the man, is in office.”

A participant from Idlib confirmed the same, outlining her own experience in attempting to enable women’s participation in one of the local councils: “As women, we were not welcomed to serve in the specialized offices in the local council, such as the legal, medical, and educational offices, despite our relevant expertise in these fields. Instead, we were forced to form a dedicated women’s office. We organized independent elections to assign the women’s office members and its leadership, yet the head of the local council forced us to assign his daughter as the head of the women’s office to keep his control over us. When we refused, he threatened us with imprisonment. This made us quit the women’s office and start our own independent civil body through which we attempted to do our best to change this reality.”

In addition, the participants mentioned that, even within the institutional frames where women’s representation is mandatory, their role remains performative rather than authentic, with no real intentions to effectively utilize the abilities of women involved. “The local council members wanted to have the women’s office only to brag about it when needed, no more than that,” the same participant from Idlib said.

While the participants admit that enforcing a quota for women could be susceptible to manipulation and thereby lead to inauthentic and ineffective participation, they also assured that the presence of women in positions of power is the first step in provoking necessary change. “Usually, women’s participation is minimized to slipping some women in the holistic image,” said a participant from Suwayda, “this is a double-edged sword, as we do want better access for women, but what we really want is real and effective participation, not just in appearance.”



Bullying and defamation

Women are often victims of bullying and defamation in communities, a reality that is rooted in the patriarchal social, legal, and institutional norms. Such campaigns particularly target women who work in the public sphere and are a great deterrent to women in political work. This was outlined by many participants sharing personal experiences of how they and their families had been directly targeted by bullying and defamation because of their political activism and work. This reality has burdened many with great psychological and familial pressure and drove a lot of women to quit.

“Through my work in the local council, the janitor would repeatedly ban me from entering meetings because I’m a woman,” said a participant from Idlib, “I needed one of my male colleagues with me to even be allowed to enter. There was so much mockery and defamation... this made things difficult, but I did not want to give up. I was afraid that we would be robbed of our rights as women to be on the council.” Another participant from Idlib confirmed the same: “I was the only woman among thirty other members in the local council in Kafr Nabl in Idlib. This was enough to make things very tough for my teenage son at school. He was bullied by his schoolmates for being the son of a woman who works in politics.”

Women also exclude themselves from the political sphere, because usually they would be judged and assessed personally rather than for the quality of their work. Women in power have been victims to campaigns intended to discredit them through the fabrication of obscene photos or defamatory voice and video tapes. This unsafe environment has deterred many women from going into this field, given the sensitivity of the issue in the dominant traditional cultures. “Women avoid leadership positions because they know that they would be subject to personal attacks,” said a participant from Azaz, “working in such positions exposes women to discreditation, insult, and defamation.”

The economic reality

Economic struggles remain a core debilitating factor to women's participation in Syrian politics. Especially in the context of war, women in Syria have been saddled with tremendous financial burdens that have made merely providing for themselves and their children a full-time job. Consequently, the ability to empower oneself to effectively participate politically has become a luxury that most Syrian women cannot afford.

Several participants noted this, saying that working class women carry even more financial burden than women of other classes. These financial difficulties are exacerbated for those who are now in the camps, in the outback countryside, or displaced in neighboring countries, where economic opportunities are limited. **“Many women became the main provider for their families,”** said a participant from Raqqah, **“this financial burden loaded them with responsibilities and took them away from political participation. A woman needs to be financially capable to participate effectively.”**

Women candidates are particularly disadvantaged as they are less likely to be able to have the resources to fund their campaigns or have access to loans or third-party funding. This is particularly true given that women face economic discrimination not only in the job market, but also in the unjust social and legal environment that restricts a woman's right to ownership and inheritance.

The displacement reality

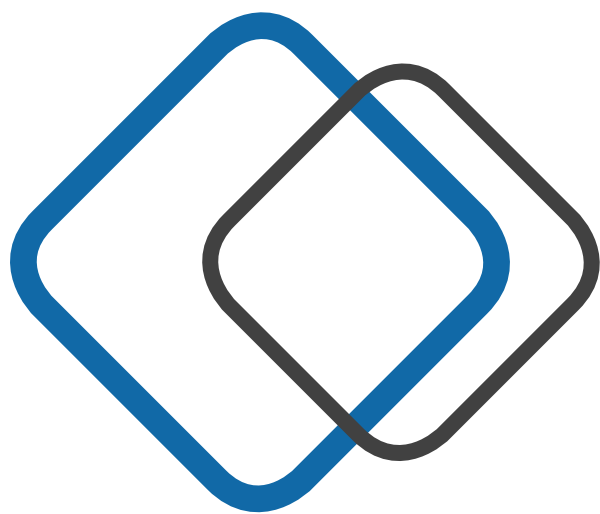
The recent displacement context has impacted the participation of women in several different ways, both positively and negatively. Some participants noted that internal displacement contributed to financial crises and increased the rates of underage marriage, hence, further restricting women's role in society and depriving them access to education, work and experience that would help them effectively participate in politics.



On the other hand, the displacement experience has also created opportunities where women lost the providing man in the family, thereby forcing many out of their traditional roles and putting them into positions of leadership. This has contributed greatly to empowering many women to be more effective political participants in the future. “We were deprived of most of our rights before the revolution in Syria,” said a refugee participant in Jordan, “because of the asylum experience, we had to assume more leading roles, making our voices louder. Today, we are more capable of participating despite the economic pressures all around us.”



Safe electoral environments



The participants define a fair, just, and legitimate election as one that nurtures active participation, is non-discriminative, and whose results reflect a true representation of the free and democratic will of the Syrian electorate in a manner that consolidates the principles of citizenship. For such an election experience to take place, a secure and inclusive environment that encourages trust and participation needs to be established. This also requires designing an effective electoral process that reconsiders the shortcomings of current electoral systems and legislation, whether pre-dating or resulting from the war.

Prerequisites for fair, impartial, and legitimate elections

The discussions highlighted several preconditions for creating a safe environment that accommodates fair and legitimate elections. The participants discussed these preconditions, noting the following.

○ Starting a political transition

Holding legitimate elections will require starting a real political transition. This must lead to dismantling the current regime and other *de facto* forces that dominate the Syrian land.

○ Obtaining security and military stability

The election process will also require a sufficient level of stability and a sense of security. This will require putting an end to the influence of the militant forces and limiting the reach of security and military institutions, official and unofficial, thus, eliminating potential intimidation of voters and candidates or election manipulations.

○ Accountability and transitional justice

In order to prevent those suspected of participating in human rights violations or war crimes from reaching positions of power, the participants emphasized

the need for processes of accountability. They also insisted on the priority of transitional justice efforts beginning with resolving files attaining to the topics of detainees, the forcibly disappeared, the forcibly displaced, mass graves, those deprived of documents, those deprived of nationality and citizenship rights, among others. Participants also emphasized the need for finding mechanisms to promote reconciliation and co-existence, as this would be pivotal to gaining the trust of voters in the electoral process and thereby encouraging turnout.

○ **Constitutional and electoral reforms**

Initiating a fair election process requires a new constitution be created that is agreed upon as just and legitimate by all Syrians. This will also require a review of the legislative and procedural frameworks of the current electoral systems, as well as other contributing factors such as the governing political parties, media, and civil society organizations. This potential restructuring is necessary to ensure the ability of all affected parties to participate effectively.

○ **Addressing the social reality and building awareness and trust**

The current social context will not necessarily be suitable for implementing a fair and just electoral process, as it is first necessary to address the remnants of traditional social frameworks that contribute to the exclusion of many segments from political participation. The participants stressed that it would require intensive efforts to raise awareness and build trust in a way that encourages effective and genuine turnout of voters and candidates.

○ **Enabling economic empowerment**

Finally, the participants emphasized that addressing the deteriorating economic situation is essential for inclusion. Without doing so, large swaths of Syrians will be left unable to participate due to their economic burdens

or will be especially vulnerable to political polarization. Repairing this will require working to achieve an economically secure state that meets the urgent needs of financially insecure Syrians and creates the opportunity for just and balanced economic development.¹²

On the reality of participation

The participants highlighted a series of suggestions they believe would optimize a fair and inclusive electoral environment and rectify the current barriers to participation in the Syrian context. These include:

- Granting Syrian citizenship to the individuals and groups that have been deprived of it, whether by arbitrary decisions or because of complications due to the political, legal, or administrative situation over the years. These include, but is not limited to:
 1. The Kurds who were not included in Decree 49/201;
 2. Exiled Syrians who have lost their citizenship for political reasons and their descendants for one or more generations;
 3. Those who have lost identification papers and valid official documents;
 4. Children of Syrian mothers and unknown fathers, or those born to non-Syrian fathers or fathers who cannot prove their Syrian nationality.
- Reconsidering the nationalities granted during the years of war to various foreign groups and rescinding that citizenship from those who acquired it because of political and military alignments that contributed to fueling the war, as well as from those who are proven to have been involved in human rights violations or war crimes in Syria.
- Addressing the issue of lost or expired official documents, documents issued by unofficial bodies, and forged documents that have been widely spread inside and outside Syria over the years of war.

12- For more on the requirements of a safe economic environment from the point of view of Syrian women, you can view the policy paper prepared by the Syrian Women's Political Movement in June 2020 :["From War Economy To An Economically Safe Environment: Problems And Solutions As Seen By Syrian Women"](#)

- Addressing the issue of population statistics and electoral data to reflect the current reality, taking into consideration the particularities of displacement, enforced disappearance, and the complications of official documents.
- Restructuring the security sector to ensure the organization of armed groups and individuals, both formal and informal, and the release of those who wish to return to civilian life through a rehabilitation process that will enable their political participation.
- Reconsidering the residency preconditions for voters and candidates, considering the context of exile and forced displacement inside and outside Syria.
- Addressing the eligibility laws for voters and candidates in a way that does not deprive Syrians who hold other nationalities due to displacement from their right to participate.
- Addressing candidacy mechanisms to ensure the representation of different social and economic backgrounds in decision-making positions.
- Facilitating the participation of the forcibly displaced outside their electoral districts, both inside Syria and in their countries of asylum, through collaboration with host governments or active international institutions.
- Addressing the cases of forcibly disappeared persons and former or current political prisoners/detainees to ensure their effective participation in the elections without undue intimidation, pressure, or deprivation.

On the mechanisms of representation

Considering the complexities of the current Syrian context and the diversity of its demographic configuration, the participants discussed a series of recommendations that might contribute to creating more fair mechanisms for representation. These include:

- Re-evaluating electoral districts, their size, and the number of their representatives to reflect the current demographic reality in Syria, factoring in displacement and forced expulsion;

- Examining the possibility of further localizing electoral districts, to enable better geographic and social representation;
- Considering the formation of a parliament consisting of two chambers, with representatives from different groups in one, and ensuring the presence of relevant and specific members in the other, according to clear mechanisms that define the powers and authorities of each chamber;
- Designing inclusive candidacy frameworks that avoid the trap of ethnic and religious divisions;
- Establishing the necessary mechanisms to avoid the monopolization of seats by the economically, socially, or politically affluent, or militant powers;
- Guaranteeing better representation of youth, women, and civil society representatives;
- Evaluating the role of political parties in activating better representation mechanisms for the different regions and demographic segments;
- Exploring the possibility of creating advisory committees or advocacy groups at local or parliamentary levels for groups that face the risk of marginalization.

On the participation and representation of women

On the experience of women and their systematic exclusion from political participation in Syria, the participants identified a series of issues that must be addressed to enable better participation and representation of women of all affiliations and classes. Their proposals include:

- Reviewing and amending exclusionary and discriminatory laws, legislation and policies that impede women's political participation, and enacting new frameworks that encourage and protect their engagement;
- Enforcing laws that contribute to the protection and empowerment of women, especially regarding confronting patriarchal traditional structures that contribute to the exclusion of women or the diminishing of their opinions and experiences;

- Mandating the participation of women in decision-making platforms through a quota to guarantee at least 30% of the seats;
- Increasing the roles of women in political parties and scrutinizing any marginalizing and exclusionary procedural measures regulating participation of parties in the elections, which may result in tokenizing the role of women (during the preparation of candidate lists, for example).
- Implementing appropriate measures to address exclusion, discrimination, and disregard of women's rights within the institutional structures of their workplaces;
- Directing the media to encourage and protect women's participation, and imposing appropriate measures to prevent the use of media and social media in defamation campaigns against women;
- Taking lived economic realities into consideration and facilitating more economic opportunities for women who wish to run for election;
- Intensifying efforts to empower women politically, with an emphasis on reaching more diverse social structures to raise women's political awareness, increase their self-confidence, and help them overcome obstacles that may prevent their participation;
- Working to raise awareness to the necessity of women's political participation through general campaigns as well as male targeted strategies.

Managing the electoral process

About managing the electoral process in Syria, the participants proposed some ideas that they believe would ensure integrity, fairness, and legitimacy in future elections. These include:

○ Creating an independent election management body

Recognizing that elections will likely be held at a critical stage in which Syria may not be fully recovered, the participants discussed the need for



an independent electoral body to be responsible for managing the electoral process. This body may incorporate international actors, as this would help to ensure the integrity of the process and would support it technically and financially. The specific international parties that would be involved were a point of contention, however, with several participants citing their lack of trust in major international organizations including the United Nations given their problematic involvement in the Syrian conflict in one way or another.

The electoral management body would also need to be designed to ensure it could outlast the withdrawal of international bodies and remain in long-term control of the Syrians themselves. This will require the effective participation of reliable Syrian entities in the design and management of the body. The participants stressed the need for the supervisors of this electoral management body to be Syrians who are independent, characterized by integrity, universally respected and distant from corruption, favoritism, and political polarization.

Finally, the participants discussed the degree of decentralization of this body and stressed the necessity of having local offices in all Syrian regions as well as in the countries of asylum. In this time of great displacement, they believe that having a presence of this body close to all Syrian communities and in all regions and neighborhoods, especially marginalized ones, will contribute to building trust in the electoral process and facilitate greater access for all Syrians.

○ **Transparency, accountability, and combating corruption and fraud**

Based on the social and political legacy of the previous elections which have been characterized by mistrust and a sense of futility, the participants believe that there should be close attention paid to the provisions of transparency and accountability in the management of upcoming elections. This will require extensive efforts to ensure the transparency of the electoral

frameworks, the decisions related to them, and the persons involved in managing them. It will also require periodic reports or announcements on the progress of the electoral process and its results in a way that ensures voters have access to the details of vote counting, electoral disputes, and adjudication mechanisms. It is also crucial to take the necessary measures to combat fraud and corruption in electoral centers and to activate the role of media agencies and civil society organizations alongside the electoral body.

Finally, the participants believe that the accountability of the electoral body and all those involved with the electoral process will be absolutely necessary. This will require publishing periodic reports on all activities that could be subject to corruption and manipulation and giving everyone the ability to file complaints, submit questions and register objections in a safe manner.

○ **Facilitating access of diverse groups**

The participants stressed that the design of the electoral process itself must consider the importance of ease of access for many marginalized groups. Participation for some groups may require special considerations in designing candidacy and voting mechanisms inside and outside Syria, so it is integral that the systems put in place accommodate for this. This would enable the participation of women in conservative environments, people with disabilities, illiterate groups, dialectal minority communities, residents of remote rural areas and camps, the poor, those with technical limitations and others who may face economic or social pressures.

○ **The role of the media**

The essential role that media institutions must fulfill is in ensuring the transparency of elections and facilitating the effective participation of voters and candidates alike. The participants noted that ensuring media

freedom, independence and objectivity is necessary for enabling it to play its pivotal role in elections. Some also mentioned the necessity of allowing international media outlets to report on the event, to have a greater transparency of the electoral process.

In addition to its role in covering and monitoring the electoral process, the media must play an important role in disseminating and explaining the electoral programs of each of the candidates for the public. This calls for developing mechanisms that enable all candidates to have fair and equal access to media outlets, and would also require regulating the media, including social media--which may be more problematic. This is seen as necessary to enable the media to effectively exercise its role and protect it from interference and manipulation that could serve the interests of specific candidates or contribute to the defamation of other candidates.

○ **The role of civil society organizations**

Civil society organizations can play an important role in designing and monitoring the electoral process and providing necessary reports. They can also contribute substantially to building trust, making candidacy more inclusive and to increasing voter turnout. This can be accomplished by spreading awareness across all groups and developing the capabilities of candidates and voters in ways that will help them to participate effectively and equitably. The participants emphasized the need for civil society organizations and teams working to spread awareness to be mostly local and familiar with the special circumstances of each region, including the social complexities that voters may face in them.



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