



What Municipal Elections Mean for Lebanon

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Lebanon is holding this month municipal elections across the country, the first electoral test since the start of the Syrian war. The ruling traditional parties scored victories but with lower margins compared to the last elections in 2010. The results of these elections reveal four major trends anticipated as Lebanon's political crisis moves forward.

For the first time since the end of the Syrian regime's control over Lebanon, Lebanese citizens went to the polls this month to elect municipal councils across the country. Lebanon has changed tremendously since the last vote was cast in 2010: Hezbollah became involved militarily in Syria, the presidential palace has been vacant since May 2014, and the parliament's term was extended twice. Consequently, political alliances have been redrawn and a civil society movement has been protesting in vain against a defective political system. In a neighborhood rattled by warmongering, these municipal elections served as a barometer to assess the balance of power among Lebanon's ruling political parties and as a test for an emboldened civil society movement.

After months of speculation on whether it will be held or not, the Lebanese government reluctantly decided last April to move forward with the municipal elections in four phases, each held on every Sunday of the month of May. In the past two weeks, Lebanese voters cast their vote in the Governorates of Beirut, Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel and Mount Lebanon while last two rounds later this month will be in the North and South Governorates.

The public mood across the country was cynical during these elections, forcing traditional political parties to run campaigns void of their blame game rhetoric. Families across Lebanon formed alliances with civil society to take on traditional candidates knowing ahead of time that they might have a slim chance to win. While clans across Lebanon are key decision makers in the makeup of their respective municipal councils, the results of the first two rounds of these elections reinforced four major trends in Lebanon's national politics:

1) The Sunni-Shiite Truce Persists

At a time when the Sunni-Shiite divide has reached unprecedented levels of regional confrontation, the Saudi backed "Future" movement and the Iranian backed Hezbollah opted not to confront each other in these elections. This undeclared truce has been steadily upheld since December 2014 when both sides launched rounds of discussions after a three-year hiatus when the leader of the "Future" movement Saad Hariri's cabinet was sacked in January 2011. Even though earlier this year Saudi Arabia has labelled Hezbollah as a "terrorist organization" in an attempt to deter its regional activities, Hariri did not instruct his aides to stop their regular meetings with the Shiite group or to cease the security cooperation between both sides. The disengagement in the municipal elections was orchestrated by the "Amal" movement leader and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri who is the main broker of this rapprochement.



However, the municipal elections' results showed how both sides lost some of the appeal to their respective base.

In the capital Beirut, Hezbollah stayed out of the elections, leaving the field clear for Hariri to fight his own political battle. Indeed, Hariri personally led the campaign under the banner of "al-Bayarita list" (Residents of Beirut) with the declared support of the major political parties in the capital. Compared to the last municipal elections in 2010 and with the same turnout of nearly 20 percent, the list backed by the "Future" movement received 47,000 votes on May 8, down from 65,000 votes six years ago. This drop in the margin of victory was due to many reasons, mainly the corruption cases that marred the last municipal council and the impact of Hariri's financial crisis on his election expenditures. Furthermore, the majority of the predominantly Christian areas did not vote for Hariri's list, prompting the former Prime Minister to publicly criticize his allies for not sufficiently mobilizing their base. Across Lebanon, Hariri's approach was avoiding electoral confrontation and attempting to forge alliances in particular with Sunni politicians who commonly disagreed with his political platform.

While Hezbollah and the "Amal Movement" swept most municipal elections in the Shiite areas, their margin of victories was also subdued. For instance, they won in Baalbek by 700 votes only with 46 percent voting against their candidates in a city known to be a major Hezbollah stronghold. The Shiite group was also unable to secure walkover victories and was compelled instead to launch campaigns in 138 municipalities in the Bekaa-Baalbek-Hermel Governorates compared to 100 councils in 2010 municipal elections. Hezbollah's financial support from Iran and its own organizational skills reinforced control over loyalists, however there are warning signs for the party's leadership as it continues to be fully engaged in the Syrian war.

2) "March 14" and "March 8" Are Officially Done

These two major camps dominated Lebanese politics since 2005 with "March 14" claiming an anti-Syrian regime platform following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and "March 8" carrying the pro-Syrian regime mantle. With the prevailing power vacuum since the end of the Syrian regime influence over the country, the ruling Lebanese oligarchy have been struggling to resolve internal disputes and in merely governing as Lebanon remains sidelined by momentous regional developments. In the past two years, the stalled presidential election further divided the ranks and shifted alliances in both camps.

There are currently two unofficial presidential candidates from "March 8", former Lebanese Army Commander Michel Aoun and the leader of the "Marada" movement Suleiman Frangieh. Samir Geagea from "March 14" as well as Hezbollah endorse Aoun, while Saad Hariri endorses Frangieh with the tacit support of Nabih Berri and the leader of the Progressive Socialist party Walid Joumblat. The municipal elections reinforced this emerging political divide. The diverging interest between Geagea and Hariri was evident in Beirut and Zahleh



municipal elections where their base did not trade votes. Hezbollah tried to avoid a looming confrontation between Aoun and Berri, however the “March 8” alliance has never been looser.

3) New Dynamic in Christian Areas

While election campaigns in the predominantly Christian areas over the past decade reflected the Sunni-Shiite divide, with Aoun allied with Hezbollah and Geagea allied with Hariri, a new dynamic emerged this time around. The national motivation of Aoun and Geagea in the municipal elections was to demonstrate that their nascent alliance represents the majority of the Christian vote, hence qualified to be the main decider in the selection of the next Maronite President. Together they tried to overrun major local feudal leaders across the country. While successful in Zahleh for instance, they failed to cooperate in Jounieh municipal elections. Aoun emerged as one of the major winners in the municipal elections of Mount Lebanon, the stronghold of the Christian vote, however his own political movement suffered significant divisions in the process. Both Hezbollah and the “Future Movement” are hoping that Aoun and Geagea will eventually return to their original alliances, although this seems unlikely.

4) The Rise of an Electable Civil Society Movement

The civil society movement in Lebanon made big strides in recent years, acquiring support from the media and a significant portion of Lebanese society, in particular the youth. The big shift in Beirut municipal elections was that this movement became an electable force. A group of independent professional and activists ran the second list in Beirut’s municipal elections with a new campaigning style. “Beirut Madinati” (Beirut My City”) focused on promoting individual candidates and governance programs instead of offering a uniform list along sectarian lines. The second civil society list in Beirut was incomplete with only four candidates led by former minister Charbel Nahhas, a leftist economist turned political activist who was one of the founders earlier this year of a new movement called “Citizens in a State.”

While “Beirut Madinati” earned 40 percent of the vote in the capital, including 30 percent in the Sunni areas and a majority in the Christian areas, it is not clear whether it was a one time vote as a political message to Hariri or the beginning of a new trend in Beirut politics. In return, Hezbollah loyalists in Beirut voted for Charbel Nahhas, a phenomenon that will likely not recur in the next municipal elections in 2022. Even though the civil society movement managed to set a momentum in the trash pickup debate, it was outmaneuvered by the resources available to the government and now once the municipal elections end that movement faces a new challenge to build on this momentum or wane over time.

The Next Challenge in Lebanon

As usual in Lebanese politics, there was no final verdict on who is the real winner in these municipal elections. What was clear though is that the major political parties lost some of their credibility and control over their popular base. Now, the next challenge for Lebanon is to either reach a compromise over the presidency before the end of the year or hold legislative elections



before the Parliament's term expires in June 2017. Lebanon's major political parties cannot afford extending the Parliament's term for the third time, and there is increasing pressure on them to compromise.

Despite their open confrontation in Syria and beyond, Saudi Arabia and Iran are not escalating the situation in Lebanon, however they are not willing to concede yet. Meanwhile, the current Lebanese government, albeit impaired and dysfunctional, remains as the only legitimate institution to govern the country. The four major new trends in Lebanese politics will likely shape the coming presidential election as well as the parameters of Lebanon's own political transition while waiting for Syria's future to be settled.