

Lebanon's Perennial Limbo: A Paralysed System Teetering on the Brink

by Giulia Gozzini

Against the backdrop of a catastrophic and seemingly endless downward spiral that began in 2019, a paralysing political stalemate has once again gripped Lebanon. Close to three months have passed since the Lebanese were called to the polls on 15 May, the first parliamentary elections held since the October 2019 revolution (*thawra*) and the 2020 Beirut blast. Yet, nothing seems to have changed.

While the results did not bring about a significant political breakthrough, they did break the monopoly of traditional parties, with the election of 13 independent candidates associated with the popular protests of 2019.¹ This is a noticeable occurrence given that it was produced by a system which is tailor-made for the political *élite* to maintain the *status quo*. That said, the vote can hardly qualify as a victory of the so-called "forces of change".

¹ Anthony Samrani, "Pourquoi le Hezbollah est le principal perdant des élections", in *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 17 May 2022, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1299844>.

Likewise, it would be unwise to claim – as many in the media did in the aftermath of the vote – that the results represent a defeat for the Shia Islamist party, Hezbollah.

True, the alliance led by the Shia parties (Hezbollah and Amal), which includes other Christian, Armenian and Druze parties, lost its majority in parliament and, thus, its role as king-maker. Yet, it still remains the largest parliamentary bloc. Moreover, while Hezbollah kept its seats and even secured more votes for its candidates compared to 2018, this was not the case for its non-Shia allies, who seem to be losing the trust of their voters (perhaps, critical of a growing dependence on the "Party of God").²

This reveals a downsizing of the ancillary components of Hezbollah's

² For data and statistics concerning the elections, see the elaboration of The Policy Initiative, *Lebanese Parliamentary Elections: Seat Distribution of Winners by Political Affiliation*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.thepolicyinitiative.org/article/details/148>.

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substantial power in the country, which is certainly not grounded in parliamentary seats. Indeed, the party does not need a majority in parliament to maintain its hegemony. As the re-election of the leader of the Shia party Amal, Nabih Berri, for a seventh term as speaker of parliament on 31 May attests, Hezbollah still retains a considerable degree of control over Lebanese politics.

Among the Hezbollah's allies, it is worth noting the poor performance of Lebanese President Michel Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). While the FPM lost seats and votes, the Lebanese Forces (LF) – led by Samir Geagea and fiercely opposed to Hezbollah with Saudi Arabia's support³ – reported impressive gains, thus becoming the main Christian political representative and the largest party within the *majlis* (parliament).

These results affect the internal political equilibria of the Christian community by challenging the FPM's leadership. Nonetheless, Geagea's electoral gains will be hard to translate into practice. Indeed, the re-election of Berri, albeit with the slimmest majority ever, and the consultations for the appointment of the next prime minister have already demonstrated the LF's inability to build a large coalition, a precondition to retain influence over any new executive.⁴

³ This has interesting implications since the Saudis traditionally supported the Sunni community and, notably, the Hariri family. After the split with Saad Hariri and subsequent to his withdrawal from politics, the Saudis decided to cautiously re-engage with Lebanese politics by supporting the Christian leader Geagea.

⁴ The LF seem to have resorted to their traditional passivity. This was immediately

Moving to the Sunni camp, Saad Hariri's withdrawal from politics did not seem to have a cataclysmic impact on the overall turnout.⁵ Again, the implications mainly revolve around internal balances within the Sunni field. Despite the gauntlet the former prime minister threw down to his rivals, no alternative Sunni leadership has emerged. On the one hand, the installation of a large yellow inflatable swimming pool in Beirut's Sunni stronghold of Tareeq al-Jadideh by Hariri's supporters, who boycotted the elections, testifies to the popularity he still enjoys.⁶

On the other, the votes of those members of the Sunni community who actually participated in the election were actually dispersed between independent candidates and new local leaderships (such as Ashraf Rifi in Tripoli). This unprecedented

visible, as mentioned, during the parliamentary consultations to name the new prime minister-designate that led to the re-appointment of Najib Miqati. Indeed, Geagea and his party decided not to support the outgoing prime minister, yet without expressing a name of their own. Moreover, the fact that Miqati did not even obtain the endorsement of the FPM – the other Christian party – raises inevitable questions about the survival – notably after the 2008 Doha Agreement and its recognition of the opposition's veto power over government decisions – of a prime minister who does not enjoy Christian legitimacy to date.

⁵ Indeed, the overall turnout was around 49 per cent, thus equaling the 2018 turnout figure of 49.7 per cent. For official data, see the Interior Ministry's website: *Election Results by Year* (in Arabic), <https://elections.gov.lb/النتائج/2022/اجياتن-باسنح-الليصافت/تباختنال-اجياتن-ماعل-تباختنال-2022.aspx>.

⁶ "Saad Hariri's Beirut Supporters Boycott Election with Pool Party", in *The National*, 15 May 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2022/05/15/saad-hariris-beirut-supporters-boycott-election-with-pool-party>.

political fragmentation within the Sunni community – once under the undisputed monopoly of the Hariri family – may pave the way for the emergence of new, more localised leaders, reminiscent of the pre-civil war era.

One notable exception to these general trends of internal fragmentation is the Shia front which still firmly revolves around the “Hezbollah-Amal duo”. Nonetheless, the biggest novelty undoubtedly regards the new independent candidates, which gained 13 seats, replacing long-standing political figures. Independent candidates were elected in Beirut, the Mount Lebanon Governorate and the southern and northern governorates, demonstrating a good cross-regional performance. This result clearly reflects the widespread popular dissatisfaction towards the old guard.

That said, two major challenges now face the independents. First, they have to cope with a problem of internal cohesion,⁷ which makes the creation of a united opposition front unlikely. Second, they face a dilemma of coherence. Since parliament is divided into several parties/groupings, none having a majority, independents will soon have to decide whether to remain consistent with their “purist” anti-establishment posture – thereby contributing to this paralysing political fragmentation – or agree to coalesce and compromise with other traditional

⁷ Indeed, even among the new independent members of parliament, there are significant ideological and political divergences, which resulted in an internal competition that has likely limited the number of seats won.

parties (such as the LF) which they have long criticised and opposed.

While the election of new independents did produce a positive revival of the spirit that drove the 2019 *thawra*, this success needs to be framed in the overall context. Despite their dismal results, Lebanon's established political forces still control 90 per cent of parliament. The enduring popularity of traditional forces suggests that “time-tested mobilising methods, such as leveraging patronage and instigating sectarian fears, still have traction”.⁸ Patronage and political clientelism are today even more useful than the past, given the economic collapse in Lebanon.⁹ Indeed, since 2019, living standards have seriously deteriorated. Income and wealth are now decimated and the ruling class is seemingly – and one might say intentionally – oblivious to the social repercussions of this financial meltdown.

Elections did not alter this grim outlook. Rather, they have again produced a fragmented and polarised parliament.¹⁰ In the best-case scenario, parties will be able to create fluid, “issue-oriented” majorities. At worst, Lebanon will be jammed in another political deadlock.

⁸ David Wood, “Lebanon's Elections Portend Protracted Political Vacuum”, in *Crisis Group Q&A*, 23 May 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/19546>.

⁹ See, Melani Cammett and Sukriti Issar, “Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: Sectarianism and the Logics of Welfare Allocation in Lebanon”, in *World Politics*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (July 2010), p. 381-421, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887110000080>.

¹⁰ “Berri Wins Tight Speaker Vote in Divided Lebanon Parliament”, in *Reuters*, 31 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanese-parliament-re-elects-nabih-berri-speaker-reuters-count-2022-05-31>.

The task of forming a new government will likely be complicated and lengthy. Likewise, government formation will be inevitably intertwined with the presidential elections scheduled for October.¹¹ If no new president is designated by 1 November (a highly probable scenario), the council of ministers – in accordance with the Lebanese Constitution – will assume presidential powers. Political parties are, therefore, perfectly aware that the new government may be granted full executive power, which raises the stakes further.

Such a paralysing stalemate will inevitably make the task of implementing reforms even more complex. The new government must reach a final agreement for a bailout package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is conditional on the fulfilment of a list of long-delayed reforms. Yet, the IMF deal is not enough to build a sustainable, equitable and inclusive economy. Steadily worsening humanitarian conditions also require the urgent implementation of an ambitious social protection policy and economic recovery plan.¹² Yet, the present political setting for this to materialise simply

does not exist.

As a result, Lebanon risks being stuck in a bad and paralysing equilibrium, clinging to the resilience of its civil society and economic support from the diaspora in order to survive, or at worst face the risk of an implosion, with an outbreak of social anger likely resulting in tensions and violence.

In the absence of an outright majority and in a delicate consociational system like Lebanon – where the decision-making process is premised on consensus and compromise – any fragile majority will prove short lived and likely unable to command enough legitimacy and power to implement needed reforms. As a result, the initial celebratory mood that accompanied the electoral results is now colliding with the realisation that the outcome may in fact turn out to be grimmer than originally thought.

To save Lebanon from this disaster and truly transform the political system, the country has to come to terms with its past and shake off the political *élite* that has controlled and infested Lebanese politics since the end of the civil war in 1990. For this to happen, a political alternative should be built. These elections have shown that it is not enough to take to the streets and protest; entering formal politics is also a necessity, particularly for a younger generation of Lebanese citizens that are actively engaged in seeking to take back control of their country and their future.

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¹¹ Parliament elects the president, who requires the support of at least two-thirds of sitting legislators. In light of the election results, it is unlikely that any political grouping will be able to reach this number without support from others. Parties will therefore not compromise on a candidate without a wider agreement on the country's future balance of power.

¹² Georgia Dagher and Sami Zoughaib, "A Collapsing Society: The Urgency of a Social Protection Floor", in *The Policy Initiative*, 16 June 2022, <https://www.thepolicyinitiative.org/article/details/166>.

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