

Countdown to Lebanon's Elections:

An Opportunity for Change or a Re-assertion of the Status-Quo?

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(Hussam Shbaro - Anadolu Agency)

Over the past few years, Lebanon has seen a convergence of unprecedented political, humanitarian, financial, and socio-economic crises. In October 2019, citizens rose up to demand accountability and push for reforms to end decades of impunity and corruption. On May 15, Lebanon heads to the polls for the first parliamentary elections since the crisis began. This Policy Outlook examines key themes and questions leading up to the polls as well and explores local and regional implications of potential results.

Introduction

On May 15th, 2022 Lebanon is holding parliamentary elections, the first since the 2019 protest movement that came to be known in opposition circles as the [‘October Revolution’](#), the explosion at the Beirut port in August 2020, an unprecedented socio-economic collapse, and amidst a shifting regional environment. Widespread discontent, anger, and disillusionment with traditional political actors have increased hopes that the emergence of new parties and [electoral lists](#) affiliated with the protest movement could achieve significant gains. However, the proliferation of pro-October Revolution opposition groups combined with elite manoeuvring have watered down hopes that the election will usher in any significant changes, particularly given the unprecedented economic, social, and political challenges the country is facing. Voter turnout remains an open question as the polls approach, with a lower participation rate thought to favour established parties, particularly Hezbollah and its allies, all the more so if Lebanon’s Sunni community stay away from the polls in large enough numbers amid a widely reported boycott call by Saad Hariiri, the former Prime Minister, and the most prominent political figure among the country’s Sunni community.

What are the Core issues at Stake?

While problems in Lebanon are plentiful, the core issues that have dominated the campaign all go back to the country’s unprecedented [economic collapse](#). Corruption, graft, and economic mismanagement have dominated the campaign, particularly for opposition groups as well as those who have tried to hitch their political bandwagon to the protest movement that emerged in October 2019. The historical economic collapse, dubbed by the World Bank as one of the worst in the past 150 years continues to cast its shadow over the country. In April, the government of the current Prime Minister Najib Mikati [reached](#) a staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to unlock \$3 billion in assistance on the condition that a series of long-sought financial and economic reforms be carried out. Although \$3 billion represents a far cry from what is ultimately needed to put the country back on a path to economic recovery, it would significantly help in restoring investor confidence and facilitate the further distribution of grants and loans.

However, this emergency assistance is contingent upon the implementation of structural reforms in several areas including reforming the laws governing banking secrecy and financial crimes, a full audit of Lebanon’s central bank, the Banque du Liban, and the passing of the 2022 national budget. With elections scheduled to take place on May 15th, it is all but impossible that the IMF board will approve the funding prior to the election, meaning that it will be up to the government comes afterwards to undertake the re-

quired reforms. Unless there is a shocking turn of events on Sunday, it is all but certain that the necessary reforms will be further delayed. In addition to the poor track record of Lebanese authorities in implementing reforms, what is all but certain to be a drawn out process of government formation combined with the general resistance to conditional aid among traditional political actors, most notably from [Hezbollah](#), all present seemingly insurmountable barriers to genuine reform.

Other key issues include holding key officials to account for a range of issues including corruption, graft, and political interference in the judiciary, particularly as it relates to the highly politicized investigation into the August 2020 explosion at the port of Beirut. Moreover, the issue of Hezbollah’s weapons has been raised repeatedly by numerous protest-movement affiliated parties as well as Hezbollah’s traditional rivals, most notably the Christian Lebanese Forces led by Samir Geagea as well as elements with the Sunni community energized by a re-engagement of Saudi Arabia Lebanon’s domestic political scene. These discussions come amid a backdrop of increased tension in the country that saw a number of [clashes](#) between Hezbollah, its Amal allies and various other actors including Sunni clansmen south of the capital and last October’s fighting in Beirut between Hezbollah and Amal fighters and hitherto unknown gunmen widely believed to be affiliated with the Christian [Lebanese Forces](#).

The Ex-Pat Factor

Polls for the Lebanese diaspora were held around the world in the week prior to the election, with a reported significantly higher turnout than in 2018. [Participation](#) from country to country varied, ranging from the low-to-mid 70s in the UK and the UAE, to 27 per cent in Canada, and while some violations at polling stations were reported, the NGO [Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections](#) (LADE) indicated that none of the observed violations, ranging from breaches of voting secrecy to an active presence of political parties at the polling stations, were beyond expectations, neither did they represent a threat to the process.

Whether or not the ex-pat vote will significantly impact the results remains to be seen and is dependent on a number of factors, and while the participation rate is encouraging on some levels, it cannot be assumed that an increased ex-pat turnout automatically translates into a vote in favour of civil society or protest movement affiliated electoral lists. In fact, as the turnout in [Berlin](#) clearly indicated, many ex-pat voters have mobilised in favour of traditional political parties. In either case, whether the ex-pat vote will have any impact on the results largely depends on the particular electoral district in which they are voting. For example, the district of North III, which includes Batroun, Koura, Bcharre, and Zghorta, has a higher proportion of non-resident registered voters than other districts, and thus more opportunity for the ex-pat vote to make a difference. If the



Lebanese President Michel Aoun (L) visits the election monitoring center at Foreign Ministry building as Lebanese people living abroad head to polls for parliamentary elections to be held May 15 in Lebanon on May 08, 2022 in Beirut, Lebanon. (Lebanese Presidency - Anadolu Agency)

ex-pat vote does indeed tip the balance in certain electoral districts, it will undoubtedly alter the political dynamics in Lebanon moving forward. Even in the lead up to this election, established political leaders have largely ignored the political potential of the diaspora and have either taken the loyalty of their respective communities abroad for granted or assumed they were too insignificant to be factored into their respective strategies. However, if the large Lebanese diaspora proves to have political significance, both traditional political actors and emerging opposition movements will surely give them more weight in the future.

Political Dynamics

The significant turnout among the Lebanese diaspora, while encouraging, has limited predictive power regarding turnout in Lebanon itself this coming Sunday, May 15th. Resident voter turnout for the 2018 parliamentary elections was recorded at a mere 48 per cent, down 5 per cent from the previous elections, and a clear reflection of voter apathy in the country. Amid large scale pauperization and a lack of basic goods and services, including fuel and medical supplies, citizen anger arguably represents a potentially decisive factor with regard to voter turnout, however, it remains to be seen how this may play out and if it will be enough to counteract the fatigue and exasperation felt by so many Lebanese.

A Sunni Boycott?

The potential of a widespread Sunni boycott of the polls has injected additional unpredictability as to how the vote might play out. Out of Lebanon's diverse confessional communities, the Sunni community has arguably experienced the most disarray in recent years, particularly after Saad Hariri's largely unexpected [withdrawal](#) from the political scene in January 2022. Many analyses have assumed that a low level of Sunni participation will entail gains for Hezbollah and its allies within the Sunni community. [According](#) to political analyst and former advisor to Saad Hariri Ibrahim al-Jawhari, "because of what Saad Hariri did, Hezbollah now has two-thirds of the parliament within its sights." Hezbollah and its allies, who collectively hold 71 out of 128 parliamentary seats could potentially secure the required two-thirds majority (known as the blocking two-thirds) that would allow them to advance an agenda without the concern of being vetoed.

Beyond the potential national and regional ramifications of a widespread Sunni boycott of the vote, the upcoming could determine who the next political leaders of the Sunni community will be. While Saad Hariri's exit from the political scene is only the most recent chapter in the scion of the Hariri family's political drama, it has opened doors for others to step forward. One of the most notable of these figures is former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. While he is not personally running and recently declared that he was



Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati (L) and Lebanese Mufti Sheikh Abdullatif Deryan (R) attend Eid al-Fitr prayer at Muhammad Al-Amin Mosque in Beirut, Lebanon on May 02, 2022. (Mahmut Şehirli - Anadolu Agency)

[not interested](#) in potentially leading a post-election government he has openly declared his support for particular electoral lists. Likewise, current Prime Minister Najib Mikati, while also not running for election, has made moves that make it clear that he is seeking to carve out a sphere of influence among disenchanted Future Movement supporters. Saad Hariri's brother, Bahaa, who entered the fray of Lebanese politics following his Saad's withdrawal and is reportedly backed by both the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, represents another potential future political leader of the Sunni community. While the possibility remains that Saad Hariri could make an eleventh-hour [appeal](#) to his supporters to come out and vote, a widespread Sunni boycott of the election would be a clear demonstration of the ongoing appeal of Saad Hariri's sway among Lebanon's Sunnis.

Within the last week, prominent Sunni figures, including Seniora and Lebanon's Grand Mufti Abd al-Latif Derian, have appealed to Sunni voters to participate, [warning](#) that a boycott would inhibit independent candidates and would all but hand Hezbollah and its allies full reign over the state. This appeal is expected to be echoed by Sunni religious figures during this week's Friday prayers in a last-ditch effort to mobilise Sunni voters. For his part, Seniora has [re-iterated](#) that Hariri never actually called for a boycott of the vote and that he should not be attributed with something that he never actually said.

This renewed energy among prominent Sunni figures can at least be partly attributed to a re-engagement from the Gulf, particularly from Saudi Arabia, following a [crisis](#) late in 2021 that saw GCC states withdraw their ambassadors ostensibly in protest of unfavourable comments made by then-Lebanese Information Minister George Kordahi regarding the Saudi-led coalition's actions in Yemen. Since diplomatic ties were restored, Saudi Ambassador Walid Bukhari has been holding meetings with allies in Lebanon in the lead up to elections. Saudi re-engagement appears to be at least partly attributable to the efforts of French President Emmanuel Macron who reportedly pushed the Saudis to [re-engage](#) in the country. Should Hariri make a last-minute appeal to his supporters, which he has been rumoured to be prepared to do at the request of a number of Gulf states, a new element of unpredictability would be added to an already uncertain situation.

The Christian Vote

The key dynamic to watch for within the Christian constituency is the extent to which the Hezbollah-allied Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) will emerge from the polls degraded and who among its rivals will be the primary beneficiaries. The anti-Hezbollah Lebanese Forces, backed by Saudi Arabia, and Kataeb stand to gain the most from the FPM's expected losses, particularly in the Maronite heartland of Keserwan. However, there remains the possibility that independent parties that emerged out of the protest movement could pick up a couple of seats at FPM's expense. The FPM is counting on Hezbollah to help them make up for these losses in other districts, particularly in the south, however, it remains to be seen how effective these efforts may be. Whether Hezbollah and its FPM allies can once again secure a parliamentary majority depends in large part on whether the FPM can make up for some of its expected losses in Keserwan and beyond.

A significant electoral win for the Samir Geagea-led Lebanese Forces would spell trouble domestically for Hezbollah, particularly if combined with a high level of Sunni participation. However, the most significant potential consequence relates to the election of Lebanon's next president, scheduled for later in 2022. A significant loss for the FPM would all but bury Gebran Bassil's hope of succeeding his father-in-law in Baabda, the seat of Lebanon's presidency.

The Shi'a Duopoly

Will Hezbollah and its allies emerge once again with a parliamentary majority? This depends, in part, on the extent to which Hezbollah and its Shi'a ally Amal will maintain their grip on their core constituency. There is a distinct possibility that one or two independent candidates could break through the formidable political machine that Hezbollah and Amal have set up, particularly in the south. Given that a few seats could prove to be the difference in whether or not a second straight parliamentary majority is secured by



The first batch of Iranian fuel oil arrive in the city of Baalbek in eastern Lebanon on September 16, 2021. The fuel oil cargo secured through Lebanon's Hezbollah was delivered via Syria by truck. (Sleiman Amhaz - Anadolu Agency)

Hezbollah and its allies, such a breakthrough could have significant immediate political consequences. Perhaps more importantly, it would open space for dissent among Lebanese Shias and would signal that the tight grip of Hezbollah and Amal is beginning to loosen. Instances of voter [intimidation](#) and threats against independent, pro-protest movement candidates by Hezbollah and Amal supporters in the south are an indication that the Shia duo is taking the threats against them in their core constituency seriously, regardless of how marginal they may currently be.

There also appear to be concerns among Hezbollah officials regarding the shift in dynamics in both the Sunni and Christian communities resulting from Saudi Arabia's renewed engagement in the country. In the face of likely FPM losses, Hezbollah and its allies will need to make significant gains in Sunni areas, which has been somewhat of an assumed *fait d'accomplis* until recently with Saudi Arabia's renewed engagement in the country.

Although counterintuitive given its rhetoric of resistance, Hezbollah can be counted among the status-quo powers in Lebanon. Thus, while a Hezbollah-allied two-thirds parliamentary majority would have significant consequences beyond Lebanon's borders, it remains an open question whether or not the party cum militia desires such an outcome. Hezbollah expects the next parliament to differ little from its current iteration, which would allow the party to retain its current level of political influence and ensure

the continuation of a de-facto cover for its weapons and regional activities, while also shielding it from both domestic and international accountability. Moreover, a two-thirds majority led by Hezbollah and its allies would likely isolate Lebanon both regionally and internationally at a time when the country is in dire need of support, something that would likely be an unwelcome burden for the party.

The Protest Movement and the Emerging Opposition

The 2022 elections are notable for the unprecedented engagement of opposition parties affiliated with the protest movement that swept the country beginning in October 2019. However, because the dozens of opposition groups participating in the election were unable to present a unified electoral front, despite their differences, it remains to be seen to what extent they will be able to capitalize on the widespread public anger and frustration towards the country's political class. Despite almost three years of socio-economic collapse and no effective accountability for billions of dollars' worth of savings lost to corruption and mismanagement, the hegemony of Lebanon's political elite looks set to continue, albeit more challenged than in previous years.

There are several reasons for this, including the lack of unity among Lebanon's [emergent opposition](#) composed of established civil society groups, established political

actors who have jumped on the protest movement bandwagon, and new groups who emerged out of the 2019 protest movement. While there were attempts to form a united front in the lead up to the elections, the process was complicated by the proliferation of groups. While there is widespread agreement among these groups regarding the need to move beyond the status quo and hold the political class to account for the state of the country, views on how this should be done and what exactly it entails have been somewhat divergent.

A recent [study](#) by the Lebanon-based Triangle Research and Media examining the tendency of voters to turn to traditional parties over independents indicates that while opposition groups have a significant amount of support in less populated well-off urban areas, sect and family remain the stronghold of traditional parties' appeal to their voter base. According to the study:

"50% of those voting for traditional parties stated 'historical reasons,' for their choice compared to less than 1% among independent candidates. This trend continues with questions on commitment to village, family, and region all polling heavily in favor of traditional candidates relative to independents. This indicates that factors which contribute to fear of others and sectarian-based voting continue to dominate the logic of voters who support traditional parties, even if they don't think too highly of those they vote for: A whopping 98% of respondents thought that the ruling elite's performance was bad (79%) or average (19%); yet 40% of those who answered "bad" were still planning on voting for traditional parties."

Beyond the broad agreement that the traditional political class is at the root of Lebanon's problems, a host of issues divide opposition affiliated groups. One of the most divisive relates to the highly volatile issue of Hezbollah's weapons and its intervention in regional affairs including in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The issue of Hezbollah's weapons has been seized upon by some as being the most important, while other groups have argued that the issue should be delayed until the country is in a more stable position. Moreover, the political inexperience of most of these groups came to the forefront over disagreements regarding the extent to which they should embrace figures such as Sami Gemeyal, leader of the Kataeb party, or engage with parties such as the LF, who have vocally supported – although perhaps not completely embraced – the key talking points of the protest movement regarding corruption and accountability. For now, the opposition movement will remain vulnerable to elite manoeuvring and efforts by traditional political actors to foment division and dissent among the opposition. However, there remains a significant chance that opposition parties could see some important breakthroughs in certain districts, particularly in Beirut.

The International Community

More than ever in its history, Lebanon needs outside support. The re-engagement of traditional supporters in the Gulf sends a positive signal, however, the broader international community must look beyond the May 15th parliamentary elections in planning their respective approaches to Lebanon. The results of the election, while important, should not be the exclusive standard by which the level and type of engagement is determined. The reality is that whatever the results, no major change will occur in the short term. The level of engagement of the Lebanese diaspora as well as the determination of civil society movements to ensure the elections are carried out according to due process both represent positive takeaways and bode well for the future of democracy in the country. Moreover, shifting dynamics in the broader region have the potential to open up space for regional diplomacy to positively impact Lebanon's domestic dynamic. There is a lot at stake for Lebanon in 2022, from the upcoming parliamentary polls to the election of a new president and the ongoing economic crisis. It is for this reason that the international community must take a long-term approach to the country through 2022 and beyond if there is any hope that the country can be pulled from the depths of the abyss in which it currently finds itself.