

Post-election Analysis

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LEBANON

Lebanon's Elections: What next?

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Introduction: Change is coming

On May 15, Lebanese went to the polls to choose who will represent them for the next four years. Yet this year's elections carry more significance than previous years. Since the outbreak of nationwide protests in October 2019, Lebanon's economy has deteriorated rapidly leaving nearly three-quarters of the population below the poverty line. The protests expedited the demise of a system of governance that functioned on crony capitalism and sectarian power sharing. The system was showing cracks, but those cracks were concealed behind state-sponsored shady financial engineering and clientelist networking. The system was in a moribund state, with its fate in the hands of Lebanese voters.

Despite the gravity of the situation, less than half the Lebanese [turned out to vote](#). People had the opportunity to pull the plug on the status quo by voting out politicians that collectively led the country to dismal living conditions. However, election results suggest that change in the Lebanese context does not come through landslide victories, but through incremental gains.

One of the distinctive features of this year's election is the large number of political groups that have organized themselves to contest the elections. These groups vary in structure, and range between traditional political parties and semi-structured coalitions of likeminded individuals. It is noteworthy that these groups were running in different electoral districts and with cross-sectarian candidates.

Thanks to the tireless effort of these groups, the parliament now includes at least 12 people that came to be known through their activism in the wake of the 2019 protests. These [MPs](#) include men and women from mixed confessional backgrounds. They won seats in Lebanon's five districts, including the strongholds of the country's traditional elites. While these people campaigned on different programs, what is common between them is their determination to change the system. It is not fully clear what that means or how to go about doing that while the old guard are still in power. Nevertheless, the extent to which these individuals can alter the status quo depends on how well they cooperate with each other, and with other change-seeking actors in parliament and amongst the grassroots.

Divisive issues

While the elections succeeded in implanting a nucleus of change, traditional sectarian parties remain strong. Hezbollah and Amal continue to dominate Shiite representation, but they lost key non-Shiite seats in their spheres of influence. The duo's strongest Christian ally, the Free Patriotic Movement, lost few seats, but most of the damage it incurred was to its reputation and through the loss of allies. Perhaps the biggest winner of the elections is the Lebanese Forces. Not only do they now enjoy being the largest Christian bloc in parliament, they are spearheading the popular and growing sentiment to disarm Hezbollah. It is this issue of sovereignty, besides financial recovery, that will animate Lebanese politics in the months to come.

There is no doubt that the [2019 protests](#) and the [2020 Beirut port explosion](#) played a pivotal role in mobilizing people and admitting new faces to the political landscape. At the same time, the conspicuous absence of Hariri's Future Movement scrambled old alliances and opened the door for new Sunni leadership. The posturing of emerging Sunni leaders will likely add pressure on Hezbollah to disarm, and result in disrupting state institutions. Yet questions remain as to the potency of Sunni leaders and their ability to counter Hezbollah, with this question determining the level of external engagement in Lebanon.

A Site of Regional Competition

Lebanon has been viewed as a site of competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran dating back to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. In the formative years of the Islamic Republic, foreign policy goals were intimately tied up with revolutionary Shiite thought, resulting in the provision of support to 'downtrodden' groups across the region, perhaps best seen in the establishment of Hezbollah, the Party of God. Over the following decades, Iranian support for Hezbollah strengthened the group's standing in Lebanon and in neighbouring states, much to the chagrin of Sunni Arab states and Israel. While regularly viewed as an Iranian 'proxy' - a concept that fails to account for the Party of God's agency independent of Iran - Hezbollah took on a prominent role in regional affairs, essentially besting the [Israeli Defence Forces in 2006](#) and laying bare a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy: to support Hezbollah (and by extension, Iran) against Israel, or to do nothing and be seen as standing against the broader Arab collective.

Saudi Arabia has long sought to develop relationships with Sunni groups in Lebanon in an effort to counter Hezbollah's power, both in the ballot box and on the street. Whilst historically reliant upon a close relationship with the Hariri family, after the death of [Rafiq in 2005](#), the Kingdom has largely struggled to find individuals capable of challenging the Party of God. Hezbollah's [2008 takeover of West Beirut](#) demonstrated the impotence of the Sunni bloc, revealing that, as one Saudi analyst observed, "the emperor was proven to have no clothes".

Whilst Hezbollah became increasingly active in regional politics after the Arab Uprisings, providing support to key allies such as Bashar Al Assad, Saudi Arabia was unable to counter the Party of God's gains. In 2017, Saad Hariri, the Lebanese Prime Minister and long-time Saudi ally was [summoned to Riyadh](#) and forced to resign due to his inability (or unwillingness) to stand up to Hezbollah. Whilst the resignation was initially rescinded, Saudi Arabia's policy towards Lebanon became one of strategic retreat, particularly from traditional Sunni leadership.

Conclusion

With the outbreak of the 2019 protests, Saudi Arabia began to search for new allies. Rather than turning to members of the Sunni community, the Saudis looked at the leader of the Lebanese Forces, a former Christian militia, in an effort to counter

Iran. This move is arguably one of last resort, signalling a general retreat from the Lebanese file, leaving the state open for Iran and possibly Qatar, albeit if the latter gains influence this could have repercussions for intra-Gulf competition. Ultimately, however, it remains to be seen how the elections will shape regional engagement with Lebanese politics, but Saudi efforts to counter Iran look to be taking place elsewhere.

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The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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