

Parliamentary Elections in Lebanon:

An Early Assessment

Sep 6, 1996



Brief Analysis

BEIRUT—While headline news was being made in Iraq and the Erez checkpoint, a less-noticed political drama has been unfolding in another corner of the Middle East, Lebanon. Here, Lebanese are in the midst of a five-week election five electoral districts each voting on subsequent Sundays that could have an important impact on future politics in this small but much fought-over country.

According to the Lebanese Constitution, parliamentary elections should be held every four years. The current elections are designed to fill a legislative assembly of 128 seats, as mandated by the constitutional amendment introduced by the 1989 Ta'if agreement ending the Lebanon civil war. In the last elections, in 1992, 87 percent of the electorate (mostly Christians) boycotted the vote to protest overt Syrian manipulation of the process. (Thanks to the boycott, one candidate was elected to parliament having received a meager forty votes in her district.) The resulting legislature labored under a cloud of doubts as to its legitimacy, and MPs constantly felt insecure with respect to the constituencies they were allegedly representing.

> In addition to the numerous bilateral agreements approved by the 1992 parliament that ordered closer unity and virtual integration between Lebanon and Syria in fields of security, economics and politics the legislature also endorsed a dubious naturalization decree in 1994 that increased the country's population by 10 percent, most of whom were naturalized Syrian Muslims. Moreover, the parliament affirmed positions that parroted Syria's negotiating line in the peace process, rejecting most recently the "Lebanon First" proposal; rubber-stamped Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's controversial plans for reconstructing downtown Beirut which have so far piled up nearly \$5 billion in foreign debt; and to comply with Syrian wishes tampered with the Constitution in order to prolong the tenure of President Elias Hrawi for an extra three years, thereby setting a dangerous constitutional precedent.

> In the 1996 elections, which have just passed the halfway mark, the picture is somewhat different although certain elements remain unchanged:

Syrian influence: Damascus control over Lebanon continues undiminished. In fact, one sign of Syria's confidence in the extent of its control is the degree of effective indirect control Damascus practices through delegating its policies to the Beirut authorities. This includes the elaborate orchestration of the electoral process in order to have it yield the desired winners and losers. Some results in the early rounds of elections so far seem less to reflect Lebanon political differences than internal factional jockeying within the Syrian ruling elite; for example, Michel Samaha, a close friend of Hafez al-Assad's son Bashar, lost in Mount Lebanon, and in North Lebanon turf wars raged among a number of Syria's cronies, with some (like Suleiman Franjeh) retaining their seats, while others (like Selim Saadeh of the *Partie Populaire Syrienne* [PPS]) losing theirs.

The Christian boycott: Opponents of the Syrian-dominated status quo in Lebanon include members of all the religious communities, but the most vocal continue to be the Christians. This year, however, attempts at organizing a boycott of the elections, as in 1992, largely failed because the leading figures of the anti-Syrian opposition whether in

Lebanon or in exile in Paris were unable to agree on a unified stand and coordinated strategy in time to generate a decisive impact. As a result, a series of demands made months ago by this opposition with a view to rendering the elections more free and fair were ignored by the authorities.

In addition, the lack of Christian political unity on the boycott effort eroded its efficacy. One prominent figure, Albert Moukhaiber, broke ranks with the boycotting opposition and ran for the Greek Orthodox seat in Mount Lebanon only to lose handily to his pro-Syrian opponent, Minister of the Interior Michel Murr. Another, Pierre Dakkash, exploited a tactical alliance with Hezbollah to win a seat whereas Hezbollah's own candidate, Ali Ammar, lost because Dakkash's Christian supporters overlooked the agreement and deprived him of their votes. A third, Butros Harb, a principal supporter of the post-Ta'if regime in Beirut and a Maronite Christian from North Lebanon, ran as an independent after being refused a slot on all tickets tacitly endorsed by the Syrians. His contrived "falling out" with the Syrians apparently convinced enough voters already disgruntled with excessive Syrians meddling in Lebanon to offer him their votes, and he won big on election day in the north. The Harb example was immediately seized upon by some to discredit the argument of the boycotting opposition that participation in sham elections was useless, this despite the fact that the following day Harb made a statement singing Syria's praises and revealing his true political sentiments.

Hezbollah and other Islamic fundamentalists: Sustained efforts in Mount Lebanon, North Lebanon, and Beirut undertaken by the government to weaken Hezbollah's representation paid off. The Lebanese press is rife with speculation that a deal was struck between Washington and the Beirut government to bar Hezbollah and other Islamic fundamentalists from winning in return for U.S. endorsement of the integrity of the electoral process. Ambassador Richard Jones' repeated statements about the propriety of the elections lend credence to this view. U.S. encouragement of some Christian candidates to enter the electoral fray was also intended for this purpose.

> In 1992, Hezbollah won a parliamentary block of twelve MPs; this time the block is expected to shrink by about half. In addition to Hezbollah's loss of one seat in Mount Lebanon and another in Beirut, the Sunni Muslim fundamentalists based in Tripoli also lost seats when only one of their candidates won a slot. Elections in the coming two weeks in South Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley both Hezbollah strongholds will show the extent of the damage sustained by the pro-Iran militants. The relatively moderate Shiite Amal party headed by House Speaker Nabih Berri has reaped the benefits of Hezbollah's losses, and stands to gain more in the coming rounds.

Jumblatt and the Druze: In his capacity as minister of the displaced, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt has been able to exert significant leverage over Christian voters who fled their homes in the Chouf district following the massacres of the war. In the election campaign, Jumblatt's supporters offered not-too-thinly disguised threats that Christians who failed to vote for his slate may experience lengthy delays in government support for their villages and government loans to rebuild their homes. Although only 50 percent of the Christians actually voted in the Druze-controlled region, Jumblatt and his ticket won in a landslide.

Hariri and Beirut's Sunni leaders: Prime Minister Hariri's electoral steamroller threatened to sweep everything in its path, including traditional Sunni establishment candidates in Beirut. However, this did not happen and Hariri's hand-picked ticket still had to make way for former Prime Minister Selim Hoss and Tammam Salam, son of another former prime minister. Christian turnout in Beirut was low, with only 21 percent turnout, two-thirds of which were Armenian Christians. (Lebanon's Armenians very anti-Turkish and anti-Israeli were enlisted en masse in support of the government.)

Irregularities: The most flagrant intrusion into the electoral process has been the role of the newly naturalized Lebanese mostly of Syrian origin who always vote in large numbers and always for the government's candidates. (In one documented incident [An-Nahar, August 19, 1996] ordinary Syrians from the Syrian village of Zein Abidin near Kasyun were bussed in to vote.) The government authorities also resorted to veiled threats made to government employees and civil servants to vote in favor of particular candidates; municipalities used services and utilities as

bargaining weapons to win votes; and the media were enlisted to focus almost exclusively on the pro-government tickets.

Early assessment: The 1996 elections could reflect an important shift in Lebanon politics. The old ideological parties and groupings of every shade the Kata'eb (Christian Phalange), the PPS, the Communists, as well as Hezbollah and the Sunni Islamic fundamentalists all appear to be in decline, with their place being taken by a fast-rising plutocracy trail blazed by Hariri. It seems as though dogmatism is giving way to pragmatism, keeping with regional anticipation of widespread business dealings and economic cooperation across borders that would accompany an era of Arab-Israeli (or, more specifically, Syrian-Israeli and Lebanese-Israeli) peace. While movement on the diplomatic front remains static and accusations fly between Damascus and Jerusalem, the elections may be a signal that changed circumstances may permit a political shift somewhere down the road.

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