



Lebanese Elections 2018

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On Sunday, 6 May 2018 Lebanon held the first general election after nine years of internal tensions culminating in several political crises — collapse of the government in 2011 and 2013, surprising resignation, followed by its revocation, of the Prime Minister at the end of 2017. The 2018 elections were held across 15 districts in accordance with a newly implemented proportionality law. The voter turnout dropped by 5% (49,2% in 2018 vs. 54% in 2009) reflecting growing frustration of the electorate over widespread corruption, a deteriorating economy and government failures to provide basic services (re: the waste management scandal). The Hezbollah-led bloc secured, for the first time, an absolute majority in Parliament at the expense of the Future Movement, led by current Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, which lost over a third of its seats. Hezbollah's electoral success strengthened its national position but also raised regional tensions.

Lebanese exception

Lebanon's unique political system, based on sectarian power-sharing, reserves the presidency for a Maronite Christian, the post of Prime Minister (PM) for a Sunni Muslim and the role of the Parliamentary Speaker for a Shia Muslim. Similarly, the 128 contested seats in the Parliament are allocated based on the confessions, assigning each ethno-religious group a fixed number of seats: 64 for Christians, 64 for Muslims (27 Sunni, 27 Shia, 8 Druze and 2 Alawites). In contrast to the 2009 elections, dominated by the pro-Syrian regime March 8 (Hezbollah-Amal and allies) and anti-Syrian regime March 14 (Future Movement and allies) blocs, this year the parties sought alliances based on local district dynamics.

Winners and Losers

The biggest loser of the elections is the Future Movement, which won only 20 seats, having underperformed in its traditional strongholds. Despite the decline, it remains the strongest Sunni faction in government. Therefore, regardless of his weakened position — considering the sectarian power-sharing system in Leba-

non — Future Movement's leader Saad Hariri is likely to be tasked to form a new government. Hariri's visit to Saudi Arabia in late 2017, his sudden and then cancelled resignation and the soft stance related to Hezbollah, might have pushed voters to punish his Future Movement.

The political alliance between Sunni and Christian political parties (except for the Free Patriotic Movement of current President Michel Aoun) was cemented with the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri by Hezbollah, uniting them under the March 14 Coalition. The Lebanese Forces (LF) is one of the main Christian parties in Lebanon and once a key player in the anti-Syrian movement leading to the Syria's military withdraw from Lebanon in 2005. The Christian parties do not form one bloc; they are divided between alliance with the Future Movement or Hezbollah. Today, the LF remains a key opponent of Hezbollah and, in the 2018 elections, it emerged as a strong player surprisingly securing 15 seats — three times more than in 2009. The Phalange Party (Kataeb), a Maronite Christian party, was once an important player in Lebanese politics. The Phalange's political decline began after its leader, Bashir Gemayel, was assassinated in 1982 and continued with the party's marginalisation during the Syrian intervention in Lebanon (1976-2005). The Phalange only started to re-emerge in early 2000 but according to the latest results it is again on the decline, having lost 2 seats compared to 2009. The Progressive Socialist Party, allied to the FM, captured 9 seats this year and the new Al Azm Movement of former Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, obtained 4.

The clearest winner of the 2018 elections is Hezbollah, having maintained its 13 seats and, together with its allies, winning enough votes to form an absolute majority in Parliament. Hezbollah is the main Iranian proxy in the Levant and has developed its electoral base among the Shia population in Lebanon — with Tehran's financial and political support. The Amal party has returned to significance in Lebanese politics as the largest Shia group in Parliament. Despite once being a more secular and moderate rival to Hezbollah, the two Shia groups remain strategic allies. Amal, led by current Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, managed to obtain 17 seats. The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), founded by current President Michel Aoun, remains the largest Christian bloc in Parliament. The FPM has a turbulent relationship with other Christian parties after signing a Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah (2006). This triggered an improbable political alliance of Maronite Christian and Shia groups, united in the March 8 Coalition. This year, the FPM and its allies (the Independence Movement, Tashnaq and the Lebanese Democratic Party) took 29 seats.

Uncertain coalition

Hezbollah, Amal and their allies will most likely renew their political alliance

with President Aoun's FPM. The bloc will have an absolute majority in Parliament and, with that number of seats, it can easily block voting on constitutional matters, including presidential elections. However, a coalition with the FPM is uncertain; during the election campaign the FPM sought alliances based on convenience and sought parties which they run against in other districts. For the first time since 2009, there is no clear division between two opposing blocs — March 8 and March 14 — which further complicates predictions over the configuration of the new government.

Whatever the Lebanese government looks like, it is essential that the country does not descend into political chaos. In a region torn apart by political violence, Lebanon has fared relatively well over the past decade and it is hoped that it has finally turned a corner on its history of sectarian violence and international conflict.

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