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Assad re-elected as Syria's president

Rebels dismiss Assad's re-election as 'farce' in polls held only in roughly 40 percent of Syrian territory controlled by regime, among expatriates.

By Roueida MABARDI –

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Bashar al-Assad has been re-elected Syria's president with 88.7 percent of the vote after a poll labelled a farce by rebels fighting to overthrow him, whose outcome was never in doubt.

The other candidates in Tuesday's vote -- Hassan al-Nuri and Maher al-Hajjar -- won 4.3 percent and 3.2 percent, respectively, parliamentary speaker Mohammad al-Lahham said.

"Congratulations to the Syrian people for its choice and decision," he said. "Syria has its leader and its captain, who will lead the ship to the shore of safety and security."

But Omar Abu Leyla, a rebel spokesman in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor, said "the Syrian people has made its decision, and will continue in its revolution, whatever the cost.

"After three years, it is impossible to go back, until we get our demands, which were freedom and justice," he said via the Internet.

Minutes after the announcement, state television showed people taking to the streets in Damascus to celebrate. Many chanted, some with the Syrian flag wrapped around their

shoulders.

Celebratory shots fired by Assad supporters killed at least three people in the capital and wounded dozens more, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The election was held only in the roughly 40 percent of Syrian territory controlled by the regime, and among expatriates.

An official said turnout reached 73.42 percent, or 11.6 million people out of 15.8 million called on to vote.

Pro-government newspaper Al-Watan said millions had voted, "defying terrorism and its mortars, rockets, car bombs and suicide attackers, to prove the legitimacy" of Assad for a third seven-year term.

However, opposition activists were quick to claim people had voted out of fear not conviction.

Earlier, Assad "thanked all the Syrians who turned out en masse to vote."

His office's Facebook page said Syrians "are proving day after day their belief in a culture of life, hope and defiance, in the face of a culture of death, terrorism and narrow-mindedness."

The US said it was a "disgrace" to hold an election in the midst of a three-year-old war that has killed more than 162,000 people and driven millions from their homes.

Secretary of State John Kerry, who was in Beirut on Wednesday, described the vote as a "great big zero," and urged Assad allies Iran, Russia and Lebanon's militant group Hezbollah to end the war.

- 'Nothing has changed' -

With millions having fled their homes and the country, Kerry announced \$290 million in humanitarian aid for Syria and countries hosting refugees.

"The conflict is the same, the terror is the same, the killing is the same."

But opposition activists have criticised Washington for failing to take decisive action over the conflict, despite its repeated calls for Assad to step down.

And in a swipe against the administration, former US ambassador to Syria Robert Ford told CNN he had retired last month after almost three years working with the opposition because he could no longer defend US policy.

"We have been unable to address either the root causes of the conflict in terms of the fighting on

the ground and the balance on the ground, and we have a growing extremism threat," Ford said.

He was alluding to jihadists in rebel-held areas, whose presence has made Washington reticent to arm moderate rebels.

But Ford said moderates "need to get the tools they must have to change the balance on the ground, at least in some localities."

He also said rebels are now not just fighting the regime, but also jihadists.

Meanwhile, Assad ally Moscow, which welcomed the election as a step towards a political solution, called for the speedy appointment of a new UN envoy.

Lakhdar Brahimi, who brokered two rounds of abortive peace talks between Damascus and the opposition this year, stepped down on Saturday saying his mediation had reached stalemate.

He had infuriated Damascus by criticising Tuesday's election as an obstacle to his peace efforts.

Russia's UN envoy Vitaly Churkin, who has just taken over the Security Council's chairmanship, said it would be "fundamentally flawed" to ignore the need for a quick successor to Brahimi to relaunch peace efforts.

"We believe that, after just two five-day rounds of talks, to say that things are so stalemated that there is no need to continue those negotiations, this is not to us entirely persuasive."

Moscow, which sent observers to monitor the election, has infuriated the West by four times vetoing draft Security Council resolutions in defence of its Damascus ally.

For his part, Human Rights Watch chief Kenneth Roth tweeted: "Syria scrapes bottom in quest for legitimacy pulling in election observers from N(orth) Korea, Iran, Russia and Zimbabwe."