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Democracy is the alternative

Leila Al Shami

19 July 2017

On 18 July women and men in Saraqib, eastern Idlib, participated in elections for their local council. According to the election commission 2475 people cast their ballot, 55 percent of eligible voters. Just days earlier, the three candidates had held a lively public debate.¹ This is unheard of in 'Assad's Syria' where free elections have not been held in five decades of dictatorship. And this is the alternative to the regime – self-organization, democracy and local autonomy – not Daesh and not foreign occupation.

Free from the state, more than 150 local councils exist in Idlib province alone to administer basic services to the population. They operate under unimaginable conditions. The regime and its allies continue their reign of terror from the skies – trying to eliminate the viability of any alternative.

The people of Idlib face other challenges and threats to their hard won freedom too. Extremist groups are powerful in Idlib province and there's been ongoing local power struggles between armed groups. Numerous local councils across the province have issued statements declaring their neutrality

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Retrieved on 13th March 2025 from leilashami.wordpress.com

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¹ Debate for local council candidates in Saraqib www.facebook.com

and calling for an end to infighting. In recent days and weeks people in Idlib, have been protesting against Hayaat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS – formally Nusra) in response to its acts of aggression against civilians, activists and Free Army groups. The largest protests have been in Ma'arat Al Numan where thousands have been on the streets calling on the extremist group to leave the city.² And today HTS gunmen opened fire on protesters in Saraqib who raised the revolution flag. Local activists have launched the online campaign 'Idlib is Green' – raising revolution flags (as opposed to the black flag of Nusra) as well as the campaign 'Al Jolani is the enemy' to tweet against the leader of HTS.

The Syrian regime's narrative that the choice for the country's future is between it and Daesh/Al Qaeda is popular amongst western commentators. It's been used to discredit the opposition and provide justification for the ongoing 'War on Terror'. Yet most Syrians are not represented by either of these two fascisms; there has always been a third option.

² See Mustapha Itani, 'Protests break out across Idlib against Syria's Al Qaeda branch', globalvoices.org