
ANALYSIS: The Results of the Lebanese Parliamentary Elections

Who won, why, and what next.

Lebanon conducted nationwide parliamentary elections on Sunday, June 7, resulting in a victory by the ruling March 14 coalition which won 71 parliamentary seats out of 128, an increase of one seat from their victory in 2005. Voter turnout was high, with 54.8% of registered voters participating nationwide. Despite isolated incidents in some districts that were quickly addressed by security forces, the elections proceeded smoothly and without violence. In addition, despite infractions regarding campaign rules and accusations of vote buying on both sides, all parties have graciously accepted the results.

What does it mean?

The new parliamentary balance of power is virtually identical to what it was in 2005, but with a key difference. The electoral districts used in 2005 were blatantly gerrymandered to marginalize Christian voters in North and South Lebanon and in Beirut. In 2005, March 14 won many Christian seats outright as a result of this gerrymandering; pro-March 14 Sunni votes overwhelmed Christian votes in Batroun, Zgharta and Koura in North Lebanon and in Beirut, while Druze votes outweighed Christians in Baabda, in Mount Lebanon. Opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun and his allies carried the other Christian-majority districts by huge margins, leading to the contention that Aoun was the true choice of Lebanese Christians.

The law used on Sunday broke these gerrymandered districts down into more representative units. Though far from perfect, the new law was agreed to by all parties. Sunday's elections proceeded smoothly, were administered by Interior Minister Ziad Baroud with exceptional impartiality, and saw record turnout. Thus, there is no longer any question about the legitimacy of the ruling March 14 coalition's majority.

What caused March 14 to win? The election results in the Shia, Sunni and Druze-majority districts were seen as foregone conclusions some time ago. Shia voters overwhelmingly support the opposition, while Sunni and Druze voters predominantly support the March 14 coalition. Christian voters are divided, and so these elections were decided in the Christian-majority "swing" districts.

After redistricting last year, March 14 Christians were no longer guaranteed victory in these districts. However, opinion polls over the past four years had shown a dramatic decrease in support for Aoun as well. The essential question was which of those would matter more. In the end they both mattered - March 14 lost Baabda and Zgharta - but Aoun's decline mattered more. March 14 Christians were able to hold on to their seats in Beirut, Batroun and Koura as well as gain enough seats in Zahleh and the Metn to make up for their losses elsewhere.

The reasons for Aoun's drop in popularity are several, but his 2006 alliance with Hezbollah and his recent rapprochement with Syria and Iran appear to be the biggest factors. These moves put him too far out of step with a majority of Lebanese Christian voters. A number of rhetorical missteps by Hezbollah in recent days as well as an eleventh hour push against Hezbollah by the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir may have contributed.

Why was this such a surprise? While it was immediately apparent how the redistricting had made March 14 Christian's jobs harder, the true extent of the decline in Aoun's support - and how this would be represented in the actual elections - was not clear until the votes were in. Additionally, opposition pollsters were more vocal and professed more certainty about their results showing an opposition victory, whereas March 14's internal polling, showing a slight win for their side, got much less play in the media. Lastly, a consistent focus in the media on the possible consequences of an opposition victory may have contributed to a sense that the opposition was going to win.

What's next?

Forming the government: After the celebrations and soul-searching comes the formation of the new government. Hezbollah has already called for continued "partnership" and will likely lobby for the opposition to retain a third of the cabinet seats, allowing them to veto key decisions. Hezbollah has also warned March 14 against making any moves against their arms or status as a "resistance." March 14 leaders have also called for a national unity government but have rejected the idea of the "blocking third." This will be the key battle over the next couple weeks. Due to their unexpectedly strong showing in the elections, however, March 14 will have a strong position from which to negotiate.

The United States: March 14's win reflects very well on America's role in the region, and will likely make the Obama administration's job a lot easier than it could have been. Lebanon is a small piece of the Middle East pie but, having sent both the Secretary of State and the Vice President to show support in recent weeks, it would have been an embarrassment to see America's allies lose anyway. It is unclear whether pro-Obama sentiment was a significant factor in these elections, though the connection is already being made in the press. March 14's victory certainly adds to the momentum for peace and the rejuvenation of America's standing in the region. It will be seen as an affirmation of the U.S. and "moderate" alliance and a setback for the Rejectionist line.

The Opposition: There is likely to be a good deal of soul-searching on the opposition side in the coming days as they digest their loss. Intra-coalition fissures may become more pronounced.

The most obvious sign of these potential problems is Jezzine. Aoun ran a list of candidates in the southern Christian-majority district of Jezzine against his ostensible ally, Speaker of Parliament and head of the Shia "Amal" party Nabih Berri. Jezzine had always been attached to large neighboring Shia-majority districts in elections and thus had always been represented by Berri's allies in parliament. This time around Jezzine was a district all by itself, and Aoun's list won defeated Berri's list with the help of Shia Hezbollah supporters.

Syria and Iran: Iran goes to the polls on June 12, and though the battle in that election are mostly about domestic politics it will be interesting to see whether the loss of their allies in the Lebanese election results are a factor as well.

Syria has been largely quiet, and analysts close to the regime are reporting significant disappointment over the results. Syrian media have accused Saudi Arabia of buying the election, but the Syrian government appears to be limiting itself to grumbling and instead looking toward further rapprochement with the U.S. for now.

The U.S.-Lebanon Dialogue Program is policy program at the Aspen Institute, in partnership with the Lebanon Renaissance Foundation, intended to elevate the debate on Lebanon within the policy establishment in Washington, DC.