

30 June
2009

Elections in Lebanon: What purpose did they serve?

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The Lebanese parliamentary elections on June 7 re-elected the 14 March Alliance, with a comfortable majority. But this is far from settling the questions arising from the crisis in the Lebanese political system, which continues to divide the country into two tightly-knit camps, none of which can be excluded in the quest for a stabilized political formula. How to find a new consensus and go beyond the task of crisis management is the challenge facing Lebanon, which has jolted it periodically since the civil war ended officially in 1989 with the Taef agreements. This article poses these questions and describes the elements of the crisis. They all remain as relevant today as they were before the elections.

associations or task forces to represent civil society. It could also issue initiatives whereby it acts as a partner with government to establish effective reform measures.

Twenty years after the official end of the civil war, there are a multitude of reasons to be disillusioned about the capacity of the Lebanese political system to transform itself, to lay the foundations of a civil peace underpinned by a social and political pact and endorsed by foreign sponsors.

There is scant indication that the country has enough elements at its disposal to launch a process of stabilization and pacification. Violence had intensified since 2004 following several key developments. These include the

extension of the mandate of Lebanese president Emile Lahoud with Syrian backing in September 2004, the adoption of UN resolution 1559, which was tabled by the U.S. and France and was aimed to disarm Hezbollah, and a few months later in February 2005, the assassination of ex-Prime Minister Rafic el-Hariri. All these led to a series of political assassinations that have never been resolved. The withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005 aroused short-lived hopes and then led to deeper political divisions.

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Spurred by regional and international rivalries, the polarization between the March 8¹ and March 14² Alliances grew wider. This was due first to the war between Hezbollah and Israel in July-August 2006 and then to the outbreak of armed conflict in May 2008 in several districts of Beirut and other parts of the country, mainly between Hezbollah and Amal on one side and the Future Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party on the other.

The Doha agreement of May 21 2008 suspended hostilities, at least momentarily, following the clashes that erupted in Beirut that month. The agreement temporarily ended the blockages

that had paralyzed Lebanese political life for several months. In particular, these were the impossibility of electing a new president—a Christian Maronite—between November 2007 and May 2008, and of replacing the Shi'a ministers who had resigned, between November 2006 and June 2008.

A year later, the legislative elections, held on 7 June 2009, appear like a trap. They were presented by the signatories to the Doha agreement, with regional and international approval, as the result of a provisional truce, even a potential first step towards a pact among the protagonists in a polarized political scene, where arms are taken up with little hesitation. By including all the players and minimizing procedures so as not to threaten the interests of any of the protagonists, this could help foster a transition and gradual pacification. However, preparations for the election harbored sources of medium- and long-term tensions. Far

from have a calming effect, they escalated verbal aggression and radical positions. The difficulty in controlling the use of money, despite new legislation and the creation of a supervisory commission for the election campaign, combined with violent themes, reopening the wounds of war, conflicts, martyrs, victims, extreme bitterness and a desire for vengeance. The poll reproduced divisions and eroded the slender chances of transforming the political system, by reinforcing sectarian behaviors, smearing the future members of parliament with illegitimacy and radicalizing the discourse of the candidates around irreconcilable positions.

The decision by the Doha signatories to return to the 1960 electoral law changed dramatically the electoral districts. New constituencies, almost all on the scale of *caza*, homogenised the vote along community lines, notably the Christian constituencies, and privileged a « localist » or even family, rather than partisan logic.

In the constituencies with majorities of Shi'as, Druzes and Sunnis, the result was virtually a foregone conclusion. Therefore the majority to come out of the poll, whatever its color, was not expected to produce the two-thirds of the 128 members of parliament needed to amend the Constitution³. Even with a comfortable edge, the majority alone cannot have the political and institutional resources to propose ways out of the internal and geopolitical impasses that have hampered the pacification of the Lebanese political scene and the consolidation of a State, whose local leaders and international backers have contributed to maintaining weak. This is particularly marked in the Lebanese “ Consociationalist’ political system as it is based on power-sharing among communities rather than the law of the majority.

¹ *This coalition is led by Hezbollah, the Amal Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun, together with other political groups such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, Marada of the northern Christian leader, ex-minister Sleiman Frangie*

² *This coalition is led by the Future Movement of Sa'ad el-Hariri, the Socialist Progressive Party of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, and Christian leaders and groups, including the Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea and the Kataeb of Amin Gemayel.*

³ *Article 77 of the constitutional law of 21 September 1990 states :*

« The constitution may also be revised upon the request of the Chamber of Deputies. In this case the following procedures are to be observed: During an ordinary session and at the request of at least ten of its members, the Chamber of Deputies may recommend, by a majority of two thirds of the total members lawfully composing the Chamber, the revision of the constitution. »

THE STAKES OF THE VOTE

The single-house Lebanese parliament or National Assembly has 128 members, divided equally between Christians and Muslims, and following the principle of community parity laid down in the Taef agreement and the Lebanese Constitution. This breaks down into 27 Sunnis, 27 Shi'as, eight Druzes, two Alawites, 34 Maronites, 14 Greek Orthodox, eight Greek Catholics, five Armenian Orthodox, one Armenian Catholic, one evangelical, and one other Christian. They represent both one of the country's 26 constituencies and their community. In fact, if the right to stand is confessional—the seats are reserved for representatives of the communities mentioned above—the right to vote is not. Votes are cast in citizens' constituencies regardless of the candidates' religion. The poll is by majority vote and in a single round. Each constituency has several seats, which allows the candidates to form joint lists, without restricting the choice of the voter, who can strike out or add names.

The first point about the election is the way in which the weight of the different political parties is measured within parliament, especially the 14 March and 8 March coalitions, which include the Shia Hezbollah and Amal, the Free Patriotic Movement, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Marada of the northern Christian leader, ex-minister Sleiman Frangie. So who could claim to be the majority?

The two camps, shored up politically and financially by their foreign backers, confront each other at several levels:

--The level of Lebanon's place on the regional and international stage. Two opposing visions exist on this score. The 8 March, backed by Iran and Syria, refuse normalization of relations with Israel until a just and equitable peace is established in the region, and continues to

believe that the 'resistance' led by Hezbollah in southern Lebanon for 30 years is the best way of fighting the battle. By contrast, the 14 March, together with the 'western clan' and Saudi Arabia, seeks to remove Lebanon from the direct and open frontline with Israel, and to neutralize the conflict, in the same way as the so-called moderate states of the region, such as Egypt or Jordan. In addition, through their Lebanese allies, there is the undeclared war waged by the international powers, especially the conflict between the United States, with its Greater Middle East project, and Iran and Syria, with the role they intend to play in the region.

--The question of national sovereignty: whether the cause or result of their regional divergences, the two groups are also divided over the role of 'resistance' claimed by Hezbollah and that played by the regular Lebanese armed forces. The representatives of 8 March, particularly Hezbollah, insist on the intangible nature of the cause of 'resistance,' to which it subordinates cooperation with the Lebanese army. Those of 14 March call for the disarming of Hezbollah and the integration of its armed forces into the Lebanese army, and believe that all the militias should be dismantled in an effort to reinforce the State and its sovereignty.

--The level of economic and social policies, although the theme was eclipsed during the campaign. The parties of 8 March accused the outgoing majority of being responsible for the country's exceptionally large debt. Lebanon has held the world record for the highest debt to gross domestic product (GDP) ratio for several years—about 200% in 2006. The Aoun posters in the capital, stating that «Beirut is not for sale,» condemn the unilateral management of State affairs by their adversaries, their refusal to share power and responsibilities, their ultraliberal economic and social policies and their focus on the development of the centre of Beirut and unproductive investments. The

question of the faulty electricity network, for example, is a recurring problem that has brought the poor out into the streets several times in recent months. By contrast, those of 14 March, whose slogan is «prosperity first,» warn against the price to pay if their adversary won, the danger of a recession, and a flight of foreign investment that is crucial to the country's economy.

The fourth level is that of the method for power-sharing in the Lebanese consociationalist system: The electoral slogans of the Free Patriotic Movement announce the imminence of a Third Republic. The question is not new, and goes beyond the hypothetical overhaul of the institutions, which is unlikely in the short-term in view of the weakness of the coalitions, and the balance of the parliamentarians in the National Assembly. It concerns the different ways of perceiving consociationalism and the life of Lebanon's political institutions. The Constitutional Council, vacant since its members were fired in 2005, has anyway never been granted the prerogative to interpret the constitution. With no arbiter, the different parties defend different positions on the mechanisms of governance, the sharing of power, and nature and composition of the next government.

In the name of the principle of 'living together,' enshrined in the 1943 National Pact and the 1989 Taef Constitution, which is regarded as the supreme authority, the Lebanese Constitution specifies 14 major questions requiring a two-thirds majority of the cabinet to be adopted. Contrary to the principle of a democratic majority, this veto, or blocking minority, in theory serves to eliminate the risk of a minority being sidelined and excluded *de facto* from decision-making in cases such as Lebanon, where politics are deeply divided along political-community lines. It is around this question that tensions worsened in 2006 between 14 March and 8 March and the labels

of the two political groups as 'opposition' and 'majority' emerged.

The main representatives of 14 March affirmed that in the case of defeat in the elections, they would not join the government. In the case of victory, they would not accept a blocking minority for the opposition. On the other hand, the 8 March camp advocated «a government of national understanding,» integrating the opposition into the government and allowing it a blocking minority. If defeated, they would demand the same treatment. If victorious, they would hold out a hand to their adversaries, but also assumed the possibility of governing alone.

Beyond the blustering, which certainly aimed to demonstrate high ambitions for the long and difficult negotiations ahead, these questions raise fundamental problems for regulating the Lebanese political system. In the same way as it proved impossible for the Siniora government to replace the Shi'a ministers who resigned without the green light from Hezbollah and Amal, it is unlikely that a Sunni Prime Minister can be named without the approval of the Future Movement. In other words, the rule of power-sharing among communities combines with the stakes of partisan political representation.

Apart from the nature of the coalition that holds the majority since June 8 2009, the poll hinged mainly on four unknowns, at least in the short-term :

- The capacity of alliances to remain intact after the election.
- The result of intra-Christian competition for the leadership, with the 14 March opposing the Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun, who lost the battle for the presidency despite his remarkable score in 2005.

- The direction of the Future Movement of Saad Hariri, who has had to assure the heritage of his father and validate the internal and external choices of his camp since 2005.
- The cards to be played by more autonomous politicians or groups in this extremely polarized game—the president of the republic or personalities more or less autonomous from the two coalitions.

Do these elections signal the end of the truce forged at Doha or do they offer limited prospects for a more lasting, albeit fragile, political pact among Lebanese political players ?

The suspension of open conflict could collapse again at the slightest suspicion of threat to the

interests of one of the numerous Lebanese political parties or their foreign allies. The attachment of the leaderships to confrontation at the international, national and—just as importantly--local levels means that the election campaign was used as an additional battlefield to act out disputes and prepare for the future.

In this context, the probability of a political re-composition around new arrangements is weak. That of the fragile status quo, or even a deepening of divisions, is more plausible. Although several coalitions could be envisaged after the vote, first within with the probably long and difficult negotiations over the make-up of the government, few indications point to a change in the fundamentals of the political system in the short-term and an end to the ‘cold civil peace’ that has been held since 1989, precarious but virtually normalized.