

Parliamentary Elections in Lebanon:

A Final Assessment

Oct 4, 1996



Brief Analysis

While the last two weeks have focused on the Israeli-Palestinian clashes, the Washington summit and the "war scare" with Syria, inside Lebanon the main political drama concerned the concluding rounds of parliamentary elections. These, as expected, produced a Syria-friendly legislature. Initial euphoria in some quarters about the early losses suffered by Hezbollah was dampened when Damascus, for reasons of its continuing strategic alliance with Iran as well as its delicate negotiating posture with Israel, once again placed its weight solidly behind the candidates of the Iran-inspired Shiite militants in the South and the Bekaa. The elections were marked by the by-now-familiar phenomenon of one pro-Syrian candidate running against another pro-Syrian candidate, reflecting Damascus' full penetration of Lebanese politics. Whatever "opposition" candidates did finally win remain securely within the Syrian orbit on all vital matters, both Lebanese and regional. Syria will therefore rely on this "Potemkin opposition" to be very vocal inside the legislative assembly in order to provide a deceptive appearance of democratic debate.

South Lebanon: Just when an anti-Hezbollah trend appeared to be gelling after three rounds of voting in Mount Lebanon, the North, and Beirut, a Syrian-engineered coalition in the South between the two rival Shiite groupings -- Hezbollah and the more moderate Amal party -- virtually guaranteed the radicals the seats they were seeking to preserve. In the voting in the South, this Shiite coalition held fast, with supporters of each group faithfully giving their votes to the candidates of the other. This netted Hezbollah a total of four seats with one of their candidates, Nazih Mansour, accumulating more votes than even Nabih Berri, the chief of Amal and speaker of Lebanon's outgoing parliament. In fact, the other three successful Hezbollah candidates scored more votes than their Amal partners except for Berri. From the defiant, upbeat tone of Hezbollah radio and television broadcasts since the final tally, Hezbollah's fine showing in the South was a tonic that restored flagging morale after the movement's poor showing in the three previous electoral rounds. For its part, Berri's Amal emerged from the elections in the South stronger than if it had gone it alone, despite its relatively inferior performance.

The main contest in the South was between the Shiite coalition and Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's well-oiled electoral machine. Hariri's sister Bahiya, running again for one of the Sunni seats in Sidon, was openly opposed by Hezbollah but managed to retain her seat in parliament. The pro-Hariri candidates ran on a platform opposed to extremism in all factions. Nevertheless, they failed to prevent the election of Hezbollah- and Amal-backed Sunni leader Mustafa Saad, an arch rival of Hariri from Sidon and son of union leader Maarouf Saad, who was assassinated in 1975 just prior to the outbreak of the Lebanon war. They did, however, manage to block the success of a Hezbollah ally, Sunni fundamentalist Ali Sheikh Ammar, but only barely.

Other losers in South Lebanon included a number of independents, among them the head of Lebanon's powerful General Labor Union Elias Abou-Rizk (a bitter critic of the Hariri government), Marxist Habib Sadek, and traditionalist former House Speaker Kamel Al-Asaad. Running as an independent and despite repeated death threats, the Christian Abou-Rizk garnered an impressive 96,000 votes and received Hezbollah support because of his

anti-government positions. Christian voter turnout on the whole was low throughout the South, nearly zero in many districts. The Israelis, in their selfdeclared Security Zone, gave full freedom for voters to go to Beirut to vote, but few came. Officials in the Israel-backed South Lebanon Army (SLA) reportedly warned prospective voters to cast their ballots for Amal candidates instead of Hezbollah.

Syria and the Amal-Hezbollah Coalition: After allowing Hezbollah to receive a bloody nose in the earlier rounds of parliamentary elections, Syria stepped in to reverse Hezbollah's fortunes. There are compelling reasons for doing this from the Syrian point of view. It is classic Syrian style not to give up any cards while negotiations are still underway, and control over Hezbollah constitutes a trump. Damascus also wishes to convey the impression that it has influence over developments in South Lebanon (including south of the Awali river), and that it has not abdicated the region to an open contest pitting Hezbollah against Israel and her allies. Furthermore, Syrian relations with Iran would surely suffer if Damascus was seen by Tehran as tacitly siding with the Hariri government -- and, by extension, with Washington -- in Hariri's bid to undermine Hezbollah's parliamentary representation. From Syria's perspective, the resistance movement in the South -- as represented by Hezbollah and supported (at least rhetorically) by Amal -- must be perceived as united. Also, if Syria felt the urgency to curtail the Sunni fundamentalists in North Lebanon because of their proximity to the Alawite region of Syria and other vital Syrian areas coupled with their latent hostility render them a potential threat, Syria does not have the same worry about Hezbollah in the South.

The Bekaa Elections: Perhaps the most extensive rigging operation in the history of Lebanese elections occurred in the Bekaa. By 4 p.m. on election day, voter turnout had not exceeded 21 percent throughout the entire Bekaa Valley, this according to press sources following the elections closely on the spot. Christians from the city of Zahle (President Hrawi's home town) constituted the lowest turnout, with only 10-13 percent of registered voters actually voting. A somewhat irritated minister of interior, Michel Murr, then hurriedly ferried in large numbers of newly naturalized voters, with many coming directly from their homes in Syria, to cast their votes. These included scores of hitherto stateless nomadic Arabs who normally roam the Lebanese-Syrian border region northeast of Baalbek. Murr also arbitrarily extended the voting period from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., and then announced that the number of voters in the last three hours had shot up to 52 percent!

Results of the Bekaa elections saw Hezbollah retaining three Shiite seats and helping a Sunni supporter get elected. Hezbollah also made sure that Hariri's principal candidate, minister of education Robert Ghanem, was soundly defeated. However, the Amal-Hezbollah coalition did not operate in the Bekaa as smoothly as it had done in the South. There were scattered defections, and voters did not stick to the agreed upon lists of candidates.

Concluding Observations: The 1996 Lebanese parliament -- a curious mixture of wealthy moderates and not-so-poor extremists-- is, like its predecessor, solidly controlled by Syria. It is expected that in its four-year term the parliament will continue to approve new bilateral agreements designed to integrate Lebanon into Syria's orbit more fully and will support all Syria's negotiating strategies with Israel. This is in line with Hafiz al-Asad's unambiguous statement to CNN that Lebanon is merely "an extension" of Syrian territory.

The manner in which the stage-managed electoral exercise unfolded shows clearly that when it comes to political representation, Hezbollah is completely at the mercy of Damascus. Words of praise for the integrity of the process coming out of the State Department and the U.S. embassy in Beirut did not diminish in intensity despite the many glaring irregularities, and even after Syria had resuscitated Hezbollah's chances by allowing them to retain most of their parliamentary seats. Particularly disturbing for many Lebanese will be parliament's likely attempts to eliminate the system of political confessionalism upon which Lebanese politics have rested since independence, to tamper with Lebanon's liberal educational sector, and to legislate further mass naturalizations of mostly Syrian Muslims thereby creating a new demographic fait accompli. Given its composition and Syrian tutelage, what is

certain will be this new parliament's inherited blind spot to the growing number of human rights violations perpetrated by the Beirut government.

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