

Lebanon: a ruling class in perpetual crisis - An overview after the May 6th general election

Thursday 14 June 2018, by [El KHAZEN Elia](#) (Date first published: 11 June 2018).

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On May 6th, citizens of Lebanon had the opportunity to vote in a general election for the first time in nine years. The timing of the 2018 parliamentary elections in Lebanon was no coincidence. It followed a near decade-long absence that saw parliament extend its own mandate by using security concerns as a justification for keeping the country under a *de facto* state of exception, allowing the ruling class to weather the Arab uprisings without any significant fragmentation of the historical bloc that has governed Lebanon for the last 14 years, while counter-revolutionary currents and anciens régimes smashed the remnants of the Arab revolutions throughout the region.

These counter-revolutionary currents have settled well in Lebanon, taking the form of a reinvigorated authoritarian neoliberalism armed with a ‘war on terror’ machinery, fuelled by an ethno-nationalist discourse and a looming economic and public debt crisis. Security apparatuses in Lebanon have flourished since the withdrawal of the Syrian army in 2005, filling the vacuum by redistributing roles and responsibilities amongst themselves along sectarian lines. The Internal Security Forces and the State Security department were thus more strongly realigned with Saad Hariri’s political faction, and the General Security shifted towards Hezbollah.

The decimation of unions and the containment of a growing migrant working class force were thus passed along to local security apparatuses, which have perfected the trade learned from their Syrian predecessors. Within this context, following the failure of the Hariri bloc to hegemonize the neoliberal project without, ironically enough, the Syrian regime’s strong grip on Lebanon, the last decade has seen an increase in protests and strikes. Since 2011, the rising general resentment against the ruling class has taken many forms: The overthrow of the sectarian system protests in 2011; the many strikes and protests organized by the teachers’ syndicate; and demonstrations calling for women’s emancipation. This resentment reached its peak during the waste crisis and was marked by demonstrations and strikes in 2015 and a civil society campaign for municipal elections in 2016, which positioned independent anti-status quo actors as competitors to the ruling class within the electoral game.

The Results

A couple of hours after the Lebanese polls had closed, major international news outlets (especially Israeli-based media) started circulating alarmist hot takes, claiming that “Hezbollah, Allies Slated for Major Gains in Lebanon Elections” [1] or peddling downright inaccurate information by stating that “Hizbollah and allies win more than half seats in Lebanon vote” [2]. Hezbollah and their allies

the Amal Movement and respective satellite parties garnered between 39 and 42 seats: 'half' would be 65. CNN celebrated "hope in Lebanon's first election in a decade" [3], but we can hardly talk of hope when voter turnout stood at 49% (54% in 2009), and the coalition of civil society lists only managed to win two seats (out of 66 candidates), one of which was then unlawfully confiscated.

With much fanfare and more than 6000 incidents of electoral fraud reported [4], Hezbollah has made significant gains. However, these are largely symbolic: consolidating and maintaining their own MPs while piercing through Hariri's flagship list in Beirut's second district with 4 out of 11 candidates. Overall, Hariri lost more than a third of the seats previously held by his party - a development that was both imposed on Hariri by the new electoral law, by shifting loyalties, and by a disenchantment with the Future Movement's continuing austerity measures, financialisation and endless borrowing policies. But, more importantly, the development was also a product of an act of voter defiance against the newly formed alliance between Hariri and President of the Republic Michel Aoun.

If pre-election polls were to be believed, the new electoral law, mainly crafted by head of the Free Patriotic Movement Gibran Bassil (formerly headed by President Aoun), was tailor made for the FPM. The FPM's share of parliamentarians, at face value, remained intact and the party succeeded in gaining seats (five overall) in new territories (Beirut's first and second districts mainly). Gibran Bassil, the president's enfant terrible in law steered the FPM ship away from the animosity that usually defined its relationship with the Hariri camp, targeting speaker of parliament and head of the Amal Movement Nabih Berri's camp instead, an electoral faux pas that not only cost him Hezbollah's support in territories like Jbeil, Baalbek and Marjeyoun, but has also helped the Lebanese Forces to perfect their preferred underdog identity and to provoke feelings of Christian victimhood among rural (mainly in the Northern district) middle class bases. Bassil's other faux pas was also his choices of candidates. It was expected that Aoun's ascension to the presidential seat would have paved the way for the president's party to gain a larger parliamentary bloc, confirming his hegemony over the Christian (read Maronite) sect and the continuation of his reign as the arbitrator of sects. Bassil, bolstered by the FPM's performance during the 2009 elections, especially in the Keserwan, Metn and Zahle districts, sought to preserve the aura of invincibility around the FPM by manufacturing "unholy alliances" with a Christian capitalist class that had remained behind the scenes for decades so as not to harm its business interests by tainting them with "politics". Businessmen turned political candidates like Assaad Nakad, Neemat Frem, Roger Azar and Sarkis Sarkis were thus preferred by Bassil to FPM party members, and the Lebanese Forces emerged as the big winners within the Christian-Maronite community, almost doubling their national seat count.

What was really at play during the parliamentary elections was a spectacle of hegemony, one that was clearly won by Hezbollah, and a battle over the incumbent cabinet members each party will be represented by in the unity government. Hezbollah's campaign focused on displaying a spectacle of unity within the regions it controls, in collaboration with its longtime Shia ally the Amal Movement. This unity was carefully contrasted to the fragmentation within the Hariri camp, a tactic that Hezbollah perfected during its three decades of war with Israel, and applied efficiently during and in the aftermath of the elections. The success of this duo in painting themselves as the sole representatives of hegemonic sectarianism and their opponents in the Sunni camp as dominant (read imposed) sectarianism consolidates the idea that their hold is stronger than ever within "their regions" although there have been increasing signs of discontent with the economic and social consequences brought by Hezbollah's military campaign in Syria, which is taking its toll in the south, compounded by a war on drugs that has incarcerated more than 40,000 people in the Bekaa alone, the main recruitment base of Hezbollah. "We protect and we build", Hezbollah's 2018 campaign slogan, departs from its 2009 slogan of "development and liberation", clearly highlighting the shift in Hezbollah's politics post-2011, when it was required to begin playing a major role in the "war on terror" in the region, which explains the shift from "liberation" to "protection".

Why now?

Constitutionally, Lebanon is a parliamentary democratic republic in which the prime minister leads the executive branch of government. What nine years without an election made evident is that the Ta'if agreement that formally ended the fifteen-year civil war, whose major architect was former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, actually shifted the locus of power from parliament to the executive branch, turning the roles of “legislator” and “guardian of the executive branch”, assigned to parliament and the president respectively, more symbolic. The executive branch, represented by the cabinet, seems to be the only continuously functional branch of government in Lebanon, surviving large periods of instability, such as when the presidential and parliamentary branches were left void at different moments during the last decade. The executive branch is responsible for the bulk of monetary and financial policies, coordinating with the *Banque du Liban* and large numbers of local private banks, real estate tycoons and speculators. It is the executive branch that has emaciated the country through a rising public debt and rapid privatization, which have in turn further strengthened sectarian clientelist networks that work to fill in and profit from the void left by the state. It is no wonder then that most intra-ruling class struggles have been over cabinet appointments, especially ones that could be used to expand clientelist networks, while completely ignoring or postponing parliamentary elections.

The new electoral law, which was approved through a parliamentary vote last year, was primarily meant to preserve a “unity government” combining blocs representative of the main political parties of the ruling class. While the law introduced proportional representation for the first time in the post-civil war era, it took a hybrid form that involved a remapping of Lebanon’s districts in a way that further encouraged sectarian alliances. The law decreased the country’s electoral districts from twenty-six to fifteen, strengthening the power of local sectarian leaders and national sectarian parties already equipped with clientelist networks and electoral pull.

Voters were obliged to vote for a full party list, choosing one “preferential” candidate in a reconfiguration that strengthened the role of sectarian leaders within the country’s districts. This limitation forced local sectarian leaders to form alliances based on the sectarian make-up of their district rather than political or ideological compatibility, resulting in contradictory electoral partnerships across the country that officially decimated what were known as the opposing March 14th (Hariri and his allies) and March 8th (Hezbollah and its allies) camps, for the time being. The reconfiguration allowed political parties to prioritise candidates over programs, and the redrawn electoral map reduced the number of mixed-sect districts, decreasing opportunities for cross-sectarian alliances or cooperation and imposing an environment of compounded competitiveness between and within lists for the sought after “preferential vote”.

The adoption of proportionality proves that the ruling class understood that need for a change in policies in response to the rising general resentment against it since 2011. Unable to address the national debt and other debilitating features of the status quo, and also wanting to avoid any dramatic structural changes to the political-sectarian balance, the ruling class could only adopt this hybrid form of proportional representation. In fact, most of the legislation that has already been passed by the sitting parliament, along with the pre-approved budget that will eventually pass, and the requests for additional loans that are already in motion, mean that the possible effects of minor changes to parliament were already minimised before the election.

In his analysis of the 2009 elections [5], the late Bassem Chit offered great insights on the then rapprochement between the Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah that can help us understand today’s rapprochement between the Free Patriotic Movement and the Future Movement, and the rise of civil society as an alternative in Beirut’s first district.

He explains that the backwardness of the Lebanese rentier economy and the absence of a production based economy, a full reliance on imports, as well as foreign investment and financing, the lack of sufficient raw materials to raise infrastructure and competitiveness, and neoliberal policies that led to the erasure of any kind of economic protection for local production, encouraged the rise of a petty bourgeoisie mainly in the suburbs. According to a recent study by the ministry of social affairs [6], 37,4% of households in Lebanon consider themselves “self-employed”.

Hezbollah’s emergence in the southern suburb in the 1980s came as a result of the massive migration of Shia farmers from the south due to the Israeli occupation, to a number of economically backward areas in the capital. This created a belt surrounding Beirut from the south of a newly formed petty bourgeois class reliant on Iranian economic backing to maintain itself.

The Free Patriotic Movement flourished among a Christian middle class (managers and senior cadres), due to Aoun’s original connection to the middle and upper cadres of the army, in addition to its electoral representation and its presence in the unions of doctors, engineers and the start of contestations during the 90s from private universities, and in the communications and media sectors. This strata was heavily affected by the financial and banking bourgeoisie’s rule that was introduced by Rafic Hariri in the 90s, that is to say the Christian bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie who were economically besieged by Hariri on the one hand and the Syrian occupation on the other. This middle-class niche that could not adapt to the current economic structure was represented by Aoun’s anti-Hariri and anti-Syrian regime stance during the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s which drove them to flock to the Free Patriotic Movement in the 2005 and 2009 elections.

The rapprochement between Aoun and Hariri in 2016 that helped Aoun reach the presidency in 2017 and secured Hariri as prime minister, combined with the social movements of 2015, created a space for the rise of civil society candidates in the municipal elections in 2016 who benefitted from the discontent of the Free Patriotic Movement’s base with this new alliance to attract an increasingly disenchanted petty bourgeoisie that had seen in 2005 and 2009 hope in Michel Aoun’s program but was now looking for another form of political representation. This further explains the candidature of Ziad Abss, for example, a former FPM cadre who ran in the 2018 parliamentary on the civil society list against his old party in Beirut’s first district. It also explains why the civil society is doing relatively well in Beirut’s first district, one of the closest districts to downtown Beirut which bore most of the brunt of the gentrifying war that the Hariri family has launched on Beirutis since 1993.

It also explains the meteoric rise of the right-wing Lebanese Forces who doubled their seats to 14 seats and who ran a campaign with the slogan “the time is now”. What they really meant is “our time is now”. This slogan, mostly faceless, devoid of political leaders, was straight to the point, efficient and intelligently alluded to the betrayal of former 14 March partners and longtime opponents who were accused of conspiring to “annihilate” the “Christian opposition”. Painting yourself/your party as a victim of a conspiracy plot resonates well with the Lebanese petty bourgeoisie due to its constant fear of proletarianization, compounded by the resurrection of old civil war sectarian tropes of genocidal annihilation especially within a Christian middle class that has not taken lightly the rapprochement between Aoun and Hariri.

Finally, it is worth noting the utter failure of the Kataeb party’s attempt at rebranding by appropriating the discourse and campaign style of the civil society, combined it with a shift towards a younger demographic that is not as rigidly aligned with the two biggest Christian right wing parties in power. This attempt at rebranding was bound to fail given that the historically right-wing party has only ever thrived through ethno-nationalist and xenophobic discourse that energised the Christian middle class in the past except in its traditional areas in Metn and pockets of Beirut’s first district, a role the Free Patriotic Movement now holds.

The “Alternative” Lists

Due to the decimation of unions and the crippling of working class movements (especially those composed of migrants) through security crackdowns, the mass discontent increasing since 2011 has gradually been redirected towards electorally-inclined social movements (both municipal and parliamentary) that are detached from a working class base and are more attuned to a middle-class disenchantment with the ruling class’ unchallenged agenda and the increasing precarisation it is feared to be enabling.

These movements, broadly referred to in Lebanon as “civil society”, especially those invested in electoralism and reformist agendas, have concentrated all of their efforts on regaining the lost trust between the state and the people, claiming that what is at fault with the current government is its unconstitutional nature, rather than a deeper structural problem inherent in every bourgeois democracy trying to assert complete dominance.

These broad coalitions departed from two distinctive protests that occurred during the last decade: the “overthrow of the sectarian system” protests in 2011, marked by chants, slogans and demands mirroring those heard across the Arab world but eventually co-opted by satellite parties linked to the traditional powers, and the more recent “You Stink” protests (2015) that were dominated by a more post-political approach to organizing in order to avoid the same co-optation by the state suffered years earlier.

This post-political populist approach has gained ground in recent years, with more anti-status quo actors distancing themselves from what they perceive as the “political sphere”, due to what they believe to be the failings of the traditional left and previous activists in politicising the struggle, preferring a more liberal approach to organization that depoliticises demands in order make them acceptable to an abstract notion of “the general public”.

This depoliticisation revolves around finding the lowest-common-denominator, usually a nationalistic one, that ties respectability politics with a petty-bourgeois notion of transparency and the end of state corruption that focuses on bribery and embezzlement rather than accumulation, exploitation and the mechanisms of realising and preserving surplus value in the hope of creating an alternate sphere that would never have to confront or collide with said elites. If these activists concede that the problem might be structural, the solution that follows seems disconnected and moralistic: more of us will make things right.

In her astute analysis of the You Stink protests in 2015 [7], Nadia Bou Ali correctly reminded protestors that a “historical moment demands a reconfiguration of concepts, a redefinition of politics rather than a shunning away from ‘politicising’ the revolt as many non-governmental organisations on the ground have claimed. If they are indeed weary of existing practices of politics, then politics (siyaasa) has to be re-defined as the necessary form of everyday human relations. What does it mean to demand a society free from corruption? When emptied out of this specific content, what will then fill the social form? There cannot be any naivety surrounding the nature of the relationship between corruption and capitalism: they are bed-fellows and have been for centuries.”

A simple glance at the economic programs of most civil society candidates and coalitions [8] participating in the elections highlights the similarities between these programs and the strong recommendations (read impositions) the IMF, the World Bank and contributing countries have imposed as a prerequisite on the Lebanese government for furthering the credit line by approximately 11 billion dollars [9] on an already heavy public/private debt nearing 80 billion dollars [10].

Most of these “alternative” programs are also devoid of any reference to the steep concentration of wealth [11] indicated by the sharp increase in personal loans from commercial banks from about thirty four thousand customers in 1993 to a million and twenty seven thousand customers in 2017, an increase of more than 3000%. According to the same source, households in Lebanon are now 21.5 billion dollars in debt, helping local banks gross more than 12 billion dollars in interest in the process.

When you factor in the actual amount spent by the Lebanese government on infrastructure since 1993, which is close to 14 billion dollars out of the 216 billion it spent during that time period, amounting to 6.5 percent of total expenditure and less than 17.5 percent of the total government debt (\$80 billion) accumulated over this period, the demands to end embezzlement and corruption on the state level seem inconsequential when compared to the immensity of the public debt, the failing tax system and the catastrophic monetary policies of the Banque du Liban.

Most of these “alternative” programs aim at amending trade laws to facilitate the establishment of companies with complete disregard for the influence of neoliberal policies on the precarisation of workers and the subsequent disintegration of trade union organization, calling for a more organic link between private and public sectors to facilitate the flourishing of foreign and local investment, and the revival of the real estate sector through public funds, without the introduction of any sustainable housing policy. These programs, instead, focus their efforts on securing even more subsidised loans to meet the needs of low- and middle-income families. With a 21.5 billion dollar debt hanging over their head, the last thing Lebanese households need are more subsidised loans.

What is also surprising is that the majority of “alternative” lists adopted uncritically a polished version of the war on terror discourse citing “security concerns within our neighbourhoods” as a major issue that needs to be tackled by the state. They chose not to address the needs of large swathes of the country’s migrant population, whose basic rights are not being met and who are, of course, deprived of the right to representation through voting.

Most of these civil society-based economic, social and security programs seem to be more in tune with World Bank recommendations than the actual policies adopted by an ineffective and dysfunctional ruling class that is unable to privatise and dismantle unions at the pace required in order to conform with these recommendations. This “technocratic revolution” thus amounts to seemingly opposing a local ruling class while adopting the very agenda of a local and global bourgeoisie that allows it to reproduce itself.

A ruling class in perpetual crisis might seem ripe for the taking through parliamentary elections – as most “civil society” activists seem to believe. But, as the great Marxist Mehdi Amel argued, this propensity towards cyclical crisis is exactly why it has been able to reproduce itself for so long.

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P.S.

* Salvage, 11th Jun, 2018:

<http://salvage.zone/online-exclusive/lebanon-a-ruling-class-in-perpetual-crisis/>

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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/hezbollah-allies-slated-for-major-gains-in-lebanon-elections-1.6061125>
- [2] <https://www.ft.com/video/eda88dad-5c73-4f92-9c5c-5cd82206e71f>
- [3] <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/06/middleeast/lebanon-hezbollah-hariri-elections-intl/index.html>
- [4] https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1807364019310484&id=154029261310643
- [5] <http://al-manshour.org/node/143>
- [6] <http://al-manshour.org/node/143>
- [7] <http://www.salvage.zone/site/online-exclusive/beirut-revolt-what-is-to-be-done/>
- [8] <https://al-akhbar.com/Economy/246988>
- [9] <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Apr-06/444436-breakdown-of-11-billion-pledged-to-lebanon.ashx>
- [10] <https://al-akhbar.com/Economy/248118/البنك المركزي يوافق على إصدار 138 مليار دولار>
- [11] <https://al-akhbar.com/Economy/248612/البنك المركزي يوافق على إصدار 138 مليار دولار>