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Lebanon: Elections Highlight Confessional System

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Compared to the dramatic events that shook Lebanon in the past six months, the parliamentary elections that took place between May 29 and June 19 were anti-climactic. Local and foreign observers expressed disappointment that, apart from the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, remarkably little has changed. Hopes for an immediate and major political transformation, however, were unrealistic. The elections served as a reminder that the basic problems of the confessional system have not yet been addressed.

In principle, recent events in Lebanon have opened up a historic opportunity for real political change. The Syrian withdrawal allows the public to express its views more openly and address issues suppressed since the end of the civil war, from sectarian relations and the distribution of power to Hezbollah's arms and the status of Palestinian refugees. Most importantly, Lebanon is witnessing unprecedented international pressure for economic and political reform.

In practice, these events resulted in some surface alterations but have not yet brought about structural political change. While there was true contestation in the last two electoral rounds as well as international and local monitoring of the polls, the electoral framework remained unchanged. The nature of the 2000 electoral law is such that once a strong coalition list has been formed in a particular district, it will generally sweep all the seats, thus not allowing the entry of new actors into the political system. This resulted in various uncontested seats in the south Lebanon and Beirut rounds. Politicians also continued to pay lip service to concepts such as “coexistence” and “national reconciliation” but failed to present concrete electoral agendas.

The elections highlighted the daunting obstacles to a real opening in the system, in particular the fact that different communities in Lebanon continue to engage in zero-sum politics. During the massive demonstrations following former prime minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination, the opposition movement (which included prominent Christian, Druze, and Sunni Muslim figures) managed to convey an impression that the Lebanese had bridged old divides and overcome the bitter legacies of the civil war. This semblance of unity began to crumble during the pre-electoral political bargaining. As the four rounds of the elections unfolded, politicians across the board did not hesitate to level sectarian

accusations at opponents. Politics thus continue to be waged in a context of intense fear among sects who behave as though any compromise would sound their death knell.

The elections also polarized the confessional system further, as certain figures emerged as the unchallenged leaders of their respective communities. Running on the legacy of his father, Saad Hariri has become the leader of the Sunni community with 23 of 27 Sunni MPs belonging to his Tayyar Al Mustaqbal (Future Movement) list. Twenty-three of 27 Shiite MPs are from the two dominant Shiite groups Hezbollah and Amal. All eight Druze seats belong to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. The 64 Christian seats were more heterogeneous, divided among the Lebanese Forces, Qornet Shahwan, and General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. However, Aoun did emerge as the leader of the Maronite community with 21 parliamentary seats.

This sectarian polarization bodes ill for a process of political reform in Lebanon based on concrete proposals for nation building, addressing corruption, and communal reconciliation that includes the wider public, as opposed to the intermittent reconciliations of elites. The only hope for change is the fact that this time post-election expectations—both domestic and international—are much higher than before. Domestically there is a sense of dissatisfaction with the current system, predominantly because of the economic crisis the country is facing. While to this day the public has rallied behind their confessional leaders and failed to hold them accountable, there is a palpable sense that the current economic and political situation is untenable. Moreover, Lebanese can no longer blame Syria for all their failures.

The new parliament might begin to introduce certain economic reforms in an effort to appease domestic and foreign pressures. Former Prime Minister Najib Mikati recently presented “The Way to Beirut Pact,” an economic rescue plan that aims at moving the country out of the postwar debt-spiraling reconstruction phase and into a vibrant emerging economy.

Political reforms that move beyond the ossified confessional system, however, will be harder to implement, as shown by the June 28 selection of Amal leader Nabih Berri as parliamentary speaker. Despite international opposition to his reinstatement due to allegations of corruption, he was reelected by an overwhelming 90 votes of 128. The ongoing delay in the cabinet formation also highlights how difficult it will be for Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government to articulate a coherent reform agenda. Lebanon's major sects are fighting over key ministerial positions, a pattern that will probably be repeated with every major decision or initiative the government takes.

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