Arab Reform Initiative

The Lebanese Legislative Elections: Fragmentation and Polarization

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Supporters of Hezbollah on motorbikes carrying their party flags, Beirut, Lebanon - May 2018 © EPA

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On 6 May 2018, Lebanon had its first legislative elections in nine years. But what was celebrated as a "victory for democracy" may have been merely a game of musical chairs between existing political actors. The elections may even be seen as a setback, with the return of major figures from the era under Syrian presence.

For Lebanon, simply holding the elections – considered routine in most democracies – was seen as a victory. Parliament had extended its mandate three times since the last elections in 2009. Many obstacles had prevented the elections from taking place including the fragile security balance; the war in Syria and its polarization of Lebanese politics support for the Assad regime; the direct involvement of Hezbollah in Syria; and finally, a lack of consensus between major political parties and figures on a new electoral law. This last issue was the most crucial as the 2018 law emerged as a mix of elements designed to please all parties. Its key tenets were proportional representation and a division of electoral districts that satisfied most political actors.

This paper explores the lessons learned from these elections and analyzes specific points such as the electoral law, political debate, and post-election perspectives.

Lessons learned

1. Low turnout

Only 49.2% of voters participated in the elections – 5% lower than during the 2009 elections. In his post-election press conference, Minister of Interior Nouhad Machnouk stated that a system based on proportional representation usually enhances participation, making Lebanon a unique case. This rate could have been even lower had the political parties not "highly" encouraged people on social media and television during the final hours of voting. At times they did so in violation of the law by asking people to vote for their candidates. Major parties were concerned about the low turnout and even considered extending voting hours, which would have been another violation of the law. A late decision allowed voters already inside voting facilities to vote after the official closing time.

2. The winners

The two major Shia organizations were definitely among the winners and had been advocating for a proportional representation system for years. In two of the three southern districts with a predominantly Shia population (South II and III), their unified lists won all seats. These were the only two districts where no other lists reached the electoral threshold necessary to gain seats.

The two main Christian parties can also be considered winners. The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) – President Aoun's party – is now the largest group in Parliament (29 seats) while the Lebanese Forces (LF) won 15 seats. This led to the marginalization of independent Christian political figures like Boutros Harb (former MP for Batroun) and Fares Souaid in Jbeil. Such figures played an important role in the later years of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, advocating for the withdrawal of the Syrian army at a time when both the FPM and the LF were banned.

3. The losers

Saad Hariri was among the losers. His Future Movement lost one third of its members (21 down from 33 in the previous parliament) and he now must face the rise of rival Sunni political figures. However, Ashraf Rifi, a former ally turned political opponent, was not elected in Tripoli. Hariri will remain as Prime Minister, but his position is weakened.

4. Not the renewal some were hoping for

Although 63 new MPs were elected to Parliament, this election did not lead to a renewal of the political class. On the contrary, many of the newly elected MPs are sons of former MPs (e.g. Tony Frangiyeh the son of Sleimane Frangiyeh was elected in Zghorta, Taymour Joumblatt the son of Walid Joumblatt in the Shouf district, and Sami Fatfat the son of Ahmad Fatfat in Denniyyeh among others).

5. The rise of civil society movements

The "Koulluna Watani" coalition registered lists in nine of the 15 districts (66 candidates). Although they gained only one seat in the Beirut I district, they were able to inject some of their policy platforms – such as fighting corruption – into the political debate. To many voters, they represented an alternative to traditional political parties, especially in the wake of the "You Stink" campaign led by civil society organizations in 2015 demanding a still-elusive solution to the garbage crisis. However, the suffered from a lack of exposure given media domination by major political figures. They also suffered from many internal divisions, which gave a sense of amateurism and discouraged potential voters. - Finally, the elections saw the return of major figures from the Syrian era like Elie Ferzli, Jamil al-Sayyed (former general director of General Security) and Abdel Rahim Mrad. This marks the revival of Syrian influence in Lebanon and the end of a cycle of reduced influence that began after the assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2005, and the subsequent withdrawal of the Syrian army.

The Electoral Law: Pleasing Everyone Except the Voters

Deciding on a new electoral law has always been a challenge in Lebanon, with conflicting demands from political parties whose main concern is to gain as many seats as possible. The main stumbling blocks remain the size of the electoral districts (between the largest – the governorate or mouhâfaza – and the smallest – the caza – or a mix of the two. Opinions vary depending on both local political interests and the type of representation (majoritarian or proportional). The 1989 Taif Agreement decided on the governorate level as a means of reducing sectarianism by making people vote for candidates from other sects, given that governorates are usually more mixed than cazas.

However, several previous electoral laws have violated this clause. The 2018 law is a compromise supposed to please all, but its complexity may have discouraged voters.

For the first time in Lebanese history, the new electoral law is based on proportional rather than majoritarian representation. According to the new law, agreed upon after years of negotiations, Lebanon was divided into 15 electoral

districts, made up of 27 sub-districts. The law did not however change the number of seats (128) or their distribution among different religious communities (64 Christian MPs and 64 Muslim MPs).

While the law allowed Lebanese living abroad to vote for the first time, they were not granted specific seats and had to vote according to their registered electorate in Lebanon. Without delving into the details of a law so complex that it took the Ministry of Interior a few days to publish the official results, we can highlight to a few points. In each electorate, voters had first to select a complete list and were not given the chance – contrary to previous elections – to choose candidates from different lists or to cross out candidates from the list they chose. Further, they had to give their "preferential vote" to one of the candidates but this vote could only go to candidates in their own caza (many constituencies were formed from more than one caza).

To gain seats, each list had to reach a threshold, equal to the number of voters divided by the number of seats in the constituency. The candidates with the highest percentage of preferential votes (dividing their preferential votes with the total of the preferential votes in their sub-district) were allotted the first seats. Yet the law had to be adjusted according to the Lebanese sectarian system, meaning candidates with the highest preferential votes lost in many districts because the seat for their sect had already been filled. This means that in the same district MPs were elected with large gaps between the first and the last vote takers (e.g. 4788 votes for the first elected in Beirut I and 539 votes for the last one).

Although the electoral law was criticized for its complexity, it facilitated the election of one candidate from the civil society coalition, which would have been very difficult under previous laws. It also ensured better representation in some districts where the largest religious community had previously decided of all the seats. For instance, under previous laws, for the Maronite seat in the predominantly Shia district of Baalbeck-Hermel, only Maronite candidates that were on Hezbollah's list were elected. But in 2018, the Lebanese Forces candidate was elected. In some districts, this law enables greater political diversity whereas previous laws led to a "winner takes it all" system. In the district of Mount Lebanon I (Keserwan-Jbeil), where the FPM had won all seats in previous elections, the Lebanese Forces and a list of local figures were able each to gain two of the eight

seats, while the FPM only won four seats.

The (Non-Existent) Political Debate and "Unconventional" Alliances

What was striking during these elections was the total absence of real political debate. Even though some political parties (such as the Kataeb or Koulluna Watani coalition) had policy platforms for the elections, economic and social positions were rarely discussed during electoral rallies. Most parties chose vague slogans focusing on issues like fighting corruption, loyalty (to president Michel Aoun or to the "resistance" i.e. Hezbollah) or the preservation of Lebanon.

The Lebanese Forces centered their campaigns on the issue of corruption with slogans like "It is time for accountability not clientelism" (Sâr badda mouhâsabeh mesh mahsoubiyyeh) or "It is time for integrity not corruption" (Sâr badda nazeha mesh fassed). The FPM's slogans focused on a "strong Lebanon" without actually specifying what that strength entails (e.g. a strong state?) or how such strength would be accomplished. Hariri's Future Movement's main slogan was similarly vague: "We are the (blue) lucky charm that protects Lebanon" – blue refers to the official color of the party (Nehna al-kharze al-zar'a lli btehmi lebnen).

While economic strategies have long been absent from Lebanese electoral debates, there had been at least a clear political divide since 2005 between the two dominant camps – the March 14 alliance (an anti-Syrian regime coalition of Hariri and his allies) and the March 8 alliance (Hezbollah and its allies). Despite the polarization induced by the Syrian conflict, even this divide weakened during the May 2018 elections, evidenced by the complex alliances between all political parties. Such alliances in part explain the lack of interest from some voters toward the elections. Former allies competed against each other in some of the districts while allying in other districts. Hariri's Future Movement and the Lebanese Forces had unified lists in the districts of Mount Lebanon IV (Shouf-Aley), Bekaa III (Baalbeck-Hermel), and North I (Akkar) but their candidates were on competing lists in other districts like North III (Batroun- Koura-Zghorta-Becharreh) and Bekaa I (Zahleh), where Hariri's party allied with the FPM, its former political foe. The FPM's alliances followed the same logic (or lack-of) where it was allied with

Hezbollah and Amal in Beirut II (Saad Hariri's electoral district) and ran against them in South I (Saida-Jezzine) and Mount Lebanon III (Baabda).

The only exception to these unconventional alliances was the Shia duopoly – Hezbollah and Amal did not compete in any district. The same did not apply to Christian parties. The district of North III (Batroun- Koura-Zghorta-Becharreh, the largest Christian district with 10 seats) was considered by the media "as the mother of all campaigns" between these parties, as three potential future presidential candidates were in competition. Gebran Bassil, Minister of Foreign Affairs and President Aoun's son-in-law led the FPM list in alliance with the Future Movement. Setrida Geagea (the wife of the Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea who may also run for President) chose to ally with the Kataeb. Tony Frangiyeh (the son of Sleimane Frangiyyeh, presidential candidate in 2016 and potentially in 2022) led a list of local figures with Boutros Harb in Batroun (who had been previously a member of the March 14 coalition). Results saw the seats divided between the three lists.

Where to now?

Although Saad Hariri lost the election, he still was appointed as Prime Minister. According to the Lebanese system, the President of the Republic has to consult with the different political groups in Parliament and choose the Prime Minister according to these negotiations. Hariri was chosen by 111 MPs (from 128) with former political opponents like the Syrian Social National Party or the Kataeb choosing Hariri as a sign of political détente. Nabih Berri, who has been speaker of Parliament since the 1992 elections, was also reelected by a large majority (98 votes, with 29 blank votes). More striking is that Elie Ferzli, a prominent Syrian regime supporter, was elected as vice-Speaker, a position reserved for Greek Orthodox representatives, which he held in the 1990s during the Syrian presence in Lebanon.

So, were the elections all for nothing, or even worse, were they a step backward? The elections reproduced the same political elite, with minimal change in the balance between political parties in Parliament. These elections were not a "victory for democracy" with over 950 violations of the electoral law reported. This

may further deter voters who fear that nothing will ever change and that political parties will do anything to stay in power.

One major short-term challenge will be the formation of the new Hariri government. Negotiations have already begun with conflicting demands from political parties. These demands largely revolve around the distribution of shares in the cabinet. But this government will have to implement important reforms in exchange for the 11 billion dollars of aid and soft loans obtained during the CEDRE conference in Paris in April 2018. While political parties skipped economic debate during the elections, contestation will be inevitable in future months if they are to avoid the collapse of the Lebanese economy.

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About the author

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About Arab Reform Initiative

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