

POST-ELECTION DYNAMICS IN LEBANON: FROM BI-POLAR TO TRI- POLAR POLITICAL STRUCTURE

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While Lebanon has long been divided between the 8 March and 14 March blocs since the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, leading Sunni figure and then Lebanese Prime Minister, the parliamentary elections held on 15 May 2022 have introduced a new dynamic to the future of Lebanese politics. The elections have brought a new political force to challenge the bi-polar dominance of the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance, which included political parties such as Maronite Free Patriotic Movement, Shiite Amal and other small parties on the one hand, and the anti-Hezbollah 14 March bloc, which involved the Sunni Future Party, Maronite Lebanese Forces and Druze Progressive Socialist Party on the other hand. Favored mainly by the disaffected protestors of the 2019 October Uprising against the entrenched sectarian and dysfunctional order, these anti-establishment and independent figures will shape the formation of different alliance systems in Lebanon politics and, by extension, the positions of effective regional actors like Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Underlining the ramifications of the post-election reality in Lebanon so far, this piece intends to first brief traditional facets of Lebanon politics since 2005 and, secondly, to speculate on the emergent changes with the ascent of a supposed third and would-be vital political force.

Introduction

The May 15 elections brought new dynamics to Lebanese politics which will certainly affect its foreign and internal policies. Heavily destabilized by regional interferences and internal divisions, Lebanon's politics has been shaped by the 14 and 8 March coalitions since 2005. In this bi-polar system, external Sunni and Shia-based actors brokered these forces and considered Lebanon as a basic "theater" to confront each other. Emboldened by their regional patrons like Saudi Arabia and Iran, local actors used similar sectarian patterns to consolidate and increase their internal power. This realist game eventually resulted in social explosion in 17 October 2019, which further exposed the corrupt and bankrupt nature of the existing system. Despite this, the 8 March forces and several 14 March forces, like the Future Movement, tried to divert attention and sustain their traditional policies. Finally, with the blast at the Beirut port on 4 August 2020, the undeniable anarchy and failure of the Lebanese state further crystallized. These subsequent events gradually empowered some new actors like pro-uprising and anti-establishment forces in the Lebanese system, which will affect both internal affairs and the positions of regional actors if these new players manage to unite and act in concert.

In light of the above, this study contends that given its anarchic nature, realist concerns prevail in Lebanese politics. However, this order seems to have gained a quasi tri-polar character with the rise of pro-reform forces. Therefore, the realist nature of the order will impact the possible

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interactions and alliance relations between traditional forces (March 8 and 14 blocs) and the new actors and, also, the strategies of both local and regional actors. Therefore, both alliance preferences in domestic politics and the strategies of leading regional actors will be crucial in determining whether seismic changes can take place in Lebanon's order or if the traditional patterns will simply repeat.

The Politics in Anarchical Domestic Life

Since the creation of “modern Lebanon” by colonial France in 1926, Lebanese politics has been designated in accordance with the demographic power of the major sectarian groups. This led Lebanese actors to take a zero-sum approach to internal politics as an anarchic environment where they needed to balance each other and mobilize their material and ideational forces to change the power equilibrium in their favor. In this context, Maronite and Sunni leadership dominated the Lebanese system until the emergence of Hezbollah as a violent and powerful Shia actor in the midst of the 1980s.¹

The Ta'if agreement in 1989 modified the internal balance of power to recognize Hezbollah's rise as another critical player in the system. In this sense Ta'if indeed not only empowered the Muslim community and brought equal representation in the parliament and the system in general, but also consolidated Hezbollah's military and political power by giving the Shia community equal weight in parliamentary representation and empowering the authority of speaker of parliament who is generally Shia. Furthermore, while stipulating other Lebanese militia groups to disband their forces it did not dispute Hezbollah's maintenance of armed forces. In other words, by reproducing the sectarian and anarchic nature of Lebanese state and simply adjusting power relations in Lebanon, the Ta'if agreement was the symbolic moment which heralded the beginning of Hezbollah's participation in the system alongside its standing armed forces. Thus, the power configuration shifted in favor of Shia communities and specifically Hezbollah. Hezbollah started to gradually leave its initial fervent revisionism and metamorphosized into a status quo power.² Eventually this process culminated with Hezbollah's ultimate military and political dominance being recently challenged by several developments. Against this background, understanding the structural conditions that Ta'if agreement constituted is necessary to make sense of the meaning and relevance of the current dynamics in Lebanese politics.

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The Emergence of Bi-polarity in Lebanon

In the post-Cold war period, Hezbollah became more active in elections, resolved some problems with another Shia actor, Amal, and pursued inter-sectarian alliances, thus creating a powerful bloc. In reaction to the Hezbollah-led bloc, especially after the assassination of leading Sunni figure Rafiq Hariri, another bloc unfolded composed of the Sunni Future Movement party, Maronite Lebanese Forces party and Druze Progressive Socialist party. In this regard, the Hezbollah-dominated March 8 and Future Party-led March 14 forces confronted each other, transforming Lebanese politics into a bi-polar order and “zero sum game” environment.³ However, following the eruption of the Beirut clashes in May 2008, Hezbollah militia forces blocked the Lebanese political system by almost invading the capital, Beirut. This aggressive move led the government to acknowledge the veto power of the opposition via the Doha agreement in 2008 which further increased the authority of Hezbollah-led opposition in the government.⁴ The Doha agreement was the second substantial break in terms of power transition in Lebanon in favor of the Hezbollah-led alliance. As such, Hezbollah, through its dominant position in Shiite society along with Amal, its alliance relations with several Maronite actors like the Michael Aoun-led Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and Druze actors, left its opposition character and turned into the central actor in power calculations in Lebanon.⁵

In reaction to the Hezbollah-led bloc, the Future-led alliance also intended to consolidate their internal sectarian solidarity and maintain inter-sectarian relations. In other words, while each bloc was made of rival factions of each major sectarian groups, both the Shia and Sunni factions managed to largely consolidate their power and to prevent any quarrel in their own communities to maintain leadership over their respective blocs. Along these lines, the near undisputed leadership over their communities, allowed both Hezbollah and the Future Movement to seek alliances with other sectarian groups and specifically with Maronite actors as Maronites have the right of largest representation in parliament. While there was some competition and even clashes between Maronite groups as well, the bi-polarity in Lebanon politics since Hariri’s assassination was seemingly driven by Shia-Sunni discord since the leading actors of 14 March and 8 March were the Shia Hezbollah and the Sunni Future Movement.

GULF COUNTRIES LIKE SAUDI ARABIA AND UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, IRAN, ISRAEL AND SYRIA, PLAYED EFFECTIVE ROLES IN RECONFIGURING INTERNAL ALLIANCES AND POWER RELATIONS AS WELL

There was also an undeniable regional dimension to this conflict as regional powers like Shia-led Iran and Sunni-led Saudi Arabia viewed this polarization as a purely Shia-Sunni conflict, thereby exacerbating internal sectarianism. In fact, the regional dimension is one of the primary factors that shapes Lebanese socio-political realities. Therefore, when attempting to understand Lebanese affairs, the regional dimension should be equally underlined as well as domestic factors.⁶ Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, Iran, Israel and Syria, till the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, played effective roles in reconfiguring internal alliances and power relations as well. This reality means the regional dimension in inter and intra-sectarian relations should also be considered when examining the possibility of new developments promoted by anti-establishment groups.

Post-Election Alternatives in Lebanon Politics: Between Rupture and Submission

Firstly, the turnout in the elections was still low with around 49% total participation in Lebanon's 15 electoral districts, which are designated in line with the sectarian distribution agreed in the Ta'if agreement. This turnout was similar to the 2018 parliament elections.⁷ Despite rising resentment, dire problems and several campaigns and promotion for participation in the elections especially by pro-reform groups, the low turnout underlines the embedded despair and pessimism among the Lebanese people about the possibility of change through elections. Secondly, not only local actors, but also their regional supporters await the official results of the Lebanon elections as they consider this country the main field to flex their regional "muscles" and confront each other by proxy. In other words, the results will both shape the policies of the local actors and their alliance relations to control the central mechanisms and the possible modifications of the regional actors.

As for the striking results of the elections, the first critical result concerns the changing leadership in the anti-Hezbollah camp and Maronite society with Hariri out of the scene. Surprisingly, it was Samir Geagea, who has a criminal background as a warlord during Lebanon's civil war between 1975-1989, who arose as the critical figure to hold an anti-Hezbollah stance and empower alternative leadership in Maronite society.⁸ Given that Maronites hold 34 out of the 68 Christian parliamentary representatives, compared to other Christian communities such as Rum and Armenian Catholics and Orthodox, Geagea arose as the primary figure to challenge both Hezbollah's dominance of the system and Aoun's leadership of Maronite Christians.

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Both the incapable, uncharismatic and vulgar character of Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil and the previously crystallized failure of Hariri and his boycott decision enabled Geagea to position himself as a powerful alternative for both anti-Hezbollah regional and local actors and also for some anti-establishment forces. Yet there remains uncertainty over whether Geagea merely represents the continuation of traditional patterns with different strategies or the first rupture from these patterns. There is not only observable conflict between the two main Maronite movements, but also between several other Christian movements. To illustrate, whereas Suleiman Frangieh's Marada Party aligns with Hezbollah and sustains its previous status with 2-3 deputies, Samy Gemayel's Kataeb Party backs anti-Hezbollah forces.⁹

As for Sunni politics, Sunni actors were divided into several camps due to Hariri's decision to boycott. Some pro-Hariri sections honored this position by organizing boycott pool parties. Hezbollah also attempted to garner some Sunni support via Sunni candidates but it failed to attract Sunni segments. While Najib Miqati's Azm Movement partially preserved its electoral power, Miqati did not run for re-election like Hariri and most Sunni segments aligned with independent and civil society-based candidates which prove the Sunni community's powerful inclination towards popular calls for reform of the existing system on the basis of a non-sectarian and democratic model.

As for Druze politics, Hezbollah picked the losing side as its investment on leading Druze figures like Wiam Wahab and Talal Arslan backfired. Rather, Walid Jumblatt sustained his dominant posture with 8 deputies by realizing important breakthroughs in Druze populated areas like Chouf and Aley. The loss of critical pro-Assad figures seemed to prove the success of Jumblatt's maneuver to keep control over Druze society and to counter any challenge to his son Taymour Jumblatt. In addition to inter-Druze calculations, this result can be seen as a reflection of the weakening influence of the Assad regime, once the dominant regional actor in Lebanese politics.

In terms of a united and concerted position, the long-term Hezbollah-Amal solidarity finally brought substantial success on the achievement of total Shiite deputies, that is 27. Despite their old and sometimes bloody feuds, these actors intensified their extensive cooperation.

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This strategy facilitated their dominant position over not only Shia communities, but also the Lebanese system by allying with leading Maronite figure Aoun. That said, despite the lasting monopoly of the “Shia Duo” over the Shia community, its recent failure to promote Hezbollah allies within other sectarian groups will likely contain its 4 years of nearly total control over legislative and executive organs. Furthermore, although the Shia-Duo’s control over the Shiite community remains clear, there is some discontent even among the Shia constituency as some critical figures like Subhi al-Tufayli have long championed an anti-Hezbollah stance inside the Shiite community. To illustrate, despite repeated threats and intimidation, protests erupted in Hezbollah strongholds like Sour (Tyre), Nabatieh and Saida (Sidon).¹⁰ This was the manifestation of the spread of the October protests to Hezbollah-led cities and the strong support by Shia communities for the demands raised by Lebanese people.

Ex-Hezbollah leader al-Tufayli backed these protests as well by severely rebuking Hezbollah policies and its status-quo position during the protests.¹¹ In other words, these elections not only brought a critical setback for the electoral position of Hezbollah allies in other sectarian groups compared to their electoral success in the 2018 elections, but also partly revealed some challenges to the Shia Duo’s leadership inside the Shiite community.¹² Some figures like the head of The Policy Initiative Sami Atallah stressed that compared to 2018 elections when the highest turnout was observed in the Shia community at 54%, there was some decline in this turnout which may indicate some dissatisfaction with Hezbollah’s gradual transformation into a staunch supporter of the very status quo it initially promised to remove.¹³

As for the possible alliance relations and policies followed by the actors in the Lebanese parliament and the probable status of a third/alternative bloc, three important processes will be critical to analyze the course of subsequent events. These are respectively the election of speaker of parliament, the formation of the government and the election of president by parliament. In these critical events, the positions of local actors and their regional alliances will probably determine the fate of the long-suppressed and overlooked popular demands which resonated in the 17 October protests. Therefore, these actors will likely remain stuck between their ideals and the ingrained dynamics of Lebanese politics, such as an anarchic domestic environment amid a failed state divided along confessional patterns.

The status of pro-uprising and civil society-based independents (13-15), traditional opposition independents (8) and 14-March leaning independents (9), who now may now constitute a somewhat third bloc with their around 30-32 deputies, can play a certain role in the maintenance or modification of previous patterns. Initially, reconciliation and solidarity among these deputies who support neither 8 March nor 14 March actors is necessary to force existing traditional actors to confirm possible reforms as they are unlikely to gain the majority without the support of these actors. A simple majority, namely 65 deputies out of 128, is a necessary condition for all legislative and executive progress on the election of speaker of parliament, the formation of cabinet and the election of president. Therefore, both the 14 March and 8 March blocs should seek support from pro-uprising candidates due to the irreconcilable disagreement between themselves. This could possibly increase the status of independent and anti-establishment opposition deputies. These figures mostly advocated the severe grievances of the Lebanese people concerning the unjust and unequal essence of the sectarian order, and its inhuman and dysfunctional economic, political and cultural order that leaves the populace vulnerable to all too complicated problems.¹⁴

8 March forces especially paid the price for turning a blind eye to the growing reform calls from disenfranchised segments of Lebanon society. They now need to confront this reality which endangers their dominant position over the Lebanese system. However, Geagea, who claimed leadership of 14 March forces following the Sunni vacuum, needs to take into consideration the sensitivities of independent and anti-establishment forces to balance Hezbollah and its allies and, moreover, shift the balance of power in his favor. In other words, while the nascent third bloc forces seem to abide by non-sectarian, democratic and secular ideals, their possible allies, particularly 14 March forces under Geagea's leadership, will sustain their realist concerns as they remain traditional actors. Therefore, the litmus test for a stable and functional alliance between Geagea-led actors and pro-uprising actors regards the inherent tension between the idealist expectations of the burgeoning bloc and the realist concerns of traditional actors. These tensions will likely maintain the chaotic status of Lebanese politics for at least some time. Indeed, the re-election of Amal leader Nabih Barri as speaker of parliament, indicates that business may indeed continue as usual.¹⁵

Conclusion

Considering the initial results of the elections, much more than the loss of Hezbollah's allies which still preserve a powerful position in parliament with their around 60-62 deputies out of 128, the most striking consequence of this election is the emergence of pro-reform or anti-establishment forces which democratically and peacefully seek transformation. Nonetheless, these actors face the challenge of reforming a system where actors pursue zero sum game

strategies to maintain or increase their autonomous positions. In this system, each actor possess its their own political, economic and, for some like Hezbollah and Lebanese Forces, even military forces. In this context, the main predicament facing alternative actors who want to reform the system is to balance their idealist motivations with these realist concerns which brought them to parliament. Given that they need the support of several traditional actors to gain ground in Lebanese politics and to make changes to the system, they are forced to seek alliances with these traditional forces and especially Geagea-led actors. In these new dynamics, the main status quo actor seems to be Hezbollah and its allies despite the significant blow they received in the elections.

Given that Hezbollah has dominated the system for some time with its outreach to the other sectarian groups and its inter-sectarian alliances, this former revisionist actor will likely mobilize all the material and ideational forces at its disposal to stall or avert the new challenge posed by alternative actors and their allies. Furthermore, Iran will likely provide unwavering support to Hezbollah and its allies. As for the Assad regime, the elections results proved that this once powerful regional actor has partially lost its determinant impact on Lebanon politics. Two primary Gulf actors, that is Saudi Arabia and UAE, with their stable economic and political support to the anti-Iran camp seem to have modified their policies by aligning with Maronite Geagea to balance Hezbollah and by sidelining their long-term alliance Sunni Future Movement. In other words, in addition to internal calculations, regional actors' policies will also shape Lebanese politics in an either confrontational or peaceful direction. All in all, when considering the complicated regional and domestic roots of Lebanese politics and the ongoing severe problems, the natural optimism in regards to the rising new actor and the hopes for reform encounter long-standing realities in Lebanese politics.

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