

Ending (or Deepening) the Crisis in Lebanon: The Role of Electoral Reform

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Brief Analysis

The May 25 election of Gen. Michel Suleiman as Lebanon's twelfth president was a central element of the Qatari-brokered compromise between the March 14 coalition and the Hizballah-led opposition. The agreement was greeted with relief in Washington and other international capitals, allaying fears that Lebanon was once again heading toward civil war. Now that Fouad Siniora has been re-designated as prime minister, the Doha agreement's remaining elements include the difficult task of establishing a "national unity government" and holding parliamentary elections in 2009. The new law governing those elections will determine whether Lebanon will have a solid future foundation or if the day of final reckoning has been merely postponed.

Lebanon's Electoral History and the Doha Agreement

According to Lebanon's constitution, citizens have the right to change their government periodically in free and fair elections. However, in the course of Lebanon's troubled political history, parliamentary elections have never been entirely "free" or "fair." Past electoral reform efforts have been cosmetic and limited to redrawing of districts.

Elections held between 1960 and the outbreak of civil war in the mid-1970s produced four legislative assemblies that fairly represented most communities, therefore contributing to political stability. At that time, Lebanon was structured administratively into six large governorates (muhafazat) and twenty-six smaller districts (qada). These smaller areas were then adopted as electoral districts in 1960 under a law that governed the elections of 1964, 1968, and 1972.

Since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990 and the ratification of the Taif Agreement, four elections took place (1992, 1996, 2000, and 2005) under rigged electoral laws engineered by Damascus to benefit its local allies. Through systematic gerrymandering and political intimidation, the weight of the then predominantly Christian and anti-Syrian opposition was diluted. The most notorious of these laws was the 2000 electoral law, which Lebanese lawmakers were compelled to readopt for the 2005 elections.

In Doha, the signatories agreed to replace the 2000 law with an amended 1960 law based on districts -- notwithstanding the fact that both the Taif Agreement and the ill-fated Boutros Commission (a government-appointed expert commission tasked with crafting a new electoral law) envisioned proportional representation using governorates, presumably to ensure effective representation. With the exception of the Christian constituencies, the principal effect of the changes was to consolidate the main players' power over their various constituencies.

Members of parliament are elected according to the "block vote" or slate system, in which each voter can vote for as many candidates as there are seats in a given district. However, distribution is subject to the number of seats reserved for each confession in each district. For example, in a district with two Maronite seats and one Shiite seat, the two highest-scoring Maronite candidates and the highest scoring Shiite candidate enter parliament. Throughout Lebanon's history, the formation of slates has not been guided by a common policy platform but rather by unconcealed power calculations to secure key swing votes. Thus, slates are loose alliances of individual candidates who agree to ask their voters to also vote for other candidates with whom they form a bloc.

Winners and Losers

The determination to use small districts in the next election coupled with the Doha decision to redistrict Beirut and maintain Marjeyoun-Hasbaya, Baalbek-Hermel, and West Bekaa-Rachaya as single electoral constituencies guarantees that the status quo will change little in the next elections. Only Christian voters will have real alternatives to choose from: among the opposition, Gen. Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and Marada leader Suleiman Franjeh; on the March 14 side, Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces and Amin Gemayal's Kataeb (Phalange) Party; and the soon to be announced candidates affiliated with the new president, General Suleiman. Still, there are a number of districts where shifting alliances could prove crucial.

In Jbeil, the home of president-elect Suleiman, a cluster of pro-Hizballah and Amal Shiite voters will be central in determining the outcome of one of two Maronite seats, potentially to the benefit of their Christian ally, General Aoun. His lock, however, on the district of Keserwan, where he swept the Maronite seats in 2005, appears to have weakened following his 2006 alliance with Hizballah and subsequent developments.

The North Metn district of Mount Lebanon will also experience change in 2009. In 2005, Aoun won the majority of seats through his alliance with the affluent Greek Orthodox former vice-premier, Michel Murr, and the Tachnaq -- Lebanon's largest Armenian party. But the defection of Murr from Aoun's parliamentary bloc and his likely new alliance with Amin Gemayel will undoubtedly redraw the 2009 electoral landscape of that locality, influencing the outcome of eight parliamentary seats: four Maronite, two Greek Orthodox, one Catholic, and one Armenian Orthodox.

Finally, Beirut's redistricting at Doha clearly gave Saad Hariri's Future Movement the upper hand in determining the ten seats of the capital's third district, since 64 percent of its registered voters are Sunni. Yet, the outcome of Beirut's first and second district is not certain and will depend largely on Armenian Orthodox voters. Finally, if Hariri guarantees Tachnaq seats on his list, he could consolidate additional gains for March 14, reducing Hizballah's representation in the capital still further.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The electoral changes agreed to in Doha are not true reforms. And if they are ratified by parliament, the changes will serve merely to solidify the current parties' dominance and the ongoing political stalemate. If that occurs, the Amal-Hizballah alliance will collect the majority of Shiite seats, especially in the districts of the Bekaa and the south, again denying moderate Shiite figures access to the legislature. Walid Jumblatt will remain the chief power broker of the Druze community, and Saad Hariri of the Sunni constituency. Only within the Christian constituency is there any chance of a shakeup.

The Doha agreement called for the adoption of some of the Boutros Commission reforms, but did not go far enough. It is critical, for example, that an independent electoral commission be established and resourced. Likewise, all candidates should have access to the media and strict campaign financing and monitoring should be enforced. The elections should also be conducted in one day, and other procedures related to the elections should be observed. If possible, international monitors and observers, including Arab delegations, should be deployed in Lebanon well before the elections take place to ensure the transparency and fairness of the electoral process.

In the long-term, however, even these reforms will not put Lebanon on a new course. Only a wholesale reform of the electoral system as envisioned under the Boutros Commission can ensure that genuine pluralism in Lebanon is guaranteed. If the 1960 law is to provide the basis for the upcoming elections, efforts must be made in the time between these elections and the next to revise the system further. If Lebanon is to break out of its sectarian ghettos, ultimately some form of proportional representation based on larger electoral districts will need to be adopted.

In 2005, the 2000 law was readopted out of expediency. As a consequence, Lebanon today is on the verge of civil war. If the mistake of 2000 is to be avoided in the coming months, the international community, and particularly the United States, must actively engage President Suleiman and the Lebanese government to ensure the electoral process moves the country in a forward, not backward, direction. As it stands today, it looks as if the false stability of the past is being restored. For some this will be a comfort. If the past is any example, however, avoidance of difficult issues in Lebanon is likely to be a recipe for future conflict.

Jean-Pierre Katrib is a visiting fellow in The Washington Institute's [Project Fikra \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)



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