

The Lebanese Parliamentary Elections of 2018: Much Ado about Nothing?

On 6 May 2018, Lebanon went to the polls to elect a new parliament for the first time in nine years. These elections stand out for the largest reform in voting laws in Lebanese history, the influence of regional tensions, but also a civil society challenging the old guard. After much anticipation, the general elections changed less the political landscape than many people had hoped. The results demonstrated that Lebanese voters and political parties are still far away from running and voting on policy-based solutions to tackle the socio-economic challenges facing the country.

Since their last election in 2009, the parliament had extended its mandate three times before agreeing to hold elections in 2018. The delays were so extensive that the last parliament was elected in a different regional context – before the “Arab Spring” and the Syrian War. Revolutions have reshaped Tunisia and Egypt, while Syria, Iraq and Yemen plunged into gruesome wars and experienced the rise and fall of the Islamic State. In recent months, the Trump administration, Israel and Saudi Arabia have been increasingly escalating their campaign against Iran, with the US withdrawing from the Iran Deal (JCPOA)¹ two days after the Lebanese elections.

Internally, Lebanon is closely affected by neighboring Syria where the war has produced an outflow of 5.6 million refugees, with around 1.5 million refugees living in Lebanon,² rendering it the country with the highest count of refugees per capita. Interestingly, the war and refugee crisis did not play a large role during election campaigns – partly because of the lack of feasible solutions and partly because of a tacit agreement among parties to avoid this path. An important aspect was the buildup of major international conferences where Lebanon wanted to give a positive image and avoid populist campaign rhetoric: On 24 and 25 April 2018, the Brussels II conference was held to secure

humanitarian support for Syrian refugees as well as political support for neighboring host countries.³ More important was the CEDRE⁴ donor conference that was held in Paris on 6 April, where 11 billion USD in credits and grants were pledged to Lebanon during election season – a country with a gross public debt of almost 80 billion USD⁵ and the fifth-highest debt-to-GDP ratio worldwide.⁶

A Peculiar Political System

Lebanon is a consociational democracy that relies on a system of proportional sectarian representation.⁷ Based on a late Ottoman power-sharing formula,⁸ each of the 18 acknowledged religious sects in Lebanon enjoy access to the government: the 128 seats in Parliament are distributed between sects in accordance with their size of population. After Lebanon’s independence in 1943, a power-sharing deal based on the census of 1936 gave the largest sect (Christian Maronite) the Presidency, the second largest group (Sunni Islam) the Prime Minister, and the third (Shia Islam) the Speaker of Parliament. No official census has taken place since 1936, but the Taif Agreement of 1989 that ended the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) strengthened the role of the Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament in relation to the Presidency. Most militias were disarmed after the war, but Syria continued to occupy Lebanon for another 15 years, effectively controlling the country through political proxies and its military force. This included the support of Hezbollah, keeping the group in arms and shielded from accountability. Still, virtually all major political parties today had a military wing during the war. After commanding militias (or the army) during the war, today’s party leaders maintain their power through a system of patronage and sectarianism.

Political and Security Challenges

The parliament’s elections were postponed in 2013 and 2014 because of security concerns. During the time, the Syrian War was raging in the Lebanese-Syrian border region, while the rise of ISIS and frequent car bombings in Hezbollah’s southern Beirut neighborhoods led to a general sense of insecurity. The Syrian government was losing ground and the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah militia had joined the conflict in 2012 to fight alongside the regime. It took until mid-2014 for the Lebanese and Syrian army with Hezbollah to secure the border region, although pockets of ISIS remained in Lebanon until summer 2017.

Security is not the only concern in Lebanon: the incapability of the Lebanese government to agree on basic infrastructure projects led to major crisis in the summer of 2015. Beirut’s main landfill was closed without having an alternative at hand, because political actors could not agree on a plan that would benefit them all. Organized waste management became impossible for the next eight months, during which municipalities had to store waste within the city, often in residential neighborhoods – if garbage was collected at all. The notorious corruption and incompetence of the Lebanese political system sparked protests in the summer of 2015 that grew from the garbage crisis to overall contempt for the government and political system. The protest movement was able to mobilize and quickly organize the civil society, surprising the established political class. This became apparent in the municipal elections of May 2016, where the civil society that formed in the previous summer earned considerable votes in several districts – particularly Beirut, where they won 40% on specific seats. Due to the majority-based electoral system at the time, the votes were not enough to win any seats, but they demonstrated that the civil society was a force to be reckoned with.⁹

The Lebanese Game of Chess

At the same time, a political crisis had been looming: the Lebanese President's term had run out in May 2014 with no successor in place and the Parliament's two main blocks were in a deadlock over whom to elect. It wasn't until early 2016 that the rival Christian parties Lebanese Forces (LF) and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) came to an agreement that secured the Presidency for Michel Aoun. Having initially pushed for a different candidate, Saad Hariri, Sunni leader and son of the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, was forced to agree on the deal that would also make him the new Prime Minister. As such he led a government that included almost all major parties, including Hezbollah –, which Hariri opposes on a political and sectarian level. Amid a regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah enjoys the strong support of Iran, while Hariri is seen as Saudi Arabia's man in Lebanon.¹⁰ In October 2016, a national agreement was reached when Michel Aoun's election ended a 29-month vacuum in the presidency. The new national unity government was finally able to sign a series of pressing issues into laws and completely overhaul the electoral law for parliamentary elections, which was an outstanding issue regarding the political process in Lebanon.

In late 2017 however, Lebanon was once again reminded of how closely its fate is tied to the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran: Saudi King Salman and his son, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), had opposed that Hariri governed together with Hezbollah – an actor who is actively fighting Saudi interests in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Hariri, who also holds the Saudi citizenship, unexpectedly resigned from the Prime Ministry while on a trip to Saudi Arabia in November 2017. The episode was resolved when France got involved and Hariri was allowed to leave the KSA, only to return to Lebanon and annul his resignation. The standoff was generally considered to have been created by MBS who allegedly pressured Hariri into resignation to dissolve the Lebanese government and plunge the country into a chaos that would isolate Hezbollah, benefiting Saudi

interests. Instead, the move weakened the KSA's position in Lebanon and with it that of its ally Hariri, while Hezbollah and President Aoun were praised for keeping calm, uniting the country and solving the crisis diplomatically.

Changing the Electoral Law

Before 2018, elections in Lebanon were based on an old majority-based electoral law that followed a winner-takes-all logic. In an attempt to avoid the deadlock produced by previous elections, the law was changed to a more proportional voting system.

The Lebanese parties primarily represent religious sects and family relations, although minor ideological differences may still occur, particularly within the sects. Hence, parties very rarely engage their constituents on the level of ideology or political programs. The pronounced sectarian identity of Lebanese voters and party loyalty is passed on within families and over generations. Shifts in voter alignment are unlikely because parties focus on religious rhetoric, clientelism and family affiliations instead of a programmatic platform. This would make it nearly impossible for political parties to escape the deadlock in the political system by changing their programmatic orientation. Instead, the system itself needs to be changed, thus parties agreed on changing the voting system.

In 2017, a consensus was reached that opened the elections to the Lebanese diaspora and switched the voting from a majority to a proportional system. However, it kept in place the sectarian restrictions and made use of serious manipulations regarding the design of the voting districts as well as defining the exact number of seats and their sects. The law's requirement for candidates to run in fixed lists was regarded as helpful to push parties to agree on a coherent policy that would bring them together in the list.¹¹ Instead, fixed lists lead parties to abandon political platforms more than ever, in favor of combining parties and candidates to form lists that accumulate a maximum of votes. Established parties joined lists with allies and rivals in some districts, while

running against them in other areas. Other implications include: First, independents and popular candidates could no longer rely on their own weight but rather had to attach their candidacy to strong lists that expected to win seats. Second, because the system no longer follows a winner-takes-all approach, the seats of each sect gained considerable weight, even in areas that were traditionally seen as strongholds of a particular sect and their respective parties. Third, the diaspora vote opened the elections to a completely new ecosystem of Lebanese nationals. Since Lebanese citizens living abroad are believed to amount to roughly the same size as inside Lebanon, this may have considerable impact if enough diaspora Lebanese choose to take part in the elections.¹²

The 2018 Election Outcome

After nine years without elections, there was a general mood of excitement, and although the candidate registration was not cheap (ca. 4400€),¹³ close to a thousand candidates signed up to run for office, including a record number of 86 women (in 2009 only 12). For a parliament that had only four women – all representing powerful men (the wife, daughter or sister of another politician), this could have been an important step towards more gender balance. Furthermore, the large amount of young and alternative candidates gave hope to the civil society and those demanding a change.

The outcome however was a rather sobering experience on several levels. Voter turnout was surprisingly low – down to 49% from 54% in 2009. Established parties blamed this on the complicated new electoral law, but the general frustration with the Lebanese political system is high: the elections witnessed 800,000 first-time voters,¹⁴ but only 3% of the Lebanese youth is "satisfied with the way democracy is exercised in Lebanon."¹⁵ Similarly, the participation of diaspora in the voting did not live up to the expectations: of the approximately 4 million Lebanese citizens abroad,¹⁶ only 83 thousand registered¹⁷ and just over half of them actually voted.¹⁸

Because the threshold is calculated based on the actual votes, a low turnout could help underdog lists if they united enough voters around it. This worked well in the predominantly Christian East Beirut (Beirut I), where the civil society's united list "Koulluna Watani" was able to win a seat – their only election victory and one of just three newly elected female MPs.¹⁹ Another female candidate of the same list and area, Joumana Haddad, was initially believed to have won but this was mysteriously overturned in the official results.²⁰ In most districts however, alternative lists damaged each other as they dispersed votes among several lists, usually failing to pass the threshold. The civil society ran with 66 candidates – this could be seen as an achievement in itself. The low turnout and manipulations led to a questionable legitimacy for some MPs: Eddy Demerjian won the Armenian Orthodox seat in Zahle with 77 votes in total, Haddad lost in Beirut by 108 votes to Antoine Pano's 539 votes. West Beirut (Beirut II) has a Sunni majority (60%) and is a stronghold for Future Movement, however eight other lists went up to challenge Hariri. This dispersion of votes, particularly among Sunni and more secular voters is disadvantageous, granting the Hezbollah-backed list a surprise victory of four seats although Shia are a minority here (20%).²¹ Hariri's block was expected to lose seats to large minorities or to rival Sunni groups. But with 15 seats lost in total, the losses for Hariri were more painful than expected, leaving them only 20 seats. This demonstrates that the proportional system not only impacted the seat distribution on the intra-sectarian level but also within sects. Hariri was challenged from within the Sunni community, where rivals such as Fouad Makhzoumi and Najib Mikati's Azm Movement won 5 seats.²² The Lebanese Forces were able to almost double their seats from eight to 15 seats, picking up seats from the fellow Christian Kataeb and FPM (and in Baalbek-Hermel one seat from Hezbollah).

The Hezbollah camp made considerable gains, although they came less from Hezbollah itself which gained only one new seat, bringing its total to 12. Rather, allies such as Speaker Nabih Berri's Amal (3 new seats), smaller parties and pro-Hezbollah

independents won enough seats to render it one of the largest factions of 40 seats. Together with their main Christian ally, President Aoun's FPM and their block who won 29 seats (including two of Aoun's sons-in-law), Hezbollah and their partners can now lead the biggest coalition in parliament. This has led international observers to declare the elections a landslide victory for Hezbollah.²³ Israeli Minister Naftali Bennett even declared "Hezbollah equals Lebanon", suggesting "Israel will not differentiate between... Lebanon and Hezbollah, and will view Lebanon as responsible for any action from within its territory."²⁴ Lebanese politicians and media were quick to reject this notion²⁵ but power has certainly shifted away from Future Movement block, the formerly strongest block in Parliament.

Despite Saad Hariri's losses, he is still the strongest leader among Sunnis and was instructed to form the next government again as Prime Minister. Similar to the outgoing coalition, the upcoming government is expected to be a difficult balance between most of Lebanon's major political parties, many of them rivals.²⁶ It will most likely include the Sunni Future Movement; the Shia Hezbollah and Amal, LF and FPM for the Christians and Walid Jumblatt's PSP for Druze.

The upcoming formation of a new government is expected to be difficult, despite the gains made by the Hezbollah-FPM led block. Lebanese politics are highly divided on major positions such as their relation towards Syria or Hezbollah's military wing. There are now 14 parties represented in Parliament (none has over 20 seats) and alliances have become frailer in recent years.²⁷ While the general fault lines persist, they have become less definitive. Hezbollah and Future Movement are on different ends of the spectrum, as the rivalry of their allies Iran and Saudi Arabia continues to play out by proxy. However, their traditional partners in the Lebanese political system seem to grow increasingly tired of this rivalry and have other priorities. Some have switched sides, while it was the rapprochement between the Christian LF and FPM that ended the Sunni-Shia deadlock and enabled Aoun's presidency in the first place. Lebanon's politicians have demon-

strated their ability to compromise on policy as long they can secure mutual benefits. The new government's priorities will be to combat Lebanon's immense debt and find ways to rescue the economy.

Outlook

While the Hezbollah-led camp has made considerable gains, the outcome also holds some risks for the party. Having framed itself as an apolitical resistance movement that operates outside Lebanon's corrupt political system, Hezbollah's election gains now push the party towards taking more responsibility to tackle socio-economic and infrastructure challenges.²⁸ Over the years, many parties have promised major infrastructure improvements and systemic reforms but Lebanon still suffers from electricity shortages almost 30 years after its Civil War. Another pressing issue is combating the widespread corruption, one of the few hopes to help the catastrophic Lebanese economy. This issue was in the election programs of virtually all parties and is more pressing than ever, as LF leader Geagea remarked: "I believe everyone has realized now that the ship might sink with everyone aboard."²⁹

So far, parties blamed their policy failures on rival camps blocking their efforts but now Hezbollah and their allies control enough seats to secure majorities on their projects. The fight against corruption however reaches into all fields of the economy and politics and could alienate several key allies – especially Amal – if they view reforms as a threat to their business and political interests. But failing to deliver solutions would not sit well with key demographics such as the rising Shia middle class. Marginalized in the 20th century, Shia Lebanese have ascended politically and economically and now are more interested in rising living standards than the liberation of Palestine and Syria.³⁰ A military confrontation with Israel could be a way out of this dilemma but would bear incredible risks for a Hezbollah that today has too much to lose to rush into another war – particularly while still entangled in Syria and beyond.

As the United States are increasing their pressure against Iran and its allies,³¹ Hezbollah is feeling the heat too. Nevertheless, Hezbollah is democratically elected and therefore a legitimate part of the Lebanese government. The EU should critically engage Hezbollah to limit its power – but with the ultimate goal of strengthening the Lebanese democracy, not breaking it. Any campaigns against the party must not come at the cost of Lebanon itself: the Lebanese system is not perfect but it is one of very few democratic systems in the Middle East, and its resilience to regional conflicts is worth saving. Tacit support for military campaigns or extremist groups to counterbalance Hezbollah could break the country – and open external or internal conflict would put over two million refugees as well as their Lebanese hosts on the move towards Europe. Austria should continue aiding Lebanon by participating in UNIFIL while supporting the security forces and a democratic political discourse, Austria and the EU continue to stabilize Lebanon.

The EU knows that good living conditions for refugees and host communities are vital; frameworks such as the Madad Fund from 2014³² and now CEDRE ensure basic funding. But Lebanon's economy will not be recovered only through external funding or the eventual return of refugees. Corruption and mismanagement are rooted much deeper in the system – and here Beirut needs European expertise but also the political pressure to push reforms forward. Instead of increasing neoliberal policies and social inequality, Lebanon can learn from Austria, Germany and other EU member states to adapt a social welfare system and strengthen its institutions. To avoid an economic breakdown and possible sovereign default, lending policies should be more conditional on austerity measures and combating corruption. In a country, where policy makers are linked to bank ownership that profit from public debts,³³ lenders should hold Lebanese politicians more accountable for their socio-economic decisions. In this regard, the EU could use conditionality tools to put more pressure on the government to make it move in the direction of reforming.

Endnotes

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- 13) Election Law 44, Article 45
- 14) Numbers by Ministry of Interior. This is also due to the fact that the last elections were 9 years ago.
- 15) Study by LCPS and International Alert
- 16) Again, numbers are highly uncertain but the diaspora is believed to be at least as large as the population in Lebanon
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