

Understanding Refugee Politics in Lebanon and Calls for Repatriation



Law and Politics of "Safe Zones" and Forced Return to Syria: Refugee Politics in Lebanon



Libya's Manufacturing Sector: Placing Strategic Bets to Become Competitive



Tunisia's Manufacturing Sector: Machinery, Electronics, and Chemical Sector Potential



المركز اللبناني للدراسات
The Lebanese Center
for Policy Studies

Search LCPS

Join our mailing



letters



Review of the
status of the
Constitution
Law

11 Dec 2012- Jan



Decentralization Law

10 Oct-Nov 2012



How to Mixed Sectarian
Has Provided Favor
able and Infrastructure
in Heterogeneous Ones

09 Aug-Sept

links

business incubated by

government agencies

international agencies

Featured Analysis



Sami Atallah, LCPS executive director

Share 161 Tweet Share

May 2018

Calling into Question Hezbollah's Electoral "Takeover"

On May 6, Lebanon held its first parliamentary election in nine years. To average Lebanese citizens, the results cannot be described as anything other than anti-climactic. Turnout for the election was low despite voters casting their ballots according to a new hybrid proportional representation system, under which turnout is usually higher; only a slightly higher number of women will enter the next parliament compared to 2009; and new, independent groups were not able to propel more than a single candidate to victory. Despite all these issues surrounding the elections and its results, some foreign

observers and domestic actors have reduced the outcome to an abrupt and final Hezbollah takeover of the country. This interpretation is both misleading and largely misses the point of what Hezbollah has in fact gained.

Lost in this maze of analysis is the fact that the party which scored the biggest win is the Lebanese Forces (LF), an anti-Hezbollah party. The LF managed to double their number of seats from eight to sixteen and expanded their representation from five districts in 2009 to thirteen in 2018. By snatching ten Maronite seats, they have deluded the Free Patriotic Movement's (FPM) claim of being the party which best and most powerfully represents Christian interests across the country.

At the other end of the spectrum, the current prime minister's party, the Future Movement, saw its bloc dwindle from being the largest with thirty-four seats to twenty. The loss of five Sunni seats weakens the prime minister's leadership in the Sunni community as his party controls only seventeen out of twenty-seven Sunni seats. In Beirut II district, his party lost five out of the eleven seats, four of them to Hezbollah and Hezbollah-allied parties.

Although the FPM increased the size of its bloc by two seats to reach twenty-nine, making it the largest bloc in parliament, its victory is not as ironclad as claimed by Gebran Bassil, the FPM's leader. The party controls only thirteen Maronite seats, six fewer than in 2009. The party was also compelled to nominate eleven non-party members to ensure victory in various districts.

Hezbollah, where all foreign eyes are trained, gained one seat. Although Hezbollah and its allies won a seat in Zahle and Beirut II, it lost a few seats in Baabda and Baalbeck, its own backyard. Its victory rests not in the size of its bloc but in sweeping all twenty-seven Shiite seats with the Amal movement, which itself grabbed seventeen seats. It secured victory for five Sunni MPs who provide it with cross-sectarian cover. In terms of the popular vote, Hezbollah and Amal lists garnered 35% of ballots cast in 2018. While a large section of its constituents willingly support it, Hezbollah's success lies in its organizational capacity to mobilize voters on election day.

Indeed, Hezbollah, Amal, and other smaller parties hold one-third of parliament seats. Adding the FPM to their camp would numerically give them the upper hand in parliament but the nature of politics in

Lebanon dictates that Hezbollah and their allies will not simply run roughshod over the country using the parliament. For one, President Michael Aoun's agenda may deviate from that of Hezbollah now that he resides in Baabda and is entitled to name a share of the government's cabinet posts. He will likely be keen to preserve the state and its institutions, possibly to a degree than might not be convenient for Hezbollah. Two, the contemporary iteration of the FPM reached an agreement with the Future Movement only last year, according to which Aoun was elected president and in return Hariri headed the government. In the last year and a half, this relationship evolved in such a way that both parties worked closely on several issues. Even electorally, Hariri called on his supporters in Batroun to give their preferential vote to Bassil, who has struggled to win a parliamentary seat since 2005. Furthermore, the tension between the FPM and the Amal movement will further complicate the FPM's relationship with Hezbollah in the coming weeks, not the least because it remains unclear whether the FPM will endorse Amal leader Nabih Berri's candidacy to become, once again, the parliament speaker.

All signs point to anything but smooth sailing in the formation of a government, a process which could very well last late into the summer if political haggling and wrangling is employed to full effect. Hezbollah's largely coherent bloc will strengthen its bargaining position and it will be able to veto nominations and laws that are not to its liking. However, the nature of the political system will force it to engage in wheeling and dealing with other parties. Its ability to control the state is constrained by rival parties as well as the confessional quota of the country. Also, it is not in the interest of Hezbollah to try to dominate the political scene for two reasons. One, pushing too hard may antagonize other political groups to Hezbollah's own detriment. Engaged in Syria, Hezbollah would likely not want to aggravate the domestic situation. This could lead to instability which is something to be avoided domestically for its own sake. Two, assuming too much control of state institutions via ministerial portfolios may backfire, especially if they fail to deliver. During the election, Hezbollah made several promises to fight corruption—reflecting unease among its constituents—but an anti-corruption battle is very hard to win in Lebanon. In the sense that Hezbollah derives its power, not from the number of seats it holds in the parliament, but from its ability to mobilize its followers and partisans; its strong and consistent foreign backing; and its special—albeit often opaque—relationship with state security and intelligence

agencies, the party has fortified itself with this win. How the party uses this power, which it possessed prior to Sunday's election, will determine the course of future events.

To see the election outcome through the prism of an outright Hezbollah victory is reductionist and misses the point. Earlier this week, Israel carried out its largest military operation targeting Syrian soil in decades, action which comes on the heels of Trump declaring that the United States will no longer adhere to its commitments under the Iran nuclear deal. The tacit argument being made by those touting the notion that Hezbollah has seized control in Lebanon, and explicitly by many Israeli political and military leaders, is that the Lebanese state is a legitimate target in any future conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Apart from engaging in lazy and incomplete analysis, there can be no other informed interpretation of attempts to promulgate the flawed assertion that Lebanon is now, suddenly, under the control of a single political party.

Granted, the majority in parliament among Hezbollah and their allies likely means that the party's weapons will not be a focus of action in the legislature but that begs the question of whether they ever were in the first place. Hezbollah's accumulation and retention of arms stems from the signing of the Taef Accord, consecutive governments that tacitly approved of the party keeping their weapons, in addition to regional actors such as Iran supporting the party both materially and rhetorically.

So, where does this largely non-contextualized focus on Hezbollah's electoral achievements leave us? Indeed, Hezbollah has solidified its position in parliament. However, this is a marginal addition to its power given the unwillingness of MPs to fully exercise the parliament's legislative and oversight roles. No keen Lebanon watcher should gloss over the fact that their ability to dictate policy is limited by a range of factors, prime among them Lebanon's confessional system and fluid party politics. While the next ministerial statement will likely not denounce Hezbollah's arms, let's not lose sight of the fact that a regional consensus would first be necessary to level a final decision on that contentious matter.



Search LCPS



Copyright © 2018 by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, Inc. All rights reserved. Design and developed by Polypod.

[Your comments](#)
[Contact LCPS](#)
[Careers](#)
[Legal notice](#)