Lebanon:

At the Crossroads between Democracy and Rogue State

by Robert Rabil **(/experts/robert-rabil-0)**

Jun 17, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert Rabil (/experts/robert-rabil-0)

Robert Rabil is the LLS Distinguished Professor of Current Affairs in Florida Atlantic University's Department of Political Science.

Brief Analysis

Lebanon's ongoing parliamentary elections—held in a staggered format through June 19—reflect a new, complex reality for the country. Although free from Syrian tutelage and gerrymandering, the results have been much less encouraging than had been hoped when Syrian troops withdrew.

Background: Past Elections

The 1990 Taif Accord offered an imperfect compromise between democracy and sectarian peace. The agreement gave equal parliamentary representation to Muslims and Christians, divided proportionally between the two sects' various denominations. Under Syrian pressure, the legislature was later enlarged from 108 to 128 seats, with 64 Christian representatives (34 Maronite, 14 Greek Orthodox, 8 Greek Catholic, 5 Armenian Orthodox, 1 Armenian Catholic, 1 Evangelical, and 1 candidate representing various "minorities," including Jews) and 64 Muslim representatives (27 Sunni, 27 Shiite, 8 Druze, and 2 Alawite).

Using a system still in place today, voters were assigned to electoral districts originally drawn around Lebanon's six administrative regions, requiring candidates to appeal to a broad cross-section of religious communities in order to win office. Candidates generally run as members of a list for their district. In the 1992 and 1996 elections, Damascus gerrymandered certain districts to benefit pro-Syrian candidates. In the 2000 elections, the Taif provisions were entirely ignored, and the country was divided into fourteen electoral districts. Overseen by Ghazi Kanaan, then-chief of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon, this division created districts that favored pro-Syrian candidates, bringing together unconnected areas with vast demographic differences. In particular, such gerrymandering joined areas containing denominations of one sect with large areas containing a single majority denomination of another sect. This practice helped dilute anti-Syrian votes, mainly from Maronites. For example, less than half of the 64 Christian representatives were elected from Christian-majority districts; most came from areas annexed to larger Muslim districts, essentially elected by Muslim votes.

Postwithdrawal Political Maneuvering

The withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon created a political vacuum, sparking a sectarian struggle for political power. Angered by the February 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, allegedly by Syria,

Lebanon's Sunni community rallied around the leadership of Hariri's son Saad. At the same time, Hariri's Sunni archrival, the pro-Syrian Omar Karame, lost his clout with the crushing of the Syrian order in Lebanon. The Harriri family, riding the wave of his martyrdom as a symbol of national unity, sought to become the focal point of national reconciliation and thus position itself at the center of Lebanese politics.

Meanwhile, the Shiite community, led by the pro-Syrian Hizballah, sought to claim a political role in Lebanon commensurate with its demographic strength. Hizballah became concerned about UN Security Council Resolution 1559, part of which calls for its disarmament. The group recognized that it could become a target of the international community, led by the United States. Consequently, it pursued a dual policy of co-opting other communities in the name of national unity and making the elections both a referendum for its role as a resistance movement and a means of showing its political strength. Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah defiantly refused disarmament and urged political reconciliation in Lebanon by reaching out to Christian factions, which have been among the most vocal in calling for Hizballah to surrender its weapons.

Among the Druze, Progressive Socialist Party chief Walid Jumblat was central to the unity of the anti-Syrian opposition, given the contrast between his pro-Syrian past and his more recent unwavering stance against Damascus. Once Syria withdrew, however, Jumblat was hemmed in by his community's numeric weakness and feared a Christian nationalist revival. Consequently, he solidified his alliance with Saad Hariri and mended his relations with Hizballah. Specifically, he struck a deal with the Sunnis and Shiites to base new parliamentary elections on the 2000 electoral law. This would allow Hariri, Nasrallah, and Jumblat to shape the emergence of the new political order and enable Hizballah to undermine the candidacy of any Christian calling for its disarmament.

Christians were taken aback by Jumblat's maneuvering, prompting the League of Maronite Bishops to issue a statement on May 12 condemning the electoral law: "In light of this law, the Christians can elect only 15 MPs out of 64 while the others, almost 50 MPs, are elected by Muslims." Still, Christian factions decided not to boycott the elections for fear of prolonging the parliament's pro-Syrian character. Saad and Jumblat (with Nasrallah's support) tried to temper Christian discontent by forging alliances with Christian leaders who had been old foes. For example, Saad included in his Beirut electoral list Solange Gemayel, wife of late Phalange president Bashir Gemayel, while Jumblat (along with Hizballah) included Edmond Naim of the Christian Lebanese Forces in his Baabda-Alley list. Christian ranks were further shaken by the apparent defection of Gen. Michel Aoun, who recently returned to Lebanon after fifteen years of exile. In disagreement with the mainstream Christian factions, Aoun created his own lists, even allying himself with pro-Syrian politicians such as Michel Murr and Suleiman Franjeh. This development amplified Christian discontent with the overall direction that the anti-Syrian opposition has taken,

Implications of the Current Elections

Staggered over four dates corresponding to particular districts (May 29 for the Beirut area, June 5 for southern Lebanon, June 12 for Mount Lebanon and Bekaa, and June 19 for northern Lebanon), the current parliamentary elections have taken place in a free, democratic environment, crowning the new leaders of Lebanon. Saad, Jumblat, Nasrallah, and Aoun have emerged as the uncontested leaders of their respective communities (regardless of the results in northern Lebanon). The biggest upset was Aoun's victory in Mount Lebanon (North Metn and Jbeil-Keswran) and Bekaa (Zahleh), where his lists won out over almost all mainstream and historic Christian candidates. Apparently, Christian protest votes were partly responsible for his victory. Depending on the outcome of the June 19 polls, Aoun's bloc may end up with more than thirty seats. Given that the Hizballah-led bloc already holds thirty-five seats, this would leave the former opposition bloc with less than half of the seats.

In general, the elections have ushered in a new era for Lebanon. On a positive note, the polls have helped strengthen national unity by allying certain past opponents. The new political dynamics have also made it nearly impossible for one party to decide Lebanon's governance, thus encouraging compromise, an essential component of the

democratic process. On a pessimistic note, these same dynamics could negatively affect national reconciliation. Aoun will no doubt oppose Jumblat and Hariri's attempts to dislodge pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud. Moreover, when Lahoud's term ends, Aoun will either run for the presidency himself or nominate an ally. In either case, Aoun may seek Hizballah's support to counter Jumblat's opposition. (Jumblat has already criticized Aoun's victory, using it as an occasion to lament the defeat of Christian moderate leadership.) Aoun and his pro-Syrian allies will also attempt to block both Hariri's ascent to the premiership and Shiite leader Nebih Berri's reappointment as speaker of parliament.

The new political dynamics will also make it extremely difficult for any party to support UN Resolution 1559. Instead, the government will likely opt for a domestic resolution to the question of Hizballah's disarmament, one that is favorable to the party. This could entail creating a legitimate pretext under which to protect Hizballah's weapons, which could bring Lebanon into conflict with the international community.

Interestingly, one of the main factors that brought Lebanese together upon gaining initial independence was the tacit sectarian understanding that their country was a crossroads between East and West. The success of Lebanon's newly acquired independence may hinge on a similar understanding that it is at a crossroads between democracy and rogue statehood.

Robert Rabil, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, is an assistant professor and director of graduate studies in the Department of Political Science at Florida Atlantic University. ❖

Policy #1004

RECOMMENDED

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022
◆
Anna Borshchevskaya
(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)