
Lebanon's Upcoming Elections

Summary

Lebanon's democratic process is a complex system intended to ensure a balance of ethnic and religious representation at all levels of government. Because certain electoral districts must be represented by a set mix of ethno-religious representatives, the prospect of a single party winning a broad mandate for leadership is very low. The nature of the governing coalition depends heavily on how electoral alliances are stitched together in the days immediately before and after the elections. According to the most recent polls, the elections today are still too close to call. What does seem clear is that whoever wins will likely hold a very slim majority in parliament, quite possibly leading to a continuation of some form of the current power sharing arrangement. This would mean that there would be no radical shift in Lebanon's regional orientation, but would likely continue to slow further reform efforts with the need to secure approval from all sides. March 14 leaders have consistently rejected this idea, however, leading to fears that if Hezbollah and its allies win a majority, they may have to govern alone and face the curtailment of essential international aid.

The Lebanese Political System

Lebanon's three top national positions – president, prime minister and speaker of parliament – are reserved for Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Muslims respectively. The deputy premiership and deputy speaker of parliament are reserved for the Greek Orthodox. The parliament and cabinet are apportioned along a 50-50 split between Muslims and Christians, with proportional representation of each sect within those two blocs. Other major political bodies are divided in roughly similar fashion. Though few bodies have the same rigorous quota system as the cabinet and parliament, all are expected to adhere to the same spirit of inclusivity.

The Electoral System

Voting takes place according to a majoritarian, first-past-the-post system. The candidate who receives the most votes, even if this is only a plurality, wins their seat. Candidates for parliamentary seats nominate themselves and can either run as independents or form coalitions or "lists" with other candidates in order to combine forces. Citizens vote on all the seats in their district, but candidates only compete within their respective sects. In a district with one Maronite seat and one Sunni seat, for example, the highest vote-getter among Maronite candidates and the highest vote-getter among Sunni candidates would win the seats, regardless of whether they were part of the same electoral list.

When parties form their lists, the inclusion of any particular candidate is weighed based on how many votes they are likely to bring in for the list. To be complete, each list needs to have the proper number of candidates of different sects for the district in which it is running. For instance, complete electoral lists in the second Beirut district need to have four candidates: one Shia, one Sunni, and two Armenian Orthodox. While citizens can pick and choose candidates rather than vote for an entire list, the lists have been powerful organizing tools for local chieftains and parties to dominate their districts.¹

¹ The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) has put together a highly detailed reader on the Lebanese electoral system here: http://www.ifes.org/publication/56c0cdaa64aa2cad85b3f5996e37cb4c/IFES_Lebanon_ESB_Paper030209.pdf



Figure 1 - Lebanon Voting Districts – Population and Parliamentary Seat Breakdown

Then and Now

The last parliamentary elections in 2005 were held with highly gerrymandered electoral districts. The previous electoral law divided Mt. Lebanon into four “constituencies,” Beirut was divided into three Sunni-majority districts; Christian districts in North Lebanon were grouped with a larger Sunni district; and, in South Lebanon, Sunni and Christian districts were absorbed into a Shia-majority electoral district.

This arrangement, originally designed to marginalize anti-Syrian voices during the era of Syrian rule in Lebanon, helped the pro-Western Sunni “Future” movement sweep elections in Beirut and North Lebanon. Meanwhile, Gen. Michel Aoun’s Change and Reform bloc swept predominantly Christian districts in Mt. Lebanon and Zahleh. The Future movement and Druze ally Walid Jumblatt agreed to a “Quadripartite Alliance” with pro-Syrian Shia parties Amal and Hezbollah in order to garner a few seats in South Lebanon in exchange for seats in Beirut and Baabda. Amal and Hezbollah carried the rest of the South Lebanon seats.

As part of the May 2008 Doha agreement, a new electoral law² was put in place that made each individual “caza” in Lebanon its own electoral district. The law also redrew Beirut’s three electoral districts, creating one majority-Sunni and one majority-Christian district, with a last district divided roughly evenly between Sunni, Shia, and Armenian Orthodox. The new districting has shaken old alliances, as party leaders have had to adjust to the new electoral math.

Political Parties

Most political parties are of one sect, due to the sectarian nature of apportioning of political power in Lebanon. Because the prescribed representation of each sect in parliament prevents any sect or sectarian party from winning a majority on its own, the parties must form alliances with each other to win a majority and form a government.

The two major alliances at present are the pro-Western March 14 coalition, named for the date of the massive 2005 demonstration that toppled the last Syrian installed government, and the March 8 coalition, named for the date of a prior 2005 demonstration in support of Syria organized by Hezbollah, following accusations of Syrian guilt in the assassination of former premier Rafik Hariri.

March 14 Parties

- March 14 Christian parties include the Lebanese Forces, headed by Samir Geagea; the Kataeb, or “Phalange” party, led by former president Amin Gemayel; and the Qornet Shehwan Gathering, which includes Minister of State Nassib Lahoud and MP Nayla Mouawad.
- Lebanon’s largest Sunni party is the “Future” Movement, led by MP Saad Hariri, the son of assassinated former premier Rafik Hariri. The Future Movement also includes a small number of Shia and Christian members.
- March 14 also includes a few smaller, non-sectarian parties like the Democratic Left, small Shia parties that have failed to gain parliamentary seats, and various independents.
- Most of the Druze community, a heterodox offshoot of Islam, belongs to the Progressive Socialist Party, headed by March 14 leader Walid Jumblatt. Jumblatt’s political allegiance has fluctuated since May 2008, however, especially as the elections have approached.

² <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=44328>

March 8 Parties

- Two major Shia parties make up the bulk of the March 8 coalition. They are Amal, headed by speaker of parliament Nabih Berri, and Hezbollah, headed by Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. Hezbollah commands the lion's share of Shia political support.
- Two small Druze parties – the Democratic Party, headed by Minister of Youth and Sports Talal Arslan, and the Arab Unification Movement, headed by former MP Wiam Wahhab – are allied with the March 8 coalition.
- March 8 includes several smaller non-sectarian parties like the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and the Lebanese Baath Party. A few small Christian parties, such as Sleiman Franjeh's Christian Marada Party are also included.

The Change and Reform Bloc

- The Change and Reform bloc, led by General Michel Aoun, claims to be separate from, but allied with, March 8. The bloc consists of Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, ; the "Popular Bloc," which is local to the city of Zahle in the Bekaa Valley, headed by Agriculture Minister Elias Skaff; the Armenian Tashnaq party and various independent Christian MPs in alliance with Aoun.

Independents

- MP Michel al-Murr and the Armenian Tashnaq party historically form a bloc in the Metn district, just north of Beirut. Allied with Change and Reform in 2005, Murr formally broke ranks in early 2009 to create an Independent bloc in declared support of President Michel Sleiman. Tashnaq has remained in electoral alliance with Aoun, though they continue to be close to Murr and the President.
- There are smaller Sunni blocs, mostly based in the northern city of Tripoli, gathered around prominent Sunni figures such as former premiers Najib Mikati, Omar Karami and Economy Minister Mohammed Safadi. Safadi's group, known as the Tripoli Bloc, has been allied with the March 14 Coalition. Mikati is said to be allying with the Future Movement heading into the elections as well.
- In several of the Christian districts of Mt. Lebanon, prominent candidates have formed partial lists independent of either the March 14 or Change and Reform parties. As these districts are today completely represented by Change and Reform, these independents have been more warmly welcomed by March 14 than by Aoun's supporters. Nevertheless, the independents represent something of a wildcard, politically.

Issues and Platforms

Most of the major parties have now officially launched their electoral campaigns, with many announcing comprehensive party platforms for the first time. Following are the highlights from the March 14 coalition³, the Free Patriotic Movement⁴, and Hezbollah⁵.

³ <http://lebelections.blogspot.com/2009/03/march-14-launch-electoral-platform.html>

⁴ http://elections09.tayyar.org/ar/CR_ELprogram.aspx (Arabic)

⁵ <http://english.hizbollah.tv/essaydetails.php?eid=8199&cid=214>

March 14	Free Patriotic Movement	Hezbollah
<p><i>Foreign Policy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normalization of inter-state relations with Syria • Support for the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative • Supporting the International Tribunal and all UN resolutions • Alignment with the West and the “moderate” Arab camp <p><i>Domestic Policy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No weapons outside State control • Strengthening State institutions • Rejection of any settling of Palestinians in Lebanon • Preserving and extending economic reforms embodied in the Paris III agreement • Resolve lingering issues from the civil war: those still displaced, Lebanese held in Syrian jails • Extending the vote to Lebanese abroad • Protecting women’s rights • Protecting the environment 	<p><i>Foreign Policy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The FPM has been coy about its foreign policy. Historically close to the West, they are now allied with Hezbollah and other anti-Western parties <p><i>Domestic Policy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combating corruption • Protecting Social Security • Strengthening internal security and building the national defense • Balanced development that helps all regions • Reforming the education system • Build the economy through fighting corruption and funding local industries • Protect the environment • Promote Lebanese culture • Extending the vote to Lebanese abroad • Promote objectivity in the media • Resolve civil war issues: the displaced, emigrants to Israel, Lebanese in Syrian jails, and owners of property in Beirut’s city center • Political cooperation with the Arab and Islamic world • Promote a secular system of law 	<p><i>Foreign Policy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oppose Israel and the U.S., support Palestinian Resistance • Want alliance with Syria and Iran <p><i>Domestic Policy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abolish political sectarianism • Favor proportional representation, lower voting age to 18 • Administrative reforms: Create Ministry of Planning, decentralize, modernization, defined system for recruiting staff • Economy: break Lebanon’s debt cycle, reduce deficit, soft loans for small businesses, greater agricultural industrialization and irrigation, subsidize exports • Education: more support for Lebanese University, raise teaching standards, compulsory and free primary education, more vocational/technical education • Civil society: favor freedom of expression and women’s rights, favor controlling images harming public decency or women’s honor, ban indiscriminate wire-tapping • Services: end pharmaceutical monopolies, expand health care, fund housing loans • Resources: protect water from Israel, develop water resources, modernize energy plants, move to environmental sources • Environment: develop scientific guidelines, improve waste management, re-forest Lebanon

The Present Situation

Having passed the April 7 deadline to announce candidacies, and now the April 23 deadline to drop out of campaigns, Lebanon is now in election season proper. Some battle lines have become clear and some are still up in the air. The Southern Districts of Zahrani, Marjeyoun-Hasbaya, Tyre, Nabatiyeh, and Bint Jbeil as well as Baalbeck-Hermel in the Bekaa Valley, comprising 28 parliamentary seats, are all expected to easily remain in the March 8 camp. Hezbollah faces a possible backlash in Baalbeck because of its support for the Army’s campaign against

several prominent drug baron clans there, but neither March 14 nor independent candidates are well positioned to exploit this vulnerability.

One interesting development to arise in recent days is the battle over Jezzine between allies Aoun and Berri. Berri's Amal party has traditionally controlled the southern Christian enclave due to gerrymandering, but this year Jezzine will vote for its own candidates for the first time. Unable to reach a compromise, Aoun and Berri are actually running lists against each other in that district. Though opposition leaders maintain that this is just "healthy competition," there is more pronounced hostility between their respective supporters at lower levels.

The districts of the Chouf, Aley, Akkar, Tripoli, Minieh-Dinniyeh, Bcharreh and Beirut's majority-Sunni third district, comprising 43 parliamentary seats, are expected to remain in the hands of March 14. There has been some softening in the coalition's ideological rigidity, however. Hariri's Future Movement has invited rivals Tammam Salam and Najib Mikati onto its lists in Beirut and Tripoli, respectively, and has allied with the Islamist *Jemaa Islamiyya* party in several districts as well. In Aley, Jumblatt and pro-Hezbollah rival Youth and Sports Minister Talal Arslan agreed to split the two Druze seats between themselves, which would mean March 14 would sacrifice at least one of those 43 seats. Jumblatt has so far waved aside a recently released video of Arslan meeting with Syrians and asking them to take unspecified steps against his long time rival Jumblatt, indicating that their *détente*, reached after the violence of May 2008, still holds.

The Christian heartland districts of Koura, Zghorta, Batroun, Jbeil, and Kesrouan, comprising 16 seats, are expected to see a shake-up this year but most seats will likely remain with Aoun's Change and Reform bloc. March 14 presently controls Koura, Zghorta and Batroun (8 seats), but the new electoral law has split these areas away from the larger Sunni city of Tripoli. With the Sunni vote no longer buttressing March 14's chances, these districts may now lean towards March 8/Change and Reform. Yet where Aoun's candidates swept Jbeil and Kesrouan in 2005, his weakened support base has given his rivals hope that they may pick up a couple seats there this time around. Negotiations are ongoing to coordinate efforts between an Independent and a March 14 list in Kesrouan. In Jbeil a rival independent list seen as tacitly allied with President Sleiman running against both the March 14 and Aoun lists may throw that race back to Change and Reform, however.

The districts of West Bekaa-Rachaya, Sidon, and Baabda, with 14 seats, still lean March 14, but the strength of March 8 and opposition Christians in Baabda and a deal between Jumblatt and Berri in West Bekaa could mean losing a couple seats. In Sidon, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora has announced his candidacy and the angry reactions from the opposition indicate that March 14 has a good chance of winning both of the city's parliamentary seats. Sidon had previously been divided equally between the camps by prior agreement. The four seats in Beirut's second district are expected to divide evenly between the camps by a similar agreement.

The major battle grounds on June 7 will be Beirut's majority-Christian first district, Zahleh in the Bekaa and the Metn, comprising 20 seats. Beirut I has traditionally been a stronghold for March 14 Christian parties, but the recent electoral redistricting has provided an opening for Aoun's forces to contest the elections there. In the Metn, heavyweight MP Michel al-Murr has broken with his erstwhile ally Aoun and, while technically independent, has sided with March 14 in 2009. However, Murr's traditional ally, the Armenian Tashnaq party, has remained with Aoun. March 14 should still pick up some seats in the district, but perhaps not as many as they had hoped. Continuing infighting between the Lebanese Forces and March 14-allied Armenians over the Armenian slot in Beirut's first district could further hurt March 14's showing in these crucial swing districts.

In Zahleh, March 14 Christians are depending on Aoun's diminished popularity to pick up seats and the number of candidates vying for spots on electoral lists – 69 at last count, for seven spots – demonstrates the intensity of the

electoral battle there. In fact, after a recent televised debate, March 14's Shia candidate in the district, Okab Sakr, accused his rival Hassan Yacoub of threatening to kill him.

Recent political developments have stirred the pot on both sides. In April, leaked statements by Walid Jumblatt strongly criticizing his Christian allies were seen as damaging March 14's chances in the crucial Christian districts. Meanwhile, a falling out between Berri and Aoun over the district of Jezzine has shaken opposition solidarity. More recently, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was widely seen as overstepping in a speech lauding the Hezbollah takeover of western Beirut in May of 2008 as a "glorious day." Nasrallah and Jumblatt have taken steps to back away from their controversial rhetoric, but how successful they have been may only be apparent on election day.

Looking ahead

There are three main possible scenarios for the upcoming election results. One, the ruling March 14 coalition could retain a slight majority. Two, the opposition March 8 and Change and Reform coalition could win a slight majority. Third, a slate of independent candidates, some running on March 14 tickets, could win enough seats to deny either side an actual majority.

A March 14 win would likely result in a continuation of the U.S.-Lebanon relationship that has existed since 2005, with the U.S. supporting the Lebanese government with economic and military aid. Domestically, it would be a repudiation of opposition attacks against the legitimacy of the March 14 majority. It would also represent a new mandate for the coalition to pursue its agenda. That mandate would still be tempered, however, by a nearly united Shia opposition bloc. Despite its numerical limits in parliament and the cabinet, Lebanon's tradition of inclusivity would make it dangerous to ignore out of hand the demands of most of an entire community. Hezbollah's possession of arms outside state control would also act as a continuing de facto veto on issues it sees as vital interests.

Alternatively, a March 8/Change and Reform win would tilt Lebanon away from the West and the U.S. and toward Syria and Iran – though most believe such a shift would be gradual. Hezbollah has also signaled that it does not want to rule directly, which Lebanese fear could lead to a replay of the West's boycott of the Hamas-led Palestinian government in 2006. Hezbollah and its allies have called for a continuation of the present power-sharing arrangement, where the minority holds veto power in the cabinet. March 14 leaders have consistently rejected this idea, and Hezbollah has recently been approaching international donors such as the IMF and the European Union in an effort to ensure continued financial support in the event of an opposition win⁶.

Should no one win an actual majority, much will depend on the role played by the "independent" candidates. If they caucus with March 14 then the coalition stands a good chance of maintaining its majority, albeit with both their mandate and political program tempered by the interests and politics of their new allies. There has been discussion of an independent bloc coalescing around the leadership of President Sleiman, which could also include Jumblatt's Berri's parties. Former premier Najib Mikati, presently running on the Future movement ticket in Tripoli, has called for just such a bloc. A cohesive independent bloc, balanced against two opposing and large minority blocs, would likely result in a broad national unity government.

In all of these cases, there is a great possibility of continuing some version of the present power-sharing arrangement. Without a sweeping victory for any one side, the losers could well expect some say in running the country's affairs. This would prevent Lebanon from veering sharply towards one regional political alignment or another, but the continued rule by consensus would also hamper the ability of the state to respond confidently to the many chronic problems Lebanon continues to suffer from.

⁶ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/13a0e5e0-4a56-11de-8e7e-00144feabdc0.html>