



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 28 May 2022

Lebanon 2022 Parliamentary Elections: Implications for the Country's Economic and Political Crisis

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

28 May 2022

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On 15 May, Lebanon held its first parliamentary elections since the October 2019 protests and the August 2020 explosion of the Port of Beirut. Although Hezbollah and its allies lost the majority they had enjoyed in the previous parliament, the results did not usher in a clear majority for any other party. This may delay the formation of a government and the election of a new president to replace Michel Aoun, whose term ends next October, and plunge the country into a renewed state of political paralysis.

Background

The parliamentary elections in Lebanon took place in the wake of important changes seen in recent years, including the 2019 October protests against corruption and the sectarian regime, which held the “political class” responsible for the financial and economic collapse and the social repercussions it left behind, and the explosion of the port of Beirut¹ in August 2020. In addition to all this, Lebanon has also suffered the negative repercussions on energy and food security that resulted from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. These elections were the first to be held in Lebanon without the participation of the Hariri movement, which emerged in the early 1990s with former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, and without the Future Movement, which was founded in 2007 and headed by his son, Saad Hariri.

The decision to suspend political action taken by Saad Hariri last January had important repercussions for the electoral outcomes and candidates raced to fill the void left by the Future Movement, which had enjoyed a representative majority among Lebanon’s Sunnis. These elections also came towards the end of President Michel Aoun’s term, whose policies have negatively affected the popularity of the Free Patriotic Movement, founded in 2005 and currently led by his son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, which had enjoyed the largest parliamentary bloc in the previous parliament. All these factors – the economic collapse, the withdrawal of the Future Movement, the decline in the Free Patriotic Movement’s popularity, and the entry of candidates representing the protest movement into the competition changed the electoral dynamics. These elections represented the first test for the political forces and figures that emerged after the October protests and their ability to shake the foundations of the “political class” dominating the Lebanese political system.

Voter Turnout

Candidates for the parliamentary elections competed for 15 electoral districts for 128 seats in Parliament. There were 103 electoral lists and 718 candidates, compared to 77 lists and 597 candidates in the 2018 elections. Successful nominees were generally distributed between the traditional forces that represent the sectarian quota system, both Hezbollah allies and antagonists, and the oppositional forces representing the protest movement, with both camps including a broad political spectrum.

¹ Arab Center Washington DC “Lebanon after the Beirut Explosion: Overcoming Multiple Crises,” 19/8/202, last accessed 29/5/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3GsolZb>.



For the first time, Lebanese diaspora votes were counted in these elections, playing a significant role in the outcome, especially as a large percentage of these votes were against traditional lineups and were outside of the direct influence of the political class. The expatriate voter turnout was 142,000 out of 225,000 registered, according to the final figures of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants (63%), reflecting the electoral enthusiasm of Lebanese diaspora. These votes helped the candidates representing the protest movement to win an additional seat in major constituencies such as Beirut I and II, Chouf-Aley, and South III, indicating a Lebanese thirst for change abroad.

Meanwhile, the domestic voter turnout declined in all of Lebanon's governorates, to about 41% of registered voters, against 49.7% in 2018. This decline was particularly recorded in Sunni-majority districts such as Saida, Minieh - Danniyeh.²

Election Results

The election results need to be scrutinized in detail to assess their impact, whether for the Hezbollah camp and its domestic political influence, or for the opposition camp.³ Given the multiplicity of lists and blocs, the winners are hence divided according to political affiliation and position on Hezbollah:

- **The Hezbollah Camp:**

The Hezbollah camp obtained 61 seats including 15 candidates under the Hezbollah bloc, 15 under the Amal bloc, the 17 for the Free Patriotic Movement, 3 for the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, and 11 other direct and indirect affiliates, including 2 Marada candidates.⁴

- **The Anti-Hezbollah Camp:**

The anti-Hezbollah Camp obtained 51 seats including 18 for the Lebanese Forces, 9 for the Progressive Socialist Party, 5 for Kataeb, 12 for independent candidates, and, as result of the Future Movement's boycott of the elections, just 7 seats for the Sunni bloc, with Saad Hariri appearing to tacitly support the 5 Future affiliated candidates.⁵

- **The Protest Movement Camp:**

The bloc that is affiliated with the protest movement earned 16 seats in the election including 13 for the October 17 candidates and 3 for allied candidates.

² "The Decline in the General Voter Turnout", *The Monthly*, 16/5/2022, accessed on 25/5/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3PGjjMT>

³ The official results were also published on the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Foreign Affairs websites in Lebanon.

⁴ Elected representative, Farid Haykal Khazen, is ideologically closer to the Maronite Patriarchate, but he is constrained by his alliance with the Marada movement headed by presidential candidate Suleiman Frangieh. Meanwhile, the Free Patriotic Movement counted the elected representative of Akkar, Mohamed Yahya, as part of its bloc, but this is not certain, because he is an independent deputy backed by Hezbollah, and there are no indications that he will join the Free Patriotic Movement bloc. Additionally, Firas Al-Salloum, an elected representative from Tripoli, was considered a candidate from the ranks of the protest movement, but since his election he has announced support of Hezbollah.

⁵ Ihab Matar was counted among the protest movement's candidates, but he confirmed after his election that his victory was the result of an alliance with the "Islamist projects."

Implications for Government Formation and the Presidential Elections:

While the alignments referred to above represent the candidate stance towards Hezbollah, these alignments significantly transform regarding other controversial issues such as the election of a president or the formation of the government. From this perspective, the Amal movement, for example, would be closer to the Progressive Socialist party than to the Free Patriotic Movement” would be. Meanwhile, the Lebanese Forces indicated that they do not want to join a “national unity” government with Hezbollah, and the Kataeb Party also believes that staying out of power is the preferable step this stage. Nor do the representatives of the popular protest movement wish to bear the consequences of joining a government led by one of the pillars of the political class. Hezbollah and its allies do not have a sufficient majority to form a government, and they must give the Progressive Socialist Party a sizeable share of the cabinet to form a government, especially after the electoral defeat of its traditional Druze rivals led by Prince Talal Arslan, who lost his seat in the Mount Lebanon constituency. In fact, the two major camps are both completely immersed in their internal divisions, are unable to present a unified agenda and battle with contradictory interests. However, Hezbollah seems more adept at controlling the rivalries in its camp, unlike the opposition coalition, which has lost the Future Movement, while the Lebanese Forces are unable to play a national role in leading the opposition.

Conclusions

The election results indicate several important conclusions:

- Hezbollah still enjoys parliamentary representation in all governorates, and allies in every sects (except the Druze). Moreover, Hezbollah candidates obtained many votes in their constituencies, and the group was able to influence the election results in almost all governorates, especially outside its main hubs in Beirut, Akkar and Jbeil. Although the results consolidated Hezbollah’s influence in the Shi’i community, they forced it into a position of dependence on opponents to form a government, implement policies and pass bills in Parliament.
- Most of the candidates loyal to the Syrian regime (Faisal Karami, Talal Arslan, Wiam Wahhab, Assaad Hardan, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party) lost in these elections, as did the figures synonymous with the Lebanese banking system such as Marwan Kheireddine and Elie Ferzli.
- The elections blocked any possibility of Gebran Bassil assuming the presidency, especially since Christian attitudes were split equally between the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces, with the former suffering huge losses in major strongholds such as Jezzine, Achrafieh and Zahle.
- The call to boycott the elections received a response among the Sunni community in general, despite the victory of some MPs. The Sunni seats that freed up as a result of Saad Hariri’s



political exit were distributed as follows: Supporters of the Future Movement (8), Hezbollah (5), the protest movement (5), and the Siniora bloc (3). Sunni pro-Future Movement voters were torn between satisfying Saad Hariri's wishes and the priority of voting against Hezbollah.

- Walid Jumblatt emerged as the most prominent winner, because the Progressive Socialist Party he leads won six of the eight Druze seats (compared to two won by protest movement candidates), while his traditional opponents lost in Mount Lebanon. He obtained a parliamentary bloc of nine representatives that may give him a decisive role in the political scene in the coming years.
- Finally, the representatives of the protest movement won seats in numbers that exceeded pessimistic expectations, indicating that the road to change in Lebanon is not so elusive. Had the electoral rules process been changed the results would also have looked very different. These new representatives represent a distinct political culture, and they must be careful not to be absorbed into the quota system. People do not expect favours from these people, but in return they should offer an alternative political and social outlook, and give a professional parliamentary performance. The representatives of the uprising have lost some seats as a result of their divisions during the formation of the electoral lists, and they may lose more if there is no serious bloc or alliance that brings them together in the next stage. This group's ability to influence may be limited, but it has the opportunity, if it remains united and consistent, to present an alternative to the irresponsible image of the ruling class.