

Relative Power Within Syrian Legislature: The Speaker, The Bureau, and Limitations on Members' Voices

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Syria's Constitutional Declaration may define the authority of the People's Assembly in relation to the state, but the distribution of power within the legislature will be determined by Parliament's newly adopted internal regulations. In shaping the relationship between individual members and Parliamentary leadership, the bylaws will either preserve members' capacity to act independently or render initiative contingent on the discretion of internal leadership.

The Internal Regulations have thus far prompted concerns that too much of that authority is concentrated in the Speaker.¹ While these concerns are not unwarranted, the distribution of power appears to be more complicated. The new rules appear to reduce the Speaker's unilateral authority by transferring important powers to the Bureau, such as approval of the plenary agenda and appointment of committee leadership. At the same time, individuals and coalitions of MPs receive broad capacity to initiate legislation, but leadership have no obligation to carry out the subsequent proceedings. The likely result, therefore, may be relatively less unilateral control by the Speaker, but effectively equivalent concentration of practical authority in the Bureau rather than the wider membership.²

The Assembly adopted the 231-article text on July 30th after revising provisions of the Internal Regulations across five days of debate. The draft from which this memorandum is composed preserves alternative formulations of this text debated during the final legislative session, providing a point of comparison and offering insight into points of contention within the Assembly. As the adopted Internal Regulations have not yet been made publicly accessible, the draft is treated as evidence of the proposed design and follows later reporting whenever divergences from the draft are expressly identified.³

The Impact of Stronger Parliamentary Leadership

The Speaker's office sits at nearly every junction between committees and the executive—including referring proposals for consideration—and retains the power to convene and chair committee meetings. The Speaker is therefore a persistent gatekeeper between the Assembly's entities, enabling the position to shape both the timing and routing of parliamentary business. Committees, for example, are left dependent on parliamentary leadership for the information and external expertise needed to scrutinize the government, weakening a significant check on executive power.⁴

When assessed comparatively, these powers are not inherently undemocratic. The US Speaker exercises considerably greater political and agenda-setting authority, and the president of the German Bundestag possesses broad powers over debate and parliamentary administration, demonstrating that strong parliamentary leadership can be compatible with democratic accountability when transparent procedures connect the decisions of said strong leadership to an identifiable parliamentary majority.⁵

The larger problem, then, is that Syria currently lacks the organizational counterweights that hold strong leadership accountable in party-based legislatures. The Internal Regulations contain no framework for recognizing parliamentary groups. In other legislatures, party institutions allow members to hold leaders accountable, while ensuring that the speaker represents the preferences of an identifiable majority, translating them into a coherent agenda. In Syria's case, since the Speaker's decisions cannot be assumed to express the preferences of—or be held accountable by—a parliamentary majority, they may instead reflect personal preferences, informal alignments, or anticipated executive wishes.

It would be unfair, however, to characterize the Assembly as at the sole mercy of a powerful Speaker. The draft Internal Regulations assign important functions to the Bureau and narrowed

powers granted to the Speaker in the 1974 and 2017 bylaws, as well as strengthening the Bureau's authority over committees. The change represents a meaningful departure from that inherited paradigm, although it does not distribute control across wider membership. Under the 1974 rules, the Speaker prepared the plenary agenda, while the 2017 rules required the Speaker's approval of agendas prepared by the Bureau. In the recently adopted regulations, the Bureau is responsible for both preparation and approval of the agenda. This change would formally prevent the Speaker from determining the agenda alone, although their chairmanship over the Bureau and wider routing functions would still allow substantial influence over it.⁶

The Impact of Stronger Parliamentary Leadership

Later reporting indicates that the Bureau has further been empowered via authority to distribute members among standing committees and appoint the chair, deputy chair, and rapporteur of each committee once formed. This is a significant departure from the draft, which allowed each committee to elect its own officer. The change strengthens the Bureau partly by reducing committee autonomy rather than by empowering ordinary members.⁷

This reform therefore replaces the personal leadership of the Speaker with collective leadership by the Bureau, although the Bureau's composition and regulations may eventually require

reconsideration.

Its seats are not distributed proportionally among recognized political groups. The Speaker also chairs its meetings and breaks tied votes. The significance of the reform's push towards collective decision-making will therefore depend on whether the Bureau develops into an independent decision-making body or primarily confirms the Speaker's preferences.⁸

Control Over the General Secretariat

Mohammed Hamza Shammout was already publicly serving as Secretary-General prior to the convening of the Assembly, and in the absence of elected parliamentary leadership, effectively served as its principal administrative official. He helped oversee the preparations required to establish the chamber, participated in the parliamentary selection process as the technical official of the Higher Committee for Elections, and was quoted as publicly presenting details about its final composition. By the time members elected a Speaker and Bureau and passed the bylaws, Shammout had been heading the administrative apparatus for months.⁹ The Secretariat was involved in the formation of the Assembly prior to the election of the parliamentary leadership to supervise it, meaning the Bureau has inherited a Secretariat that they cannot likely remove without justification.

The bylaws bring the apparatus under parliamentary authority. The draft Internal Regulations would make the Secretary-

General answerable to the Bureau and give the Bureau authority to appoint and dismiss them. This would represent a meaningful change from the inherited rules, under which the Speaker exercised those powers, though the efficacy of this change is contingent on the Bureau's capacity to act independently from the Speaker.¹⁰

Procedural Rights for Small Groups

The bylaws give ordinary MPs several meaningful ways to act without obtaining the support of parliamentary leadership. Seven MPs may introduce a bill, down from ten under the 1974 and 2017 rules. Individual members may propose amendments, committee members may record dissenting opinions, and sponsors may appeal an objection to their proposal to the plenary. Similarly low thresholds apply beyond the legislative process: five members may request a ministerial hearing or challenge a law before promulgation; seven may request review of an international agreement already in force; and ten may seek an investigative committee or constitutional review of subordinate rules. Members may also appeal certain decisions of the Speaker to the Bureau or plenary.¹¹

In the absence of organized opposition parties or recognized parliamentary groups, these low thresholds function as a form of minority protection. They allow small coalitions to introduce legislation, initiate scrutiny of the executive, and obtain legal review without first

commanding a parliamentary majority or securing the support of the Assembly's leadership.

That said, there do exist significant limitations. Since the Bureau retains control of the plenary agenda, introduction of a bill may not ensure that it goes to a vote. A presidential bill would reach the agenda unchanged if the relevant committees missed a twelve-day reported deadline, while the procedure for a member's proposal contains no equivalent anti-obstruction default. The design appears to protect executive legislation from committee inaction more explicitly than it protects MP initiatives. These rights create spaces for issue-specific cooperation, but their practical value remains dependent on how leadership's control over discussion and routing of legislation is checked.¹²

Immunity and Discipline

Parliamentary independence also depends on whether members can criticize the executive and parliamentary leadership without facing prosecution or internal punishment. The Constitutional Declaration recognizes parliamentary immunity, but without defining its scope or exceptions. The draft bylaws make this immunity more precise, distinguishing between substantive immunity for parliamentary activity and procedural immunity from criminal proceedings.

Members cannot be held legally liable for opinions, votes, or other acts that constitute parliamentary work, and this

protection continues beyond the duration of their terms. For conduct outside parliamentary work, however, immunity may be lifted, particularly in the situation that a member is caught in the act of committing an offense, in which case criminal proceedings may begin without prior authorization.¹³

The draft bylaws also replace the 2017 regulations' diffuse speech restrictions with a narrower but consequential set of political prohibitions. The 2017 version permitted punishment for conduct departing from the "moral or social values of Syrian society" and expulsion for insulting the state, President, or flag—disciplinary language that made members vulnerable to punishment for subjectively defined misconduct. Recent reporting instead suggests that these provisions have been lifted, although the adopted rules seemingly state that members may not glorify the former regime or advocate for secession or partition. The draft Internal Regulations expressly protect political expression and legitimate criticism with stronger safeguards, requiring that serious disciplinary sanctions be confirmed by parliamentary vote, although it is uncertain to what extent these protections were adopted following final deliberations.¹⁴

Conclusion

The draft bylaws suggest a partial redistribution of authority within parliamentary leadership rather than a general dispersal of power to the

the wider Assembly. The draft gives powers previously exercised by the Speaker alone to the Bureau as a whole, including formal control over the agenda and authority over the Secretariat, while its low procedural thresholds offer members access to legislative and oversight mechanisms. That said, more recent reporting indicates that the Bureau retains substantive control over committees and the Speaker broad gatekeeping influence. As a result, these changes may only partially redistribute authority to collective parliamentary leadership more than increasing member autonomy.

¹ Haid Haid, “Syria’s Parliament Can Only Be as Strong as Its Leadership Allows,” Al Majalla, updated August 11, 2026, <https://en.majalla.com/node/332464/opinion/syria%E2%80%99s-parliament-can-only-be-strong-its-leadership-allows>.

² Working Draft of the Internal Regulations of the Syrian People’s Assembly, arts. 24–29, 34, 41, 145, 160–164, and 249–251 (unofficial English translation on file with the authors), id.

³ Syrian Arab News Agency, “Syrian People’s Assembly Adopts Its New Internal Regulations in Final Form,” July 30, 2026, <https://sana.sy/locals/2540921/>; Manhal Barish, “The Internal Regulations of the Syrian People’s Assembly: Broad Presidential Powers and Oversight Without No Confidence,” Al-Quds al-Arabi, August 1, 2026, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/>.

⁴ Working Draft, arts. 24–27. Haid supra note 1. Barish supra note 3.

⁵ United States House of Representatives, Office of the Historian, “Speaker of the House,” <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Origins-Development/Speaker-of-the-House/>; German Bundestag, “Functions and Duties of the President and Presidium,” https://www.bundestag.de/en/parliament/presidium/function_neu.

⁶ Reconstructed 1974 Rules of Procedure of the People’s Assembly, art. 12 (unofficial English translation on file with authors); Internal Rules of Procedure of the People’s Assembly, issued July 30, 2017, arts. 24(5), 30(4), and 33(2) (unofficial English translation on file with authors) [hereinafter 2017 Rules]; Working Draft, arts. 29 and 34.

⁷ Working Draft, art. 41(1). Haid supra note 1.

⁸ Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic, March 13, 2025, art. 28, reproduced by Al Jazeera, “Full Text of Syria’s 2025 Constitutional Declaration,” March 14, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/>; Syrian Arab News Agency, “Election of Mustafa Musa and Madonna Bashara as Deputy Speakers and Muayyad Habib as Secretary,” July 12, 2026, <https://sana.sy/peoples-assembly/2525485/>. Working Draft, arts. 19, 29–30, and 25. Barish supra note 3. Alikhbariah, “Comprising 231 Articles:

Syrian People’s Assembly Adopts Its New Internal Regulations,” July 30, 2026, <https://alikhbariah.com/>.

⁹ Syrian Arab News Agency, “How Were the Names of the Completing Third Distributed Across Syria?” July 1, 2026, <https://sana.sy/locals/2516410/>. Marwa Jardi, “The First Parliament in the New Syria: Conflicting Powers and Ambiguity Surrounding Restoration Projects,” Al-Akhbar, July 11, 2026, <https://www.al-akhbar.com/NewspaperArticles/syria/>.

¹⁰ 2017 Rules, arts. 260-262. Working Draft, arts. 249-251. Haid *supra* note 1.

¹¹ Working Draft, arts. 86, 149, 160-161, 170-172, 203. 1974 Rules, art. 97. 2017 Rules, art. 155.

¹² Working Draft, arts. 86(1), 145(1), 149(1), 160(1), 161(2), 164, 170(1), 171(1), 190(5), 198(1), and 203(1). Compare 1974 Rules, art. 97, and 2017 Rules, art. 155(1), both requiring ten members to propose a law, with Working Draft, art. 160(1), requiring seven. Draft Article 145(1) provides that a presidential bill reaches the agenda as received if the committees fail to report within twelve days; Draft Article 164 contains no equivalent rule for a member proposal.

¹³ Constitutional Declaration, arts. 25(2) and 30(1)(f). Working Draft, arts. 214-220). Haid *supra* note 1. Barish *supra* note 3. Alikhbariah, “Comprising 231 Articles: Syrian People’s Assembly Adopts Its New Internal Regulations,” July 30, 2026,

<https://alikhbariah.com/>.

¹⁴ 2017 Rules, arts. 237 and 244–251. Working Draft, arts. 232–240, especially arts. 232(e), 235(2), and 237–240. Id. Alikhbariah.