

“LEBANESE ELECTIONS: THE DEBRIEF”
SUMMARY OF A ‘MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE’ WEBINAR
17 MAY 2022



OVERVIEW

With the Lebanese electorate having gone to the polls on May 15, for its first parliamentary elections since the 2019 protest movement, the financial and socio-economic collapse, and the Beirut port explosion. the Middle East Institute in Washington held a two-part webinar series to examine the potential consequences of this long-awaited political milestone.

In the first of the webinars , held before the election, key questions regarding the current Lebanese political and electoral landscape and its effect on competing political forces were discussed by a panel of experts.

Following the election on 15 May, in the second of these webinars moderated by Joyce Karam (*Senior US Correspondent, The National*), a second series of experts discussed the consequences of the outcome for both the people of Lebanon, the region and the wider international community.

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS BY THE PANELLISTS

- I. MONA YACOUBIAN** (*Senior Advisor to the Vice President of Middle East and Africa, United States Institute of Peace*)
 - The fact that the election in Lebanon did go ahead and the fact that Hezbollah and its allies lost their majority in parliament offers a glimmer of hope, especially for policy makers in Washington.
 - As a result, the Americans have someone in the shape of the ‘newly elected reformist elements and independents’ to work with . Had Hezbollah retained its majority, the US would probably have tried to stay clear of Lebanese politics for the near future.
 - With the elections over, the priorities now - in an atmosphere where matters have become worse and more complicated because of the Ukraine war - is to get a new Speaker as well as a new ‘technocratic’ cabinet that can start as soon as possible to negotiate with the IMF in order to come up with a plan to regenerate the economy and provide a measure of relief and stability.
 - A consequence of what has transpired as a result of the election is that the US in the shape of some of the newly elected reformist MPs has something to work with and support. With US help, the new reformists (‘Forces of Lebanon’) can in this way be made to play an ‘Outsized’ role in the politics of Lebanon reflective of the broader general aspirations.

- The remaining fear – especially for the US, is that deadlock and political stagnation in parliament might persist, given especially the fact that upcoming presidential election planned for October 2022 still lies ahead.
- Finally, as for the ‘Sunni street’, with Hariri essentially a spent political force, the need for new faces has never been more.

2. JOSEPH BAHOUT (*Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut*)

- Although the election results provide a less pessimistic future for Lebanon, nonetheless, the low level of participation after all the upheavals of the recent years, was not a good sign.
- The low turn-out – estimated to have been around 45% as opposed to 60% in 2018 – can be interpreted as a signal of defiance on the part of a population that is now very concerned about the potential risk of gridlock in the new parliament because of the new intake.
- The low-turn amongst the Sunni voters can be said to have been at the behest of Saad Hariri who had called for a boycott of the elections. However, even amongst Shia voters of Amal and Hezbollah and in places like Beka and south Lebanon, the number of voters was much less than before.
- Europe and France in particular, might now – like the US – become incentivized to try helping Lebanon by trying to encourage the formation of a reformist coalition given the level of political divisions that have existed.
- However, in analysing the election result, it is important to state that Hezbollah coalition with its 62 members is still a powerful force.
- This means that with all the bargaining and jockeying that lies ahead as well as the fact that a new technocratic cabinet cannot assume office until after the October presidential election, no serious negotiation with the IMF cannot realistically begin before 2023.
- With time being of critical essence, those negotiation which are critical for the future of Lebanon can only happen, if the election of a new president by the parliament is not stalled or impeded by a gridlocked parliament, something that cannot be guaranteed at this time with Hezbollah and its allies not having the numbers they had before.
- Saudi Arabia who had recently returned its Ambassador to Beirut (someone who has been quite active on the scene) has once again resumed its interest in Lebanese politics and having patched up some of its differences with Hariri, contributed to the success of some of the new blood (group of 22) that were elected.
- As for the ‘Shia street’, while Nabil Berri (aged 82) will probably be re-elected as the next Speaker, it is a fact that neither Amal nor Hezbollah

were at all comfortable with what transpired despite the fact that neither side lost any seats (i.e., seats lost were those of their allies!).

3. MAKRAM OUASIS (*Executive Director, The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies*)

- The message sent by the voters, who feel that the level of their political efficacy is near zero, was not just one of defiance but also one of disillusionment in a country that is hosting 1.5 million refugees at a time when thousands of its own people are lining to emigrate away because of terrible economic circumstances.
- It is also a fact that more people than ever before from the diaspora community participated in the election process with the intention of moving away from traditional political figures and parties as well as perennial points of argument such the competition for influence in Lebanon between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Instead, what is first and foremost on their mind is the 'need to build a new state' - one that can work!
- As a result, with the Lebanese Pound having lost 90% of its value and with 80% of all Lebanese surviving below the poverty line, a number of familiar names such as 'Elie Ferzli' (the former Deputy Speaker of parliament) and 'Assad Hardan' - who were both defeated in the elections, have given way to new figures with completely different agendas (i.e., "Forces of Lebanon").
- Irrespective of a domestic concerns, it is important to note that regional dynamics will still play a role because of the existing ties that traditional political parties have with various regional players.
- The future of maritime talks with Israel is not expected to make quick track in light of everything else that is going on
- At the end of the day, the truth is that no matter what should happen in either the domestic or foreign scene, there are no quick fixes for Lebanon's problems.

