

The Upcoming Elections in Lebanon: Dubious Possibilities for Change

Orna Mizrahi and Orit Perlov | No. 1598 | May 12, 2022

Lebanon is preparing to hold elections on May 15 for parliament, which is supposed to elect the country's president this coming October. These are the first elections in Lebanon since the outbreak of the large-scale public protests in October 2019 and the state's collapse due to the severe economic crisis. These events have led to political changes, chiefly the participation of many new independent parties, the breakup of the Sunni camp, and the weakening of Hezbollah's partners in the March 8 camp, especially the leading Christian party (the Free Patriotic Movement). However, mainly due to Lebanon's electoral system, it is highly doubtful that the results of the elections will fulfill the public's expectations, create real change in the traditional balance of power, and enable the establishment of a new leadership able to advance the reforms necessary for Lebanon's reconstruction. At the same time, it is expected that Hezbollah will continue its aggressive campaign to attempt to deter candidates from among its opponents, using all means at its disposal, in order to strengthen its influence and prevent any change that would harm its interests and its independent military standing.

In the internal Lebanese system, preparations for the upcoming elections to the Lebanese parliament are evident. The elections are scheduled for May 15, 2022 (voting by Lebanese abroad already took place on May 6 and 8, and a high voter turnout was reported), but even at this late stage there are doubts whether they will indeed be held as scheduled. All the political forces in the Lebanese system attach special importance to these elections, the first since the outbreak of the popular uprising in the country (October 17, 2019) and the rapid deterioration over the past three years to the point of the state's collapse: the state is weathering the worst economic crisis in its history, along with the paralysis of the political system. These are compounded by the severe consequences of the horrific explosion at the Beirut Port in August 2020. The election campaign is underway in the shadow of the intense economic crisis, to the point that there is a concern that on election day there might be a shortage of electricity that could disrupt the elections.

Beyond the hope that they will lead to a certain improvement in the situation, the elections are also important given that the new parliament will elect the country's president in elections set for this coming October. The dramatic developments during the past three years have led to a dramatic rise in the number of lists and the number of candidates in the current elections compared to the 2018 elections. Some 1043 candidates from 103 lists (compared to 77 lists in 2018) are running for 128 seats in the Lebanese parliament. However, among the Lebanese public there is ambivalence regarding the elections: some see them as decisive and fateful for the country's future, yet despite these high expectations, the majority are pessimistic regarding the possibility that they will indeed lead to real change in the leadership and in Lebanon's situation. These are feelings that could lead to low voter turnout (especially in the Sunni camp). Consequently, the leaderships of all the major parties are working to urge voters to participate in the elections.

The collapse of the Lebanese economy, which has pushed the country back generations and caused 75 percent of the population to live under the poverty line, has also caused changes in the internal political system compared to previous elections. The main changes are:

- a. A decline in the Christian population's support for the leading Christian party, the Free Patriotic Movement, which is headed by the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun, Gebran Bassil, who is hated by many in Lebanon. In polls conducted so far it appears that there has been a significant decline in support for this party, which is a partner of the two Shiite parties in the March 8 movement, Hezbollah and Amal, and its heads are seen as responsible for Lebanon's deterioration. Bassil aspires to be elected president, but it seems that his chances are slim given his negative public image as a symbol of corruption and following the imposition of American sanctions on him (November 2020). He even needs heavy security in the places he visits as part of the election campaign due to the violence provoked by his presence on the part of his opponents. Hezbollah is very troubled by the drop in support for its Christian partner and especially by the expected parallel increase in support for candidates

from the Lebanese Forces party of its bitter rival, Samir Geagea; in its propaganda campaign, Hezbollah is attempting to incriminate Geagea as a collaborator with Israel. In addition, there are signs of a decline in the popularity of the Shiite leader of Amal, Nabih Berri, who has served in his position for 30 years and is seen as part of the corrupt leadership.

- b. The weakening of the camp opposed to Hezbollah – the March 14 camp – especially due to the breakup of the Sunni camp following Saad Hariri's departure, along with his Future Movement party, which for the first time since 1992 is not participating in the elections and is even calling on its Sunni supporters not to participate in them. Other Sunni leaders who belong to the old ruling elite (including former prime ministers) have likewise abandoned the campaign and a leadership vacuum has resulted among the Sunnis. Nevertheless, there has been an increase in the number of Sunni candidates running on other/independent lists: in the current elections there are 311 Sunni candidates compared to 304 in the 2018 elections. In the past few weeks Saudi Arabia has rallied to help this camp by recruiting support for Sunni candidates that it favors and preventing the election of candidates that Hezbollah is running on its behalf (in early April, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Yemen announced the return of their ambassadors to Lebanon, even though the disputes that led to the crisis in their relations with Lebanon have not fully been resolved). In the background, there is Saudi concern of a serious defeat of this camp, the strengthening of Hezbollah, and the deepening of Iran's foothold in Lebanon. But it seems that Saudi Arabia's enlistment at such a late stage portends very limited success in influencing the balance of power in favor of the camp that opposes Hezbollah and Iran.
- c. The participation of a long series of new parties in the elections, most of which crystallized out of civil society following the "October Revolution" – the protests that broke out in October 2019. These are dozens of independent national parties lacking sectoral affiliation. Despite the shared agenda of at least some of them, which mainly includes a desire to change the leadership and ensure Lebanon's

sovereignty, an independent judicial system, and economic and political reforms, there are considerable divisions among these parties and there is no guarantee that they will succeed in bringing about the election of their candidates to parliament. It is also doubtful that they will succeed in creating a bloc that can compete with the traditional parties, which are built on an ethnic basis.

- d. The rise in the number of Lebanese voters from the diaspora outside of Lebanon. About 225,000 voters from abroad registered for these elections – almost three times the number in the elections held in 2018 (90,000). While there have been reports of high voter turnout by Lebanese emigrants (around 60 percent), their voting patterns are not clear, although it is believed that they mainly belong to the camp that opposes Hezbollah. However, there is no certainty that they will succeed in creating any change due to the distribution of their votes among the various voting districts, according to their past place of residence in Lebanon.

In contrast, the Shiite community has remained united, and overall, the support for Hezbollah among Shiites stands in place, especially on the part of those who enjoy the socioeconomic support network that the organization supplies – this despite the increase in criticism of the organization, including within the Shiite camp. Hezbollah has fully mobilized recently toward the upcoming elections, in an effort to retain and even strengthen its camp in parliament. It is also important to Nasrallah not to be seen as the one torpedoing the legal process, and so he has repeatedly announced in public that his movement supports holding the elections as scheduled, while leaving an escape route for himself in saying that with Allah's help the elections will take place on time, unless a severe development, such as war, prevents them. The organization's main concern is the strengthening of opponents to "the resistance," who are calling for the disarming of the militia. Hezbollah is also worried about the possibility that independent Shiite candidates that oppose it will be elected, and it is working vigorously to cause them to withdraw their candidacy, by means of threats and disturbing their election rallies, and it does not shy away from using violence. In one of the incidents weapons were used, requiring

the army's intervention. Consequently, at least three independent Shiite candidates withdrew their candidacy.

On the eve of the election, much remains unknown. At this stage it is difficult to assess whether the changes in the political system will lead to significant change to the familiar set of forces among the traditional camps, what the impact of the new non-sectoral parties will be, and whether a change will occur in Hezbollah's standing. Among the Lebanese public, as well as among researchers and commentators, there is much skepticism regarding the possibility that the elections will lead to real change in Lebanon's situation. The doubts stem in part from the Lebanese election law, which limits any possibility for change. The law is based on a confessional system that combines regional elections (Lebanon is divided into 15 electoral regions) for the distribution of the 128 seats of parliament according to an ethnic breakdown (each region is assigned a set number of seats for each community, ostensibly in accordance with the number of citizens from each community in the district), and the 128 seats of parliament are divided equally between Christians (even though their portion of the population has shrunk in recent decades) and Muslims (Shiites, Sunnis, and Druze).

Lebanon's difficulty in forming a government that is acceptable to all the power centers and will be to advance reforms toward reconstruction and economic recovery is well known. Given the slim prospects, therefore, that the election results will produce a new leadership and/or dynamic, the most likely scenario of "the day after" is a continuation of the political paralysis and lack of progress toward resolving Lebanon's problems. As in recent years, this dead end will also be affected by Hezbollah's efforts given the new challenges facing it: maintaining its dominant standing by any means and preventing any change that could undermine the status quo that is favorable toward it – which enables it to influence decisions in the country without taking responsibility for their results and ensures its military, political, and economic independence.