

## Lebanese general elections: a desire for transformation in an unchangeable system?

*By Alessandro RICCI*

**Executive summary:** *On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2022 Parliamentary elections were held in Lebanon (hereinafter the Country). People cast their vote after a season of protests, among a desire for structural changes and the fear of the consequences of the unprecedented economic crisis that led to poverty over the 80% of the citizens. Polls' results show that these elections will unlikely drive a real change, as the status quo of the sectarian quota system remains victorious even if new forces appear in the political scene.*

On Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2022, the Lebanese elections finally took place amid calls for boycott and a general situation of emergency. These elections were long-awaited since this is the first appointment after the important anti-government protests that took place in the Country in 2019 and the subsequent economic and health crisis that struck Lebanon in the following months. The results of the elections are noteworthy as they show that Lebanese people tried to steer the Country toward new paths even if the very structure of the system seems to be designed to prevent radical changes.

Before diving into the results of the elections, it is worth remembering, albeit briefly, how the Lebanese

electoral and political structures work<sup>1</sup>. The electoral system is a proportional representation and parties can run together using lists to make alliances in different regions. When people go to ballot, they can express a preference and vote for every candidate presented in the lists, the ones who receive more votes are then elected as members of Parliament. However, it must be signaled that the candidates are elected always following a confessional balance, filling in order every seat dedicated to every religious community in any given area.

This confessional balance is the key to understanding Lebanese politics and how the entire system works. The members of Parliament are elected in

15 different electoral districts, in which the territory of Lebanon is divided. Each electoral district is assigned a certain number of seats divided per confession, following a – not always precise – religious demography of the area. This division should in theory guarantee a representation of all the different confessions present in the electoral district even though the last official census of the confessions was conducted in 1932. Consequently, cases of gerrymandering and malapportionment are a regular occurrence as parties and leaders have taken advantage of the sectarian division of the Country to manipulate the election results<sup>2</sup>.

In the meantime, after a 25 years long civil war and numerous periods of political, economic, and social crises, the Country has evolved. Thus, numerous policies and agreements have tried to guarantee a confessional balance, most notably assigning to every religion in the Country a correct number of members in the Parliament. Following the electoral districts' division of the Country, the 128 seats of the Parliament are then equally divided among Christians and Muslims. One-half of the seats is destined to the different Christian communities while the other half is to be divided amongst the Muslim communities comprising Druze and Alawites.

Moreover, every confession is assigned a specific political role among the most important figures of the Country. As an example, the Presidency of the Republic is assigned to the Christians; the Prime Minister to the Sunni community while the Speaker of the Parliament is to be elected among the Shia.

As it can be understood, the electoral system does not allow for great changes as its very structure reiterates the divisions inside the Country, leaving to the confessional leaders the ultimate control over the policymaking sections of power.

### **The elections' results: changes on the horizon<sup>3</sup>**

Notwithstanding the fact that the political system described above allows for very little change, the polls' results have revealed that Lebanese people have tried to impress a change to the system, which could effectively go through some changes in the future.

The first important element to observe is the electoral turnout. The registered number of people who went to polls for these elections is relatively low, as only 41% of the people eligible to vote went to the polls. In the 2018 elections, the turnout registered was slightly less than 50% and in 2009, it was around 55% continuing a negative trend for what concerns trust and affections toward the democratic institutions<sup>4</sup>. In contrast to this data, it

is important to highlight that, instead, the vote of the Lebanese diaspora – which accounts for a small percentage related to the voters in the Country – totals to around 60% with voters from 58 different Countries around the World<sup>5</sup>.

Looking at the data from the polls (Figure 1. Lebanese Parliament 2022), the first results of these elections are clear. The bloc formed by the two Shiite parties – Hezbollah and Amal – and one of the Maronite Christian parties, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) – also known as the March 8<sup>th</sup> Alliance – lost the majority they held in the previous Parliament. The bloc won 58 seats in total out of the 64 needed for governing; decreasing from the 71 seats, they had in the previous Parliament (Figure 1).

The main loss of the bloc is to be attributed to the FPM – which is also the party of the actual President of the Republic – which appears to be the real loser of these elections. In fact, the FPM lost around 12 seats decreasing from 29 MPs in the previous parliament to 17 elected in these elections. The other two parties of the formation, instead, retained roughly the same number of MPs of the precedent election. On one hand, Hezbollah won the same number of seats as in the 2018 elections (13) while Amal, on the other hand, decreased from 17 to 15. The last main important party of the bloc is the

Druze party, the Progressive Socialist Party, which has won 8 seats, losing one MP from the previous elections.

Its major rival, the Lebanese Forces, whose leader, Samir Geagea emerges as the winner of this electoral competition, has won the seats lost by the FPM<sup>6</sup>. In such way, the Lebanese Forces increased their number of representatives, from 12 to 19, becoming the major Christian force in the Parliament and the main party of the March 14<sup>th</sup> Alliance. March 14 comprises other parties such as Kataeb – also known as the Phalanges, another important Maronite Christian party for its history in the Country that won 4 seats – and the members related to the Future Movement, which has been the main Sunni party in the Country until these elections. The latter did not officially run in the competition as its leader and former Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, called for a boycott of the elections. However, some former members of the Future Movement ran independently and eight of them were effectively elected in the competition.

Apart from the two main blocs composed by the traditional parties, it must be signaled that 13 new MPs have been elected among the anti-establishment candidates. This is the result of the 2019 anti-government protests as they run as the main anti-traditional and opposition force. In fact, they were able to win in some of

the strongholds of the traditional parties, eliminating from the competition well-known characters such as the Druze leader Talal Arslan, and the Sunni politician Faysal Karame<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, 16 other people who run as independents have been elected. It remains to be seen how they will pose themselves in the Parliament and whether they will support one of the two traditional Alliances or will help the anti-establish members to create a new, bigger and, politically stronger, formation.

Albeit representing only a little fraction of the Parliament, the election of these new members can, actually put Lebanon on new tracks, if they will be able to resist the competition between the two main blocs. The main political objective of the new anti-establishment movement is to fight the high level of corruption of the institutions and to fulfill the requests of the International Monetary Fund to unlock the resources, which are destined to Lebanon.

Another important result, even though in absolute terms it remains extremely low, is the election of eight women as members of Parliament. Only four women occupied the position as parliamentary members during the last legislation, thus doubling the number from the precedent Parliament<sup>8</sup>.

However, even if some innovations have been introduced by these elections, some of the Lebanese structural problems remained present in these events too. The European Union Election Observation Mission in Lebanon reported that the elections were “overshadowed by widespread practices of vote buying and clientelism, which [...] seriously affected the voters’ choice. The campaign was [...] marred by various instances of intimidation. While the freedom of speech was generally respected, the media failed to provide equal visibility and balanced coverage”<sup>9</sup>.

This can be also explained by the difficult situation that Lebanese citizens are facing. Given the long crisis period, many people found themselves more dependent on patronage and clientelism than ever. Political and community leaders are the ones who can provide some kind of welfare, spanning from jobs to cash contributions, to bring inside the Country fuel and other resources that, on the other hand, the institutions and the State are not able to guarantee<sup>10</sup>.

### **Perspective for the future between uncertainty and foreign interests**

Notwithstanding the results of the elections, the main political positions of power as said before are assigned confessional. Thus, the Country will continuously be governed by the *troika* of a Sunni, Shia, and Christian

figures, and by a Council of Ministers, which is formed by the Prime Minister with the agreement of the President of the Republic and then voted from the Parliament.

Given the fact that no bloc has achieved the majority of seats, the formation of the next Prime minister and the government can be delayed for weeks, until the two Alliances find a compromise that will satisfy both parties. In this phase, however, the role of the independents and the anti-establishment members can prove fundamental as they can effectively strengthen one of the two blocs in order to find a majority.

The first test bench for the newer trends in the Chamber has been the election of the Speaker of the Parliament. Without much surprises, the 84-year-old Nabih Berri, leader of the Amal formation, was reelected in the first session of the Parliament on Monday 31<sup>st</sup> of May for the seventh time. He has continuously been reconfirmed since 1993 even if it must be signaled that this time, the reelection of Berri as Speaker has passed only by a single vote, 65, much lower than the 98 votes he received in the same occasion in 2018<sup>11</sup>.

As the election of Berri has shown, the loss of votes and the presence of newcomers in the Parliament could effectively halt or delay the elections of figures related to the *Ancien Régime*. The opposition to the

establishment and some of the characters related has been one of the main *leitmotifs* behind the protest movement. There could also be a conjunction between the positions in the Parliament among some of the traditional and the new political forces on some of the themes that would prevent the re-elections of certain key figures as some analyst thought it could happen with Berri<sup>12</sup>.

In fact, next October the Parliament will be also called to elect the new President of the Republic. Given the fact that the election of the latter requires the two-third of the Parliament, it will be difficult for the bloc of the actual President, Michael Aoun, to retain the Presidency, as it was his plan originally. In fact, before the elections it was an “open secret”<sup>13</sup> that Aoun wanted to extend his mandate through a reelection or through the election of his son-in-law, Gibran Bassil, who is the current leader of the FPM. However, the huge loss of seats could halt the election of both and could steer toward a candidate of the Lebanese Forces or an independent figure who would find a consensus among the Parliament.

The shift of votes from the FPM to the Lebanese Forces not only means that currently no bloc has the majority but also a shift in the external power that have their propagations inside the Country. Actually, the most important political parties inside Lebanon all

have an external sponsor that funds the party and through which regional and global powers try to impose their agenda on Beirut. Some of these powers are regional such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran but also the United States and France are among the global powers that want to have an influence in the politics of the Country.

Neither of the two key actors of these elections, Hezbollah and the Lebanese Forces, will have a majority inside the Parliament. However, the shift of power from the bloc of the former to the one of the latter could effectively bring about some change.

For instance, Hezbollah is the main ally of Iran in the entire Middle East region and through their presence on the ground Tehran have had a hold inside Lebanon and in its politics. Even though the party has lost its power in the legislative body, its importance in the society of Lebanon transcends the Chamber as Hezbollah, who also has an armed wing, will remain a key factor in the next years.

On the other hand, the consolidation of power of the Lebanese Forces is relevant because their main international sponsors are the United States and Saudi Arabia. This shift of power from one block to another means that the main rivals of Iran could have a stronger grip inside the politics of the Country with respect to the previous Parliament. How external

powers will impose their vision in Lebanon through the means of their proxies will be another topic to monitor in the future.

## **Conclusions**

Before the elections, some opinion polls were conducted in the Country by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation to understand views and feelings of the people towards the elections<sup>14</sup>. These surveys found that almost 60% of the people interviewed did not see itself represented by any party in the Country (Hezbollah follows with 9.8% and the Lebanese Forces with 6.1%).

Likewise, interrogated about the possibility for the Parliamentary elections to be a factor of change, 50% of the respondents believed that they could actually represent a source of change, while another 45% believe instead to the contrary. 60% of the respondents also said that no actual political figure in the Country is an ideal leader (in this case Hassan Nasrallah follows with 10.4% and Samir Geagea with 6.1%). In 2019, to the same question the respondents that expressed the same disillusioned vision toward the political establishment were slightly less than 40% suggesting that rapid and huge decrease in the political trust that brought to the protests of the same year.

The study also found out that 53% of the respondents were eager to vote

again for the same party they voted for in 2018. On the contrary, 45% would not vote for the same party they voted for in 2018, reflecting their disappointment with the performance of the parties they voted for in the 2018 elections. As a confirmation, 38% of the interviewed expressed their opposition towards traditional parties: 25.7% of them answered that they would vote for independents while the remaining 12.3% expressed a preference for the anti-establishment Change group.

In the light of these surveys, the results of the elections appear clearer. Disillusionment and dissatisfaction for the political establishment not only bring people to the streets but also alienate people from the polls as they are not conceived as a moment for change for almost half of the population. It is easy to imagine that those who did not go to the polls are also the most discontent and were their vote cast traditional parties could have lost more seats to the newer formations.

In conclusion, Lebanese civil society has tried to change the Country with an important vote for newer forces. Nonetheless, the very political configuration of the Country seems to prevent rapid and structural changes. The capacity for these newer forces to impress a change will be a hard task to accomplish as the traditional parties

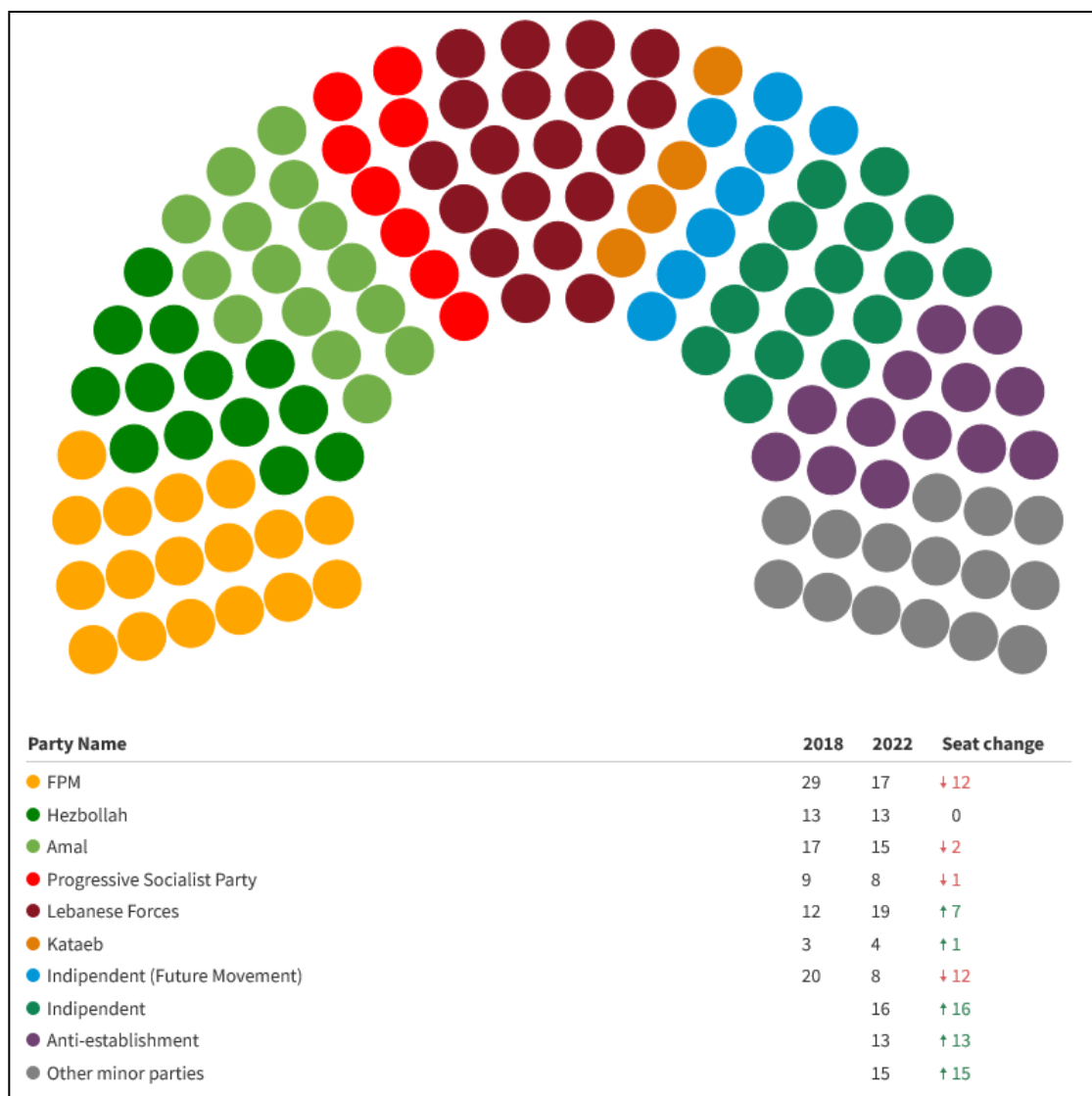
still account for almost 90% of the seats inside the Parliament.

As the Italian writer, Guido Tomasi di Lapedusa wrote in his masterpiece, the *Gattopardo*: “If we want everything to stay as it is, everything has to change”. It remains to be seen whether the traditional parties will try to accommodate some of the requests made by the civil society scared by the polls’ results or the independents and anti-establishment forces will be engulfed in the bipolar politics that would halt any project for changes

*Appendix - Figure 1. Lebanese Parliament 2022*

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Figure 2. Lebanese Parliament 2022





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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Lebanese electoral system and the main parties in the Country, see Ricci, A., 2022. *Parliamentary 2022 Elections in Lebanon*. Middle East Political and Economic Institute (MEPEI). Available at: [https://mepei.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/POLICY-BRIEF\\_Ricci-Parliamentary-2022-Elections-in-Lebanon.pdf](https://mepei.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/POLICY-BRIEF_Ricci-Parliamentary-2022-Elections-in-Lebanon.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Salloukh, B. et al., 2015. *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 91-92.

<sup>3</sup> All the numbers for the elected candidates come from <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1299895/our-full-breakdown-of-newly-elected-mps-by-party-affiliation.html>

<sup>4</sup> Among 2009 and 2018 no elections have been held as the 2013 elections were not held due to “security reasons” and the Parliament prolonged its activities.

<sup>5</sup> Al Arabiya News, (2022, May 9). *Nearly 60 pct of Lebanese diaspora voters turnout for May 15 polls*. Available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/05/09/Nearly-60-pct-of-Lebanese-diaspora-voters-turnout-for-May-15-polls>

<sup>6</sup> Homsy, N., (2022, May 18). *Lebanon’s FPM deny losing Christian majority setting parliament for showdown*. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2022/05/18/defiant-despite-losses-lebanons-fpm-claim-biggest-bloc-in-parliament/>

<sup>7</sup> Chehayeb, K., (2022, May 17). *Lebanon’s pro-Hezbollah bloc loses parliamentary majority*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/17/pro-hezbollah-bloc-loses-lebanese-parliamentary-majority>

<sup>8</sup> Fontana, C., (2022, May 20) . *Libano: elezioni in chiaroscuro*. Available at: <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/it/focus-attualita-libano-elezioni-hezbollah-forze-libanesi-turchia-svezia-finlandia-nato>

<sup>9</sup> European Union Election Observation Mission Lebanon, 2022. *Vote-buying practices affected the voters’ free choice and resulted in a lack of level-playing field*.: European Union Election Observation Mission Lebanon.

<sup>10</sup> Wood, D., (2022, May 23). *Lebanon’s Elections Portend Protracted Political Vacuum*. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/lebanon/lebanons-elections-portend-protracted-political-vacuum>

<sup>11</sup> Chehayeb, K., (2022, May 31). *Lebanese parliament reelects longtime speaker in first session*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/31/lebanese-parliament-reelects-longtime-speaker-in-first-session>

<sup>12</sup> Gavlak, D., (2022, May 22). *Lebanon’s Reform MPs Want Long-Standing Speaker Out*. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/lebanon-s-reform-mps-want-longstanding-speaker-out-6584393.html>

<sup>13</sup> Moubayed, S., (2021, December 10). *Will Lebanon extend President Aoun’s term in 2022?*. Available at: <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/will-lebanon-extend-president-aouns-term-in-2022-1.84278119>

<sup>14</sup> The survey was conducted in December 2021. It is accessible and downloadable through the website of the Foundation at: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/libanon/single-title-/content/perceptions-and-attitudes-of-lebanese-citizens-towards-the-economic-social-and-political-situation-i>