



Elections in Lebanon

At the crossroad of peace and stability

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- Next Parliamentary Elections in Lebanon will be held on June 7th, 2009.
- Since the last elections in 2005, the Lebanese political system has been under constant domestic and international strains.
- The upcoming elections will be a challenging test for Lebanon, and a milestone in the strengthening of Lebanon's democratic institutions.
- Whether a crisis will immediately take hold after the elections is not yet definite, but given past experiences it is not completely unlikely.

“When Beirut’s pitted roads are getting done, it’s election time.” This common saying can often be heard from the capital’s taxi drivers these days. With the Parliamentary ballot votes scheduled for June 7th, Lebanese parties have spread their campaign billboards all around the streets of the country. After years of conflict, the hope is high that Lebanon will head towards more stability and unity in the next years.

Former Elections

Since the last elections, which took place after the withdrawal of Syrian’s troops in 2005, the political system has been under constant domestic and international strain. In November 2007, when the term of the 11th President of Lebanon, Emile Lahoud, ended, the country was nearly on the brink of a civil-war again. Under mediation of the Amir of Qatar, the main political groups finally reached an agreement in Doha in May 2008 forming a new cross-party government. Lebanon has been so far run by a national unity government, in which the pro-western March 14 faction has the upper hand. Its major

opponent is the coalition March 8, which includes the Iranian- and Syrian-backed Shi’ite group Hizbollah.

Parties and Candidates

The race between the two rivaling blocs March 14 and March 8 is tight. With 128 seats needed to be filled, 702 candidates from 26 districts registered until the deadline at the beginning of April - the highest number of nominees ever in Lebanese history.

March 14

March 14, named after the date of the Cedar Revolution against 30 years of Syrian military occupation in Lebanon, comprises a strong coalition of various parties such as the Lebanese Future Movement, the Progressive Socialist Party, Lebanese Forces, Lebanese Social Democratic Party Kataeb, the National Liberal Party, the Independence Movement, the Tripoli Bloc, the Democratic Left Movement, the Democratic Renewal Movement, the Armenian Social Democrat Hunchakian Party, the Armenian Democratic Liberal Ramgavar

Party, the Lebanese Bloc, and the Free Shiite Movement.

Most prominently, the Lebanese Future Movement is led by Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated former Prime Minister of Lebanon. Hariri is listed by Forbes as one of the wealthiest people in the world, running the Saudi Oger construction conglomerate, being board member of the Saudi Investment Bank, and now heading Lebanon's largest Sunni Muslim political party.

Although united since the 2005 parliamentary election to end Damascus interference in Lebanese affairs, March 14 struggles with gaining internal compromises. One of the greatest opponents are Walid Jumblatt of the left-wing Progressive Socialist Party and Samir Geagea of the Lebanese Forces. Jumblatt is known for shifting his political allegiances in order to protect the long-term interests of the Druze. Equally, Geagea is defending the needs of the Lebanese Christian community against dangers and threats.

However, March 14 launched a joint 14 point plan for the elections putting the protection of Lebanon from Israeli attacks and the retrieval of Shebaa Farms through the full execution of the UN Resolution 1701 in the first place. The alliance also demands a full disarmament of all groups, a termination of the disagreement with Syria, and a full commitment to refuse the resettlement of Palestinians in Lebanon. Moreover, the bloc highlights the need of socio-economical reforms, but also touches on gender and environmental issues.

March 8

Founded after a mass political rally by Hizbollah in rejection to disarmament and to express gratitude to Syria, this alliance has been, to this point, the main opposition in the Lebanese Parliament. The alliance consists, besides Hizbollah, of the Free Patriotic Movement, the Amal Movement, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the Skaff Bloc, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Popular Nasserite Organization, the Tawhid

Party, the Lebanese Democratic Party, the Nasserite Unification Movement, the Solidarity Party, El Marada, the Arab Democratic Party, the Promise Party, the Union Party, the Islamic Unification Movement, the National Dialogue Party, and the Islamic Group.

Head of the Free Patriotic Movement is Michel Aoun, a former commander leading the Christian forces in the final years Lebanon's civil-war. The Christian Maronite, who has previously been a firm advocate for the disarmament of Hizbollah's militia in line with the US- and French UN Security Council Resolution 1559, surprised political fellows when he collaborated with the March 8 movement after returning back from exile in May 2005. Analysts suspect the reason lay in the strategic step of Aoun to overcome his political isolation after his return, and his aim to get into a better position through Hizbollah instead of fighting within March 14.

The Amal Movement, short for Lebanese Resistance Detachments (Afwaj al-Muqawamah al-Lubnaniyyah) as well as meaning "hope" in Arabic, exists as a military wing and Islamic political organization since 1975. Nabih Berri chairs the party being also the Speaker of the Parliament of Lebanon. In 2008 Berri shut down the Parliament postponing its sessions, which was seen as a maneuver to hinder the election of an anti-Syrian President by the March 14 Alliance.

Hizbollah, literally the "party of God", regards itself as the legitimate resistance movement in Lebanon against Israel. The Shi'a Islamic paramilitary organization is still listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department. In Doha, Hassan Nasrallah, the chief of the armed movement, managed to gain one-third of the government ministry posts strengthening Hizbollah's position within the Lebanese power structures. Having Hizbollah in the Lebanese government, and thereby legitimizing its role, have caused serious concerns in Israel.

In its electoral program Hizbollah declares that Lebanon should no longer be seen as an arena,

and obliges all to deal with them with the necessary seriousness and responsibility. However, Nasrallah recently announced that only if the current Hizbollah-led opposition wins the elections, it will form a national unity government with all parties; otherwise it will refuse any participation.

Arguing against "Zionist aggression" and the attempt of the U.S. to influence the region, Hizbollah furthermore calls in its election charter for political, socio-economical and financial reforms. It therefore demands, for instance, the reintroduction of a Ministry of Planning submitting ten or five-year plans for the various sectors. Additionally, the group stresses the need of a decentralized administration, a reform of the judicial system and the education sector. The movement also insists on a review of certain laws on publications and media. Similarly, the party emphasizes that the privacy of citizens has to be protected through banning indiscriminate wire-tapping of their telephone calls – all measures, which have been used to uncover Hizbollah's activities.

Since the last months, March 8 is increasingly seen as an alternative. Hizbollah celebrated a major political triumph after the release of four Lebanese generals, which have been detained for nearly four years in connection with the murder of former Premier Rafiq Hariri. Due to a survey of the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation at Lebanese universities from last July, Hizbollah leader Nasrallah also enjoys great popularity among non-Shia students.

Further turbulences into the election time brought an article of the German weekly "Der Spiegel" implicating the involvement of Hizbollah agents in Hariri's assassination. "They are scared because a win for the opposition means that the systematic program of targeting, besieging and isolating the resistance in Lebanon in an attempt to dissolve it, has failed." Nasrallah commented on Al Jazeera. Hezbollah has dismissed the report as being based on "fabrications" accusing Israel of interfering in the elections.

Meanwhile, Israel is conducting its largest military training exercise since 1961 at the end of May until the beginning week of June. A series of armed forces and emergency services drills are expected to take place near to the Lebanese border. Hizbollah is dealing with these maneuvers with "readiness and alertness", as the Resistance announced.

As Israel and Lebanon are still officially remaining in state of war, the relations between both countries are difficult. The Lebanese Government just filed a complaint to the United Nations over alleged Israeli spy networks operating in Lebanon.

New Election Law

In addition, the elections will be the first to be held under the new elections laws being a key demand of the Doha consensus. Revisions of the electoral law have always been sensitive in Lebanon where 11 recognized confessional groups compete to safeguard their political interests.

In accordance with the Lebanese Constitution, all parliamentary seats are divided equally between Christians and Muslims. The new election law of 2008 again formally sub-divides the number of representatives into four Islamic and seven Christian confessional branches. In this regard, the new electoral law increases confessional and sectarian divisions, which is seen by some political analysts as harmful for a united Lebanon in the long run.

Nevertheless, there are some achievements such as holding of the elections on only one day, more transparency for campaign financing, and the attempt for greater equal media coverage, as well as the creation of a Supervisory Commission. There will be also supplementary safeguards against electoral fraud ranging from transparent ballot boxes to the inking of fingers. However, voters can still use any piece of paper as a ballot, even napkins. This will most likely perpetuate the practice of political groups in the past to distribute prepared ballots discouraging voters from making their own choices as well as

undermining the secrecy of the vote. In these elections there will also not be any out-of-country voting yet, which leaves out the large Lebanese Diaspora abroad, which mostly fled during the Lebanese civil-war.

Security Concerns

Given the fact that four Members of Parliament have been assassinated over the last four years, concerns also remain about the security environment during the election period. It has been only nine months since a Lebanese politician was killed. As the International Foundation for Electoral Systems in its Lebanese Election Violence Risk Assessment Project analyzes, particularly Tripoli in the North of Lebanon, Baabda in the Mountain region, Jezzine in the South, and Zahle in the Bakaa area bear the risk of political and confessional conflicts. Reasons are intense political competition, the presence of influential seats, unrepresentative candidates, as well as a higher likelihood of pressure or bribery. Though, to which extent security concerns could prevent candidates from campaigning effectively can hardly be estimated. The weeks and months after the elections will show, whether violence will occur breaking once again the country's fragile stability.

Election Observation

A couple of observer missions are ready to be deployed to Lebanon. The European Union has announced to send 90 experts assessing voting, counting and the tabulation of results. The EU also has long-term observers to examine the campaign period and pre-election preparations around the country. A delegation from the European Parliament is expected to arrive the day of the elections. Besides, the European Union, the Carter Center, and the National Democratic Institute will also monitor the events.

Lebanon is of vital importance for the EU in its European Neighbourhood Policy. In its annual Progress Report in April this year, External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner stressed once again that violent

conflicts in the Mediterranean region have a direct impact on the security and economy of the European Union. Following the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement and a signed Action Plan of 2007, the EU therefore dedicated 4 million Euros to implement the Lebanese electoral reform.

The level of direct external interference in Lebanon's parliamentary elections can meanwhile no longer be termed as low. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton visited Beirut in early May, expressing her wish for open and fair elections. Clinton pledged support "the voices of moderation", and hold up the strong bilateral cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces. Lately, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden concluded a seven-hour visit to Lebanon delivering a message to the Lebanese President Michel Suleiman from U.S. President Barack Obama underlining the need for a democratic and free Lebanon. Biden also mentioned that the United States would evaluate its assistance programs based on the composition of the new government and the policies it advocates. Since 2006, the U.S. has spent \$1.3 billion on Lebanon, including more than \$400 million in military aid for the Western-leaning government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, which has also the strong backing of U.S. ally Saudi Arabia. Washington is worried that the Hizbollah-led opposition could gain more influence, which is seen as a threat by Israel.

Aftermath of the Elections

A couple of days away from Lebanon's ballots, many scenarios for the aftermath of the elections are possible. March 8 has been playing an influential role in the government and some analysts forecast it could emerge victorious in the June polls. Other political observers expect that the new government will be broadly similar in shape to the present legislature, although the balance might tip slightly. Lastly, Lebanon could end up with a unity government of March 8 and March 14, where Hizbollah not only holds the one-third blocking veto power of Doha, but even half of the posts in the Cabinet. Whether a crisis will

immediately take hold after the elections is not yet definite, but given past experiences it is not completely unlikely.

Generally, it appears that Lebanese political parties are not divided by strong programmatic differences. The main diverging issues that remain are questions of disarmament and Lebanon's national defense strategy, as well as details concerning the authorities of the Special Tribunal of Lebanon. As a matter of fact, religious actors of all confessions are significantly involved in political debates. In this regard, confessional allegiance can be seen as the most decisive feature beyond pure power considerations.

Given that Lebanon's President Michel Suleiman has been chosen in Doha last year to please all parties, it is predicted that the future government will keep him in office to complete his six-year non-renewable term. In the past, he has been successfully adept at reading power shifts, anticipating popular sentiment and balancing competing interests.

Time for Change?

As a topic of critique among the public continues the frustration that within all parties the old elites from the civil-war era will stay in power without any fresh spirit and vision for the country. This lack of enthusiasm comes with the opinion that nothing will change,

mixed with the perception that there is no single political figure committed only to the Lebanese people. Also the unknown faces in the election race, though there only a few, are very much suspected just to rule in favor of the their own family circles' wealth.

Consequently, the political parties are seeking to mobilize voters to increase the turnout for the elections. Many of Lebanese expatriates are being flown home with tickets paid by the parties to vote in contested districts. As the New York Times recently documented, especially in competitive regions votes are being bought with cash or other rewarding services.

In any case, the upcoming elections will be a challenging test for Lebanon. The period leading to the ballot votes and the results of the elections will reveal the stability the parliamentary Republic. If the process ends in a peaceful outcome, it will be a milestone in the strengthening of Lebanon's democratic institutions.

In the streets of Beirut these days, it can be inevitably sensed that the country's future and the region's stability are once again at a crossroad. Lebanon has already a winding journey of gaining freedom and independence behind it. These elections will show how much longer the way is for Lebanon to reach consolidated peace.

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