The Lebanese Parliamentary Elections: Back to the Future?

Benedetta Berti

In the aftermath of the June 7 Lebanese parliamentary elections, the political victory of the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition has been interpreted as a sign of concrete and definitive change, marking the peak of Lebanon's democratization process. Some analysts, however, have criticized the enthusiastic undertone of this approach, arguing that the electoral results do not constitute a reliable indicator of change and that "other forces" – such as Hizbollah – still determine the political course of the country.

Both these perspectives seem to fall short of grasping the Lebanese political system as well as the power dynamics within the country. At the same time, both approaches do represent reality, albeit partially: the past elections indeed constituted a significant political development and changed somewhat the internal balance of power. At the same time, the sectarian dynamics of the political system and the fragmented composition of Lebanese society drastically limit the elected government's political maneuverability and the concrete possibilities for political change.

The Legacy of Taif and the 2009 Elections: Connecting the Dots

The Lebanese political system is based upon the principle of political sectarianism, whereby each ethnic-religious community within Lebanon is assigned a number of fixed seats. This principle, established by the 1943 National Pact,[1] was then ratified de facto by the Taif Accord,[2] the political platform that allowed Lebanon to transition out of the bloody civil war that raged from 1975 to 1990. Although the 1989 Taif Accord

Benedetta Berti, Neubauer research fellow at INSS

called for the abolition of political sectarianism, in practice it preserved the confessional basis of the political system, limiting itself to altering the quotas assigned to each community and allocating the same number of seats to Christian and Muslim sectors of the population.

As such, the Accord had the effect of further entrenching preexisting sectarian dynamics – a trend that was then preserved during the years of Syrian "tutelage." For example, the 2000 and 2005 electoral reforms passed under direct Syrian influence focused primarily on restructuring the boundaries of the electoral districts engaging in systematic gerrymandering in order to maximize the chances of pro-Syrian candidates to be elected in each district.[3] Moreover, in those years, the absence of a nation-building project and of a nation-based – instead of a community-based – notion of politics only enhanced the weakness of the national political system and the government's effectiveness and legitimacy.

In order to address these practical and logistical fallacies, the Lebanese parliament charged the National Commission for a New Electoral Law, led by Fouad Boutros, to restructure the existing law. The Boutros Commission,[4] created in August 2005, presented the Lebanese parliament with the Electoral Draft Law in May 2006.[5] The main Lebanese political parties then agreed to discuss this draft as part of the commitments undertaken in the context of the May 2008 Doha negotiations,[6] and finally approved a modified version on September 29, 2008. The new law contains important improvements that addressed some of the previous shortcomings in the Lebanese electoral system.

The key to understanding the victory of the March 14 coalition lies in the ongoing split of the Christian vote, and in the underperformance of Michel Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement.

Among these improvements, the most significant change was the restructuring of the Syrian-based demarcation of the electoral districts, as agreed at the Doha conference. Accordingly, the new law replaced the previous 14 electoral districts with 26 smaller districts, which largely coincide with the existing *qadas* (administrative districts).[7] The new electoral system, based on an amended version of the 1960 electoral law, produced more proportional results than the Syrian-based one, as it prevented occurrences of one political group

winning with a narrow majority all the seats in a large electoral district, thus leaving the other groups underrepresented.[8] Moreover, the new law also established 13 "mono-confessional," or largely homogenous electoral districts.[9] This provision was adopted to ensure that "Christian seats" would be elected by a Christian-majority electorate, but it also contributed to further strengthening sectarian dynamics.[10]

However, despite the improvements in the demarcation of electoral districts, the new electoral law nonetheless suffers from a series of shortcomings. First and foremost, the 2009 law failed to adopt the most important recommendation of the Boutros Commission, namely to introduce the principle of proportional representation into the Lebanese electoral system. Originally, the Boutros Commission proposed electing the 128 MPs through a mixed system, with 77 deputies selected according to the current majoritarian system and 51 representatives with a proportional system.[11] This reform, which mixed *qada*-based votes and *mohafaza* (regional)-based votes, aimed to guarantee the "principle of effective representation" mentioned in the Taif Accord. The proposed reforms would also have partially corrected the anomaly of the Lebanese system whereby Christian representatives needed far fewer votes than Shiites in order to be elected, since the Shia population, unlike the Christians, has been increasing exponentially in recent decades, while the number of seats allocated to the community has remained unchanged.

The Electoral Results: Reading between the Lines

The newly approved electoral law failed to address these issues and left in place the preexisting majoritarian block vote system. This arrangement guarantees each voter the right to cast as many votes as the number of seats allocated in the voter's electoral district. The seats are then awarded to the candidates with the highest number of electoral preferences within their own confessional group.[12]

As a result of this failure to undertake strong electoral reforms, the 2009 electoral results still presented a discrepancy between the number of votes obtained by each party and the corresponding seats allocated. Accordingly, the incumbent coalition, led by Saad Hariri's Future Movement, won 71 of the 128 available seats, but obtained only roughly 45 percent of the total electoral votes; while the Hizbollah-led

March 8 coalition gained 57 seats, receiving, however, the remaining 55 percent of votes.[13] These results, albeit skewed by the nature of the electoral system, did not represent a dramatic departure from the 2005 electoral results. More specifically, both the Hizbollah-Amal bloc and the Future Movement obtained substantially similar results during the previous electoral round. This result is hardly surprising given the power distribution within Lebanon, as both the Hariri movement and the Hizbollah-Amal bloc are the "pre-assigned" recipients of the vast majority of the Sunni and Shia votes, respectively. In this sense, the key to understanding the victory of the March 14 coalition lies in the ongoing split of the Christian vote, and in the underperformance of Michel Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM).

With the Sunni and Shia votes split between the March 14 and the March 8 coalition, the opposition's political calculations relied on the electoral triumph of the FPM, which promised to win 70 percent of the Christian votes.[14] General Aoun, a former military commander and popular anti-Syrian politician, returned to Lebanon in 2005 to contest the first elections that took place following the Syrian withdrawal. On that occasion Aoun won 21 seats in the parliament and instantly became one of the key leaders of the Christian community. Despite sharing an anti-Syrian agenda with the March 14 coalition, the FPM did not form an alliance with Hariri's bloc after clashing on several points, including Aoun's request to obtain five cabinet seats for his Change and Reform Movement – a demand that was promptly rejected by the March 14 camp. As a result, General Aoun gradually drifted toward the Hizbollah-Amal bloc and in February 2006, the FPM signed a memorandum of understanding with Hizbollah, marking the beginning of a highly improbable political alliance between two parties with widely different political agendas and constituencies.[15] In 2009, the FPM ran under the umbrella of the March 8-led opposition forces, and concluded its electoral race with 27 seats. This constituted an important electoral result that confirmed Aoun's political relevance, but it also fell short of winning the large majority of the 64 Christian seats. Consequently, the Christian leader of the Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea, head of one the main Christian parties within the March 14 coalition, observed: "Following these elections, no one can claim

he represents the Christians. I hope you look at the figures in all the regions. None of us represents the Christian but together we do."[16]

Many commentators, especially within the Western media, linked the victory of the March 14 forces and the shift within the Christian electorate to the so-called "Obama effect," affirming that the new US foreign policy strategy for the Middle East boosted the legitimacy of the US-allied March 14 coalition. Although the new US administration likely had a certain degree of positive impact upon the credibility of the Hariri-allied parties, it seems that the real causes behind the repositioning of a slice of the Christian voters lie within domestic politics. Specifically, several factors contributed to the underperformance of General Aoun's Change and Reform movement. Perhaps chief among them is the growing unease among parts of the Christian community vis-à-vis Hizbollah, especially following the armed clashes in Beirut in May 2008, when the Shia organization turned its own weapons against other sectors of the Lebanese society. Such fears intensified after Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir voiced his concern about unspecified threats to Lebanon's Arab identity, which many read as a cautionary warning against the rise of Hizbollah and the March 8 coalition.

March 14's Second Chance: The Challenges Ahead

The nature of the Lebanese political system and the principles of confessional politics shed light on the preexisting constraints that the winning March 14 coalition must face in implementing its political agenda.

First, the government's room for political maneuver is drastically reduced by the ongoing political tension existing within Lebanese society and the need to avoid another round of violent confrontations among different political streams. This situation is partially a consequence of the existing sectarian system. Indeed, the first and most serious limitation of Lebanese confessional politics is that it both reproduces and enhances societal divisions and conflict dynamics. The Lebanese social structure is already highly fragmented, and is prone to conflict along sectarian lines. By reproducing and institutionalizing existing sectarian divisions, the political system tends to become another arena for sectarian conflicts to develop and play out, instead of a means to address and resolve such conflicts based on a national reconciliation

platform. A second consequence of replicating existing societal sectarian dynamics within the political system is that any political dispute is automatically treated as a sectarian one, dangerously blurring and merging the two spheres. In this sense the system is self-reinforcing, and any elected government's first concern will inevitably be to prevent the occurrence of sectarian violence, even at the price of prolonged political stagnation. This situation is worsened further by the profound political rift between the March 8 and the March 14 coalitions. Although the parties agreed on a truce and formed a temporary unity government in May 2008, the core differences among the coalitions persisted and involved issues such as the determination of Lebanon's identity and foreign alliances; the creation of a national defense strategy and the disarmament of all militias; the status of the resistance and Hizbollah's weapons; and the growing Sunni-Shia divide within the country.

Under these tense political circumstances, the March 14 bloc's actual capacity to implement substantial reforms will at best be slowed by the need to prevent further internal violence. Moreover, the electoral results do not grant the winning bloc the popular legitimacy and political power to reverse fully current national political trends. Hizbollah deputy secretary general Na'im Qasim acknowledged this in an interview with al-Jazeera: "Neither team – regardless of whether the opposition or the pro-government team wins – can change today's political course….The other side is the side that is ruling the country now. It has a parliamentary majority. Over the past four years, it has been trying to create a political track that is different from the current track, which underscores the importance of the resistance and Lebanon's independence away from trusteeship. Has it managed to do anything?"[17]

A first answer to Qasim's question about the political will and capacity of the newly elected March 14 coalition may be provided by the majority's approach towards an executive cabinet. In forming the new cabinet, the newly elected prime minister – likely Sa'ad Hariri – will presumably rely on a national reconciliation and unity model, trying to bring the March 8 coalition on board. However, this endeavor might be compromised by the opposition's request to be awarded veto power in the new cabinet. The Lebanese constitution establishes that any policy deemed of "national interest" cannot be approved without

a two-thirds majority of the cabinet. Accordingly, the opposition aims at maintaining the arrangement establishment by the Doha Agreement, which awarded the March 8 bloc 11 of the 30 cabinet seats.[18] Although Hizbollah's leaders have not stated their official position vis-à-vis the veto question, other March 8 members, including Marada Movement leader MP Sleiman Franjieh and FPM leader General Aoun, have voiced their interest in obtaining the "blocking third" in the cabinet, and threatened to refuse to join the government if not granted their request.[19] If the opposition were to follow up on this threat, Lebanon could be drawn back into political paralysis – a situation that would reproduce the opposition's longstanding boycott that started in November 2006 and came to an end with the Doha Agreement, after the armed confrontation in May 2008.

On the other hand, March 14 members have been adamant in explaining why awarding the opposition veto power would be equally paralyzing to the political system. Comments made by former president Amin Gemayel[20] and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea[21] echoed current PM Fouad Siniora's view on the blocking third: "This experience was not successful and everyone must bear this in mind."[22] Under these conditions, March 14 forces could decide to refuse to grant the March 8 bloc veto power, and they could rely on President Suleiman, asking him to act as guarantor within the cabinet. This arrangement might be accepted by the opposition, since a new round of protests and boycott could cost the March 8 coalition too much political capital. This formula could finally provide the March 14 coalition with enough political strength to implement its political agenda, at least partially.

> The first and most serious limitation of Lebanese confessional politics is that it both reproduces and enhances societal divisions and conflict dynamics.

However, the litmus test of this arrangement or any other political formula adopted to create the new executive will be the government's capacity to deal with some of the main outstanding political issues unaddressed during the March 14 camp's first term, including the issue of Hizbollah's weapons. On this front, it seems that the March 14 forces will have to recognize the existing power dynamics within the country, and avoid any direct confrontation with Hizbollah regarding its weapons. In fact, while the opposition may be

co-opted into relinquishing its veto power pending strong involvement by President Suleiman, the chances for compromise will likely end if the government attempts to "attack" Hizbollah's military power. This point was made clear by Hizbollah's violent reaction in May 2008 to the Siniora cabinet's attempts to remove Hizbollah sympathizer Wafic Shkeir from his post as security chief at the Hariri International Airport, and to shut down the organization's communications network. Similarly, in the aftermath of the elections, Hizbollah's parliamentary leader Mohammed Raad warned that a political crisis would explode if the government insisted on focusing on Hizbollah's weapons.[23] On the same issue, Na'im Qasim has also stated: "These weapons are linked to the resistance and the resistance is linked to dialogue. Dialogue requires agreement among the parties. Accordingly, this issue is not linked to the results of parliamentary elections."[24]

Lebanon's Political Future: A Cup Half Full?

The newly elected government thus faces considerable internal pressure that significantly limits its ability to implement its political platform fully. A delicate internal sectarian balance and a significant level of popular support and political power awarded to the opposition forces all contribute to slowing down the March 14 reformist agenda, and will likely prevent the government from addressing core issues like the status of Hizbollah's weapons. This situation, therefore, questions those analyses interpreting the election of the March 14 coalition as a watershed event in Lebanese politics, marking the peak of its democratization process. But does it constitute sufficient proof for those commentators who have clamed that nothing has changed within the internal power balance and political system? Not likely.

Despite all the existing obstacles, the March 14 coalition has gained another, largely unexpected, political victory and now finds itself in a more favorable position to advance its political agenda. The opposition forces' prolonged boycott and violent protests had a significant political impact on their legitimacy, and in the future, March 8 forces could be less adamant in relying on these tools – provided the government does not cross Hizbollah's weapons red line. As a result, the ruling parties may find themselves with more leeway than during their previous mandate.

More importantly, March 14's electoral victory had the core result of strengthening both the Arab identity of Lebanon as well as its preexisting regional and international alliances. Furthermore, the electoral victory has averted or at least stalled the gradual shifting of Lebanon towards the Iranian-Syrian axis, a trend that would have been accelerated exponentially by the victory of the March 8 forces.

In his pre-electoral campaign, Hizbollah's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah spoke to the larger geo-political significance of the elections by proposing, in the case of victory, to start acquiring weapons from Syria and Iran.[25] More specifically, he stated: "Who is ready to arm the Lebanese Army? Vote for the opposition and then I will tell you who. For instance, did the Lebanese Government ask for weapons, missiles, or military capabilities from our brothers in Syria, and Syria said no? No…Iran wants to include Lebanon in the Syrian-Iranian axis by arming the army."[26] It is highly significant, both domestically as well as internationally, that Lebanon rejected the Iranian-armament option and chose to maintain its bonds with the moderate Arab regimes and with the West.

From an Israeli perspective, the fact that Lebanon's announced shift towards the Iranian-Syrian axis did not occur constitutes a significant and positive regional development. At the same time, however, it seems highly unrealistic to expect that the victory of the March 14 coalition will initiate a rapprochement between the two countries, or even ease the security concerns over Hizbollah's weapons. The newly elected government lacks both the political capacity and the popular support to either initiate or sustain a détente with Israel. Only three years have passed from the last armed confrontation between Israel and the Hizbollah forces on Lebanese soil, and a Lebanese-Israeli reconciliation process seems both unrealistic and politically unfeasible, especially without the involvement of Damascus. Nevertheless, the Lebanese government's core interest in domestic stability implies that it will be highly committed to the status quo and will rebuff attempts

March 14's electoral victory had the core result of strengthening both the Arab identity of Lebanon as well as its preexisting regional and international alliances. Furthermore, the electoral victory has averted or at least stalled the gradual shifting of Lebanon towards the Iranian-Syrian axis.

to reignite an armed confrontation with Israel. Similarly, Israel should have a vested interest in refraining from actions that would delegitimize the elected government and boost the support and legitimacy of the opposition forces.

In conclusion, the latest parliamentary elections must be understood as an important political development for the Lebanese state and its role within the international community, but it is too early to assess whether this victory will be enough to consolidate the Cedar Revolution and continue the push towards a normalization of the Lebanese political system.

Notes

1 The National Pact of 1943 laid the basis for the current multi-confessional/sectarian political system and it assigned a fixed quota of seats in the Chamber of Deputies to the main sectarian groups present in Lebanon. See William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 2nd edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

2 Republic of Lebanon, Council of Ministers Secretariat-General, "The National Commission on Electoral Law (NCEL)," August 9, 2005. Available from: http://www.lebanon- elections.org/English/index.php?page=decision.

3 Doreen Khoury, "Lebanon's Election Law: A Cup Half Full," *Daily Star*, October 10, 2008.

4 Republic of Lebanon, Council of Ministers Secretariat-General, "The National Commission on Electoral Law (NCEL)."

5 National Commission on the Parliamentary Electoral Law, "Parliamentary Electoral Draft Law," May 31, 2006. Available from: http://www.elections-lebanon.org/elections/docs_2_1_1_e.aspx?lg=en.

6 The Doha negotiations and agreement are the culmination of the political crisis that began in December 2006 between the ruling coalition and the Hizbollah-led opposition over the failure to create a national unity government between the majority coalition – the March 14 Alliance – and the opposition parties. This lack of agreement led to the resignation of the opposition ministries from PM Fouad Siniora's cabinet in November 2006 and to a longstanding boycott, causing the de facto paralysis of the Lebanese government and deeply impairing its decision making process. The crisis escalated from peaceful protests to armed confrontation in May 2008, after the March 14 government attempted to remove Hizbollah sympathizer Wafic Shkeir from his post of security chief at the Hariri International Airport, and to shut down the organization's communications network. Hizbollah read these acts as a declaration of war and on May 7, 2008 the organization sent its gunmen to seize parts of West Beirut – the Sunni area

where most supporters of Rafiq Hariri's Future Movement are located. The seizure of Beirut led to a series of bloody engagements between the different sectarian groups, leading to the worst episodes of violence since the civil war. ("Hezbollah Militants Take over West Beirut, "CNN, May 9, 2008 (available from: http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/05/09/beirut.violence/index.html). To solve the conflict, the parties agreed to meet in Doha (Qatar) from May 16 to May 21, 2008, and subsequently consented to forming a unity government, reforming the electoral law, initiating a national reconciliation process, and denouncing the use of force to solve internal political conflicts. See "The Doha Agreement," *Now Lebanon,* May 21, 2008. Available from: http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=44023&MID=115&PID=2.

7 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), "The Lebanese Electoral System," March 2009, http://www.scribd.com/doc/14792510/Lebanese-Electoral-System.

8 "Assessment of the Election Framework," *Democracy Reporting International and Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections*, December 2008.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 National Commission on the Parliamentary Electoral Law, "Parliamentary Electoral Draft Law."

12 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), "The Lebanese Electoral System," March 2009.

13 Michael Slackman, "U.S.-Backed Alliance Wins in Lebanon," *New York Times,* June 7, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/08/world/middleeast/08lebanon.html?_r=1; "March 14 bloc wins Lebanon election," al-Jazeera, June 8, 2009, http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/06/20096813424442589.html,
Now Lebanon, http://nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=97943; Hussein Assi, "'Popular Majority' Goes to… Opposition with 55% of Votes," al-Manar, *June 9, 2009*, http://almanar.com.lb/NewsSite/NewsDetails.aspx?id=89269&language=en.

14 "Aoun: Opposition did not Win Majority but still has Popular One," Tayyar, June 11, 2009, http://www.*tayyar*.org/*Tayyar*.

15 David Schenker, "Lebanon Goes to the Polls: Last Minute Surprises and Long-term Implications," June 3, 2009, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3063.

16 "Geagea after Meeting with Sisson: Blocking Third will Paralyze Country," March 14.com, June 9, 2009, http://www.14march.org/news-details.php?nid=MTQyMTg2.

17 Na'im Qasim interview with Ghassan Bin-Jiddu, al Jazeera, May 28, 2009.

18 "PM Al-Sanyurah after Cairo Meeting: Third Blocking Experience Failed," Lebanese National News Agency, June 14, 2009, http://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/phpfolder/loadpage_ar.php?page=14-06-2009/JOU81.html.

19 "Siniora Rules Out Veto Power for Opposition in Next Cabinet," *Daily Star,* June 15, 2009, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=103054; "Aoun: Opposition did not Win Majority," Tayyar.

20 Former president Amin Gemayel said: "If the opposition prefers not to participate, that's its right. We offer participation, but not obstruction. Participation does not mean veto power," Tom Perry, "Interview: Gemayel rules out veto for Hezbollah and allies," Reuters, June 15, 2009, http://www.reuters.com/article/middleeastCrisis/idUSLF335492.

21 "Giving the opposition the power to veto would freeze the country and it would compromise the institutions," Rosanna BouMonsef, al-Nahar, June 6, 2009, http://al-akhbar.com/ar/node/139985.

22 "PM al-Sanyurah after Cairo Meeting," Lebanese National News Agency.

23 David Schenker, "Now Comes the Hard Part," *Weekly Standard*, June 22, 2009. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1293.

24 Na'im Qasim interview with Ghassan Bin-Jiddu, al-Jazeera, May 28, 2009.

25 "Nasrallah's Promise to Equip Army from Iran Affects Entity," *al-Mustaqbal,* June 1, 2009, http://www.almustaqbal.com/Stories.aspx?Storyid=350083.

26 "Nasrallah says Iran is willing to Arm the Lebanese Army," al-Manar, May 29, 2009.