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**The Parliamentary Elections in Lebanon:**  
**Hezbollah's Victory within the Political Status Quo**  
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On May 6, 2018, parliamentary elections were held in Lebanon for the first time since 2009. The results – which, in stark contrast to elections in other Arab countries, were held in a free and democratic atmosphere – show that the Shia bloc grew stronger, mainly at the expense of the political party of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri. Within the Shia bloc, the Amal party was apparently strengthened at the expense of Hezbollah. The elections were held after a year replete with crises, strikes, and demonstrations over many domestic issues. The low voter turnout reflected the sentiments of substantial segments of the population, mainly among the young generation, who are alienated by the traditional politics and the alleged corruption and dirty dealings in the Lebanese political arena. The voter turnout also reflected the growing troubles among the middle class, the country's faltering economy, the need to contend with approximately one million Syrian refugees in the country, and more.

The new election law, which was passed by the parliament in 2017, streamlines the electoral process and encourages independent candidates to try their luck, in the hope that the legislative amendments will enable new candidates to be elected. Even if the reform enabled better expression of “the voter's voice,” and new and independent candidates were indeed elected to the parliament, in general, both the election results and the traditional structure of the parliament (which is based on confessional distribution) will not spur change in the familiar inter-bloc political dynamics in Lebanon, and the status quo that characterized the country will apparently remain. At the same time, Hezbollah will presumably demand to increase the number of ministers affiliated with the Shia bloc in the new coalition government.

The process of forming the government will likely take some time, and it is still too early to assess whether the political stability that began in December 2016 will continue, after the two rival political blocs in Lebanon – the March 14 Alliance, a pro-Western and Saudi-backed bloc, and the March 8 Alliance, a Hezbollah-led bloc – struck a “deal” (after a prolonged deadlock) for the appointment of a Hezbollah ally, Maronite Christian Michel Aoun as President and the appointment of Sunni al-Hariri as Prime Minister. In any event, the prediction is that the next government will also be a unity government,

because the candidate tasked with forming the government must be a member of the Sunni community (as mandated by the parliamentary structure), most likely al-Hariri. Al-Hariri will need the support of Hezbollah and his allies in order to ensure that he wins the confidence of the parliament (which contains 128 seats, half allocated to the Christians and half to the Muslims). The candidate to head the government must win the confidence of the parliament by a two-thirds majority. The Shia bloc, together with its allies, the Christians, will reserve the veto power for itself in the parliament, since it will retain its power to block legislation in the next parliament. As such, the Shia bloc will be able to block any attempt to give a vote of confidence to a government that does not meet its conditions or to approve laws that are not in line with its interests.

The success of the Shia bloc in boosting its parliamentary power is expected to encourage Hezbollah to continue to consolidate its position as a key influential political force. The organization's conduct during the elections, including the considerable efforts that its leadership, headed by Hassan Nasrallah, invested in influencing voters, attests to the importance that Hezbollah attributes to public support. The organization is aware of the political split inside Lebanon and the public's growing discontent due to the government's failure to bring about any substantive improvement in the economy, which in turn would lead to real improvement in the quality of life. The Hezbollah campaign slogan was "We will construct and we will protect," which attests to the importance that Hezbollah attributes to its image as an organization that not only defends the country through its arsenal of weapons, but also as an organization that strives to receive recognition as a key and responsible element in Lebanese society that intends to take care of its citizens. Hezbollah was also commended for the restraint that it demonstrated in response to the Saudi-initiated "resignation" crisis of al-Hariri and its acceptance of al-Hariri upon his return to Lebanon.

Hezbollah is aware of the intensifying debate in Lebanon over its involvement in the civil war in Syria and the implications for Lebanon. Yet while the public's discontent on this matter did not diminish the overall power of the Shia bloc, the organization will likely realize that this was one of the reasons for some voters shifting their support to the Shiite party Amal, and for the loss of its two seats in Baalbek, the district from which most of the combatants were sent to Syria. Joining this was the local population's resentment that the organization did not bother to take care of its needs. Notable in this context are the complaints about the Syrian refugees, mainly those who settled in the Lebanon Valley, since Hezbollah had promised to take action to return them to Syria.

All of the political actors in the Lebanese arena now have an interest to use the elections to strengthen the stability in the country and attempt to overcome the economic problems, including with a solution to the demands for comprehensive economic reforms voiced by

investors in the international arena. Nevertheless, the process of forming the government is expected to reignite the power battles between the al-Hariri camp and the Hezbollah camp. In this context, it is likely that Hezbollah will profit from the weakening of al-Hariri's party, but apparently, also from the weakening of President Aoun, whose dependence on Hezbollah will only increase.

The key objective of the Shia bloc after the elections, particularly Hezbollah, will be to boost its legitimacy. Hezbollah will exploit the public discontent with al-Hariri's performance (expressed by the low voter turnout) and the gains of the Shia bloc in order to emphasize the organization's key role and the need to advance its agenda in the government more forcefully. However, the sense is that Hezbollah will exercise caution in its efforts to anchor its image as a leading power in Lebanon. Secretary-General Nasrallah, who immediately after the elections rushed to boast that the considerable support that the Shia bloc received is proof of its "political and moral victory," can be expected to use this as leverage to champion past achievements, while investing efforts in expanding them.

Hezbollah's policy in recent years, namely, removing Lebanon to the extent possible from the equation of direct confrontation with Israel as a central component in its efforts to win internal legitimacy (also since Israel directly attacked assets of Hezbollah and Iran in Syria), can be expected to be put to the test soon, if Iran decides to pressure Hezbollah to expand its attacks against Israel from Lebanese territory. This would occur if the confrontation between Israel and Iran deteriorates into a wider scale campaign, and particularly if Iran has no other available operative options for retaliating against the Israeli attacks.

Even after the elections, Hezbollah will likely have no interest in causing any deterioration between Lebanon and Israel and jeopardizing its achievements in the political arena. Moreover, the confidence that the Shia bloc received could strengthen the trend of restraint and impose further responsibility on Hezbollah by virtue of its positioning as a senior partner in a future government. It appears that this development will make it easier for Israel to hold the Lebanese government responsible for any hostile actions from within its territory, and to send deterrent threats to Lebanon.

It appears that Hezbollah will continue to give priority to maintaining stability and will thus prefer to continue to prevent, to the extent possible, any spillover of the Syrian civil war into Lebanon, including the intensifying confrontation between Israel and Iran. However, over time, a persistent Israeli campaign against Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, which will not be part of a coordinated regional effort, and without Russia growing accustomed to it, and mainly if it spills over into Lebanon – where Hezbollah is obligated

to take action as the defender of Lebanon and also to sustain the balance of deterrence opposite Israel – is liable to cause an escalation and push Hezbollah, against its will, into battle in Lebanon.