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## **LEBANON 2018: ELECTIONS TO WHAT END?**

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## **Lebanon 2018: Elections to What End?**

After extended debates about its appropriateness, a new electoral law for the legislative elections slated for spring 2018 was finally adopted by the Lebanese Parliament in June 16, 2017.

The advocates of constitutional regularity would pay tribute to the birth of this law, paving the way for the first elections to be held in more than eight years of the current Parliament's mandate. This longevity caused by three consecutive prorogations reinstating the legislature, did not seem very awkward back then. At the discretion of the eventful political circumstances the country went through, Lebanon actually developed the constitutional prorogation syndrome "for convenience" purposes. In fact, the automatic prorogation of the mandates of the Parliament was initiated when conflicts erupted in Lebanon in 1975: Except for the extraordinary short-term appointment of 40 deputies in 1991, the mandate of the Parliament elected in 1972 lasted until the elections of 1992. These elections were made possible after the adoption of the *Document of National Accord* or the Taëf Agreement in 1989 that introduced a comprehensive amendment of the 1926 Constitution. The current Parliament elected in 2009 for what was meant to be a four-year term, has extended its own mandate three times. One remembers that in November 2007, Lebanon was going through a presidential vacuum crisis at the end of the renewed mandate of President General Emile Lahoud (1998-2007) – knowing that before his election, the National Assembly had also prorogated the mandate of President Elias Hraoui (1989-1998) –. The election of President Michel

Sleiman on May 25, 2008 was made possible after the Inter-Lebanese Dialogue held in Doha (Qatar) on May 21, following the *Hezbollah* display of force at the beginning of that same month in West Beirut, in Sunni majority neighborhoods. Ensuing the sealed “reconciliation” and in the aftermath of General Michel Sleiman election, legislative elections were held in June 2009. Nevertheless, four years later, the elections planned for June 7, 2013 were postponed. The Parliament renewed its mandate for a first time until 2014, for a second time until June 2017 and for a third time until 2018. The electoral law deadlock in 2013 and the turn of events in Syria in 2014 were deemed sufficiently serious reasons to prevent a peaceful electoral process. The polarization of the political life reached its peak. The *Hezbollah* involvement in the Syrian war was causing a fierce opposition as many feared sectarian mobilization, questioning the country’s security and the rise of sectarian tension. Were these sufficient reasons to renew the legislative mandate? One might have a doubt so, nevertheless that was the decision taken.

With the elections scheduled to take place in spring 2018, reconnecting with the democratic life in spite of all the constitutional alternations and aberrations, could seem as a proof of resilience of a political system heckled by regional and internal events, yet that still maintains the essential functions of the coexistence communitarian pact, founder of the Modern Lebanon. Others would see this as a growing structural failure of paralyzed political institutions unable to build a modern State of citizenship, equality and progress. Social crises associated to administrative carelessness, successive and abyssal budget deficit, as well as the public debt and its servicing burden, made of Lebanon one of the most politically and financially

vulnerable country in the world. The bad management of public services, namely water, electricity and health, the dilapidation of infrastructures, the disastrous management of household and industrial waste and its consequences on public health, consolidate in the view of the public opinion the corruption of most political class. Lebanon, the country that overcame wars, could succumb to the State's bankruptcy. This perspective is not an academic hypothesis anymore. International meetings for Lebanon aim more than ever to delay financial deadlines that the persistent economic stagnation, the failure of economic recovery, the weight of the Syrian refugees on the infrastructure and on the labor market, as well as the political insecurity, are no more capable of hiding. The political impact of such a societal instability was translated by a renewed vitality within the civil society, which mobilization for the legislative elections appears to be very critical for the ruling class. Legislative elections could concretize, more than ever, the civil society's ability to hold the ruling class accountable. The civil society formations must still gather around a governmental platform and be sufficiently trustworthy to offer an alternative credible choice. During the latest municipal elections, especially in the capital, the civil society reaped more than 40% of the votes, but the final outcome was fatal due to lack of cohesion and strategy. The objective analysis would be that a young generation, increasingly conscious of the failure of its elites, is not yet capable of imposing its demands on a society that is still dominated by sectarian affiliations and concerns. Nevertheless, with the large scope of the ecological disaster specifically, some voices will make themselves heard, without necessarily enticing in their wake a massive reaction.

In the light of the above, it will be vain and misleading to oppose

a political camp that maintains civil peace at the expense of a sectarian compromise, to a civil society of citizenship beyond sectarianism. In Lebanon, divisions are way more complex, mixing the persistent weight of regional specificities and local notabilities, to that of social and regional inequalities that continue to grow in parallel to the medium class impoverishment and foreign interference. In a political system open to the turbulence of its regional environment, such fractures feed the sectarian passion, stir up fears, exaggerate the dangers and retranslate in sectarian terms political challenges that no one is truly determined to overcome. This time too, the sectarian logic will prevail. The elections will be held under an electoral law that endorses the division of seats amongst communities and takes into account the sectarian distribution of the population on the Lebanese territory. The planned obsolescence of sectarianism stipulated in the Taëf Agreement and the Constitution will not be implemented. However, the political debates would integrate the never-ending calls made by some to abandon sectarianism, and calls to remove sectarianism from the spirits (*nufus*) before eradicating it from the texts (*nussus*). This game is a mutually agreed communication exchange where some sectarian leaders play the role of fearful politicians that sectarianism protects, and others, no less sectarian yet willing to stand as the heroes of post-sectarian secular modernity. The promotion of this “objective lie” continuously peddled by the cant of the political class according to which no one would be a priori “hostile” to abolishing political and administrative sectarianism, highlight at the same time the inability to implement it without undermining the Lebanese political life. The most cynical politicians overbid on secularism, threatening to claim the immediate abolition of sectarianism (*ilgha' al taefiyya*) to let the majority rule, and

consequently the “democracy”, prevail. The most conservative ones will claim the transition to total “sectarianism” (*almana*) (Unified Constitution and Civil State) but should this transition is deemed impossible, the sectarian system is to be maintained! These sectarian language games fluctuate between the desired abolition of sectarianism and the inevitable maintenance of this system are only used to artfully mask sectarian practices. They are the wounds of a system that only functions to benefit those in power. Yet in light of the regional developments, sectarianism, one of the specificities of the Lebanese political system, is becoming an undeniable topic of current interest with the wars in Syria and Iraq. With the misfortunes caused by the exactions of the *Islamic State* terrorist group (*Daesh*) against sectarian groups and minorities, and against Sunnis who do not embrace its radical and extremist ideology, the current situation in the region represents a potential risk of slippage even for the Lebanese citizens who after fifteen years of civil war became quite alert. Yet, the Lebanese electoral context is marked more than ever by important mutations. The elections are held in the shadow of a constant war in Syria, the rise of Iran, and the regression of the situation on the Southern Lebanese borders. As usual, and even more this time, the Lebanese elections can be described as “regional elections”.

## Repercussions of the Regional Situation

Since the beginning of the Syrian war, Lebanon has been affected by an extremely volatile and dangerous situation. It is something of a miracle for the country to resist the violence exerted in Syria, a violence that took over in Iraq where radical groups flourished and the *Islamic State* terrorist organization was able to carve out a sprawling territory across both countries.

We could have expected the Syrian conflict, as per the classical spill over mechanism, to bring a wave of violence to Lebanon. In fact, Lebanon failed to resist regional violence in 1958 with the establishment of the United Arab Republic, in 1975 with the increasing power of the PLO and its strategy of confrontation with Israel on the Lebanese borders, in 1982 when Israel decided to put an end to the presence of Palestinian organizations in Lebanon, and in 1990 when a decision was taken to topple General Michel Aoun in the context of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

The current 2018 regional context is as tense as it was during the periods mentioned above. Certainly Lebanon is not in war, but is surrounded by a regional war, or at least by its immediate fallout and its future dangers. Under the direct threat of seismic political shocks tearing the region apart since the beginning of the Syrian internal conflict, Lebanon was joined by Syria and Iraq in terms of fragile state and territorial division that this country witnessed in the past. With the Syrian conflict still ongoing, jihadi groups fought by the Syrian regime have tried to take their fight to Lebanon. We remember that the Lebanese army crossed swords with armed fundamentalist groups in the anti-Lebanon region of *Ersal* and its surrounding rural areas. In August 2014, thirty Lebanese soldiers were kidnapped. Four of them were assassinated. Until last year, combats were opposing *Hezbollah* to *Fath al-Sham* fighters (ex *Jabhat al-Nusra*) supported by the *Islamic State*. Lebanon was able to contain, at the expense of heavy combats, and prevent a spillover of the conflict happening in a neighboring country into its own territory. If the military consequences of the Syrian conflict have been narrowed, however the developments on the humanitarian level appear to be disastrous and heavily dangerous for the future of the region.

Three main repercussions affected Lebanon:

The first major result of the Syrian conflict in Lebanon was and still is the massive refugee wave that flooded the region and which impact has had effects beyond the Middle East knocking at the European frontiers. Syrian refugees who fled to Turkey to escape relentless war, forced their way through the European Union countries towards Germany, their fantasized destination; this mass flow of refugees caused the closure of the once-open door to Europe and contributed among other reasons to the rise of populism in the old continent. As for Lebanon, the presence of one million refugees or probably more was unmanageable. And because it was not managed (how would it be in a nation that struggles managing its own population?), the issue became even more evanescent and explosive. Stranded in nature, crowded in improvised camps, squatting in buildings under construction, taking over the public domain or simply wandering in cities and villages' streets, these refugees are living in the unhealthiest conditions. The impact of their presence on the country's infrastructure and services (water, electricity, schooling, transportation, health needs...) is huge, even if the country is supposed to cater for their direct and indirect needs thanks to the international aid. A nation cannot project itself into the future, plan its resources and its destiny accordingly, while taking care of foreign nationals accounting for at least fifth of its population and amongst whom many might settle in the country indefinitely. Into the bargain, the case of refugees is related to the strategic and sensible issue of demographic balance in Lebanon.

The second repercussion of the Syrian war and undeniably the most important one on the political level would be the involvement of the Lebanese party *Hezbollah* in its course

alongside the Syrian regime. Bathing in the glory of its victory against Israel in 2000, establishing itself as the sovereignty defender, the *Hezbollah* continued to gain momentum on the Lebanese political scene. Major Shiite component of the political game, its strategy seems to be articulated around three major projects pursued steadily: The first one is to stand as the main national and regional opponent of Israel. The second one is to avoid a direct involvement in the domestic political game, be it in the Parliament or in the Government, leaving this mission to its Shiite ally (*Amal Movement*), or its Christian ally (*The Free Patriotic Movement*) while keeping the upper hand. The party dedicates itself to mobilize the Shiite community and the Lebanese society in general, around its famous strategic trilogy formula: "The army, the people, and the resistance". More concretely, *Hezbollah* is acting systematically on the field for the sake of a "resistance" society organized around a social solidarity network formed of schools, hospitals, clinics, social aid, along with its supporters' political militancy. Living off the administrative State, with the exception of its control over security issues and its relations with national security or military intelligence agencies and with the State's financial authorities, the party is committed to promoting and ensuring the sustainability of its military apparatus. The party of God is a party of combatants. Its origin (fighting the Israeli occupier in 1982 in South Lebanon), its function (resistance against Israel including the liberation of South Lebanon in 2000), and its projection (contributing to the liberation of occupied Palestine) make of it a party with a military structure and finality. *Hezbollah* reacted to some political parties' outcry that the army should have monopoly over the possession of weapons, with the May 7th display of force in Beirut. The case had been then heard.

However, the situation in war-torn Syria, achieved the transformation of *Hezbollah* from a resistance party to an army party. The involvement of *Hezbollah* in the Syrian events was a major turning point in the history of the party and in the history of Lebanon. Through supporting the Syrian regime in its fight against the democratic opposition first and then the Syrian Islamist opposition, the *Hezbollah* sank deeper in the vicious regional politics. It contributed to defending the Syrian front line in *Qusayr* and *Qalamoun* in 2013 and 2015, and then it contributed with the Lebanese Army to fighting Sunni jihadists and defeating groups linked to *al-Qaida* and the *Islamic State*. With the fall of Aleppo, the army, hardened by the party of God, is now able to control the Syrian-Lebanese frontier from the Anti-Lebanon until the stairs of the Golan Heights. Through participating to this battle, the *Hezbollah* distanced itself from the principle of “dissociation” adopted by the Baabda Declaration of February 11, 2012.

Can we still consider that the *Party of God* is like any other party? This comparison was already difficult to perceive before the events in Syria. *Hezbollah* will present candidates to the 2018 elections, planning its action pursuant to the broader regional balance of power, and directly subordinating its behavior and objectives to the central position Iran enjoys within this context. The *Hezbollah* is no longer merely a party of elected candidates, leading staff or militants as it used to be. It is building around its structure a well-articulated network that ensures functions normally delivered by the State. It is, in summary, a polymorphic party that has a State oriented aim under a partisan form. Its visibility was mainly granted through its role in the Syrian war. The party of resistance was transformed into a regional army.

Through its military deployment at an unusual scale, the *Hezbollah* reached the status of an integrated unit within the Syrian and Iranian armies. Its function shifted. In fact, since the consolidation of the front line, the control provided by *Hezbollah* along with the Syrian army and *al-Quds* Brigade gives the party a supervision and strategic control mission. What looked like an additional role of coordination with other armed units supporting President *Bashar al-Assad* became a fully integrated role. With the fall of Aleppo, on December 22, 2016, and after securing the line of defense from North Syria to South Lebanon until the Golan, an Iranian military protectorate was established. The strategic mission of *Hezbollah* dominating the current scene is to act as an extension of the Iranian regional vision since the gains made during the victorious military campaign of Syria.

Acknowledging the scope of the *Hezbollah* transformation into an army-party in a regional scene undergoing a fundamental reshuffle, is accrediting that for *Hezbollah* at least, the upcoming elections are not as any other elections. From all the parties participating to the legislative elections of 2018, only *Hezbollah* has a political-military vision of a Lebanese future linked to the Syrian-Iraqi-Iranian hinterland. Its agenda is regional and its perception of the region reflects the logic of the conflict raging between regional axes. Unlike all Lebanese parties, *Hezbollah* aims to establishing the Lebanese power system as a strong pillar linked to Iran. Such a goal is far from the “dissociation” principle adopted by the Lebanese foreign policy. while this theory remain debatable, the de facto reality has drawn the fault lines of a lasting balance of power won at great cost against the Cassandra alike prophets, who predicted the defeat of *Hezbollah* on the Syrian battle fields.

Finally, the third fundamental element of the regional equation is the perpetuation of the Sunni/Shiite confrontation, i.e. the Iranian-Saudi conflict. The regional war won by Iran, with Russian support, is an obvious triumph of the camp that was aiming at upholding *Bashar al-Assad's* grip on power. The defeat of the *Islamic State*, the reversal of the position of Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries after being forced to drop the jihadists whom they were secretly supporting in order to undermine the Syrian regime, left the regional Sunni powers with no alternative project to contend Iran. With the outbreak of the war in Yemen, the Saudi-Iranian confrontation heated up. Offended, Saudi Arabia sees its opponents in Lebanon, namely the March 8 alliance, controlling the country where its main ally, Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, partnered with *Hezbollah* to form a so-called unity government. The outcry of Crown Prince Mohammad Ben Salman, the sequestration of the Lebanese Prime Minister in November 2017, reflected the reality of this rivalry. After being the godfathers of the National Unity Government of Hariri formed in December 2016, in the wake of *Hezbollah's* renewed commitment to dissociation policy declared to keep the state out of regional conflicts and axes, Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry came to light. In fact, Saudi Arabia, tired of its Lebanese protégé covering up the *Hezbollah* machinations in Syria, didn't find a better way than to force the Prime Minister to resign while being held in Riyadh. This last avatar of Saudi-Iranian relations will definitely not be the last manifestation of an increasing tension. The end of the sequestration episode of Prime Minister Saad Hariri inaugurates a series of upcoming confrontations. The ferocious opposition against Iran includes a number of countries like the United States, Egypt and Israel; it opposes two forms of Islam and mainly, two poles of influence and regional hegemony. This bipolarity was

not expected. From the time of Nasser, the two regional powers struggling for influence in the region were both Sunni. On the Lebanese level, the new order gets complicated with the major forward-looking alliance declared on February 6, 2006 between the *Free Patriotic Movement* of General Michel Aoun and the *Hezbollah* of Hassan Nasrallah. While political alliances in the Lebanese political scene have a short life span, the alliance between these two Lebanese political parties seems to stand the test of time. General Aoun saw in this alliance a mean that could pave the way to his election as President of the Republic, while Nasrallah's party, gained the much-needed Maronite coverage deemed impossible years ago. In letting his Maronite ally promote for the concept of "strong presidency" amongst his supporters, *Hezbollah*, master of the time and place, bought internal political peace that allowed it to pursue its war business.

## The New Electoral Law

It is in this context that the new electoral law n°44/2017 dated 17/06/2017, saw light as promised by the candidate for the Presidency Michel Aoun. It was actually the fruit of a medium term compromise that characterizes the Lebanese political life, between those who during the presidential vacuum were eager for a *package deal* including an agreement on the candidate to the Presidency of the Republic, the candidate to the presidency of the Council of Ministers and the electoral law, and those who were keen to hold presidential elections before voting for an electoral law. The other solution would have been to prorogate the mandate of the Parliament for a fourth time. Yet, this solution that was the most convenient for many politicians arguing over the impossibility to hold proper elections in a volatile national and regional environment, would have furthered the public

opinion's distrust in a political class that have been reproducing itself benefiting from current circumstances. Already called into question, the legitimacy of the Parliament would have been blown away. In committing to vote a new electoral law in the wake of his election, candidate Michel Aoun has undoubtedly participated, with the help of his ally the *Party of God*, to smoothly resolve the problem. The adoption of the electoral law prior to any presidential or legislative election would have surely blocked any crisis exit. In fact, the division of territorial districts, the choice between the majority system and the proportional system would have divided the political class and delayed the upturn of a normal institutional life. For this reason, once the election of Michel Aoun was over, the major players who helped his ascendance to office started working frenetically on the development of a draft consensual electoral law. This project was in fact capping off the efforts made by Shiite, Sunni and Christian parties (with the exception of the *Kataeb* party) who supported the new president. The truth is that this project, for the purpose of soothing the turmoil, reassured political opponents and septic spirits by ensuring their interests as much as possible. This was indeed the case for the prefiguration of lists supported by the Druze leadership in the Chouf, or the big list dominated by Christian candidates in the northern *cazas* of Koura, Batroun, Zgharta and Bcharre – or even the transfer of the minority Christian voting in Beirut II (ex-West Beirut dominated by Muslims) to Beirut I (ex- East Beirut dominated by Christians) etc... On June 16, 2017, the Parliament, acting by the unanimity of the 115 deputies participating to the voting– the Chamber is legally composed of 128 votes; the deputies number is currently 127 following the death of Jezzine district MP Michel Helou - endorsed pre-agreed electoral districts, designed and tailored to

best suit its supporters' interests.

What are the specifics of the agreed-upon electoral law? Between opting for a proportional system with the country being a single constituency (claimed by Shiite parties) or a majority system in the “small constituency” or the “district” namely the *caza* according to the 1960 law (that Christians parties support), the electoral law opted for a political compromise. It divided the country into fifteen electoral constituencies encompassing 26 *cazas* which are used to determine, as before the number of seats allocated to each community, and adopted the list proportional system in the new constituencies and not at national level as previously mentioned, yet added a majority-style dimension named “preferential vote”. The “preferential vote”, the latest creation of the Lebanese mind and a complicated connivance among confessions, gives the voter the opportunity to choose his “preferred” candidate from the list he votes for. This vote, described as preferential, will sort out candidates from the same denomination belonging to winning lists and running for the same seat on the level of the *caza*. Therefore, a list will win through the votes collected by on the regional level – the fifteen constituencies designed by this new law – taking into account the electoral quotient determined by the number of voters in a given constituency divided by the number of seats allocated for that constituency. However, the preferential vote will establish the ranking, and therefore the winner or the winners amongst candidates seeking the seat or the seats allocated to their community at the level of the small constituency or the *caza*. (Refer to the details of the law and the relevant comments in the [report](#) of the MDF conference organized on December 14, 2017).

Let us not try to find, in such a design, a complex political

rationality because there is none. The preferential vote is not known in the usual electoral systems adopted around the world. The fabrication of this electoral law falls within the scope of a politicized rationality, especially with the “invention” of the preferential vote that seems to be a reward or a “bonus” for candidates who find themselves affected by the presence of big parties imposing their own candidates. In this case, through the preferential vote, the voter will be stealing away votes for his community’s candidate who represents his preferred option in absolute terms, thus limiting the automatic weight of parties’ candidates. This hypothesis still needs to be crosschecked in light of how the voters will make the best use of the preferential vote. The logic of the list respects the division of seats while the logic of the preferential vote respects the sectarian choice, insuring that parliamentarians are elected mainly by their own co-religionists: A Maronite, Sunni or Druze voter will give his preferential vote to a candidate from his own Maronite, Sunni or Druze community. This approach is similar to a consolation prize given to those who expressed, during previous legislative campaigns, their support for a sectarian voting: the voter being obliged to vote for a candidate from his sectarian community. The latter project baptized in 2013 as the “Orthodox law” (as it was developed by politicians belonging to the Greek-Orthodox community) was not endorsed. The second potential hypothesis for the use of the preferential vote is enhancing the winning chances for *outsider* candidates who do not belong to the classical Lebanese political sphere or the main political parties and are instead running against them, or are candidates from Lebanon’s civil society who had fought tooth and nail over the past years against those in power. The political breakthrough made by the lists of the civil society during the municipal elections, namely in Beirut, were

very surprising. However, it is unlikely that within the new hybrid proportional electoral system a candidate from the shaky civil society could be elected. Yet this possibility remains nothing but a pure hypothesis until we witness the result of the concrete implementation of this electoral law. Unfortunately, we cannot exclude the potential corruption and vote-buying that this windfall preferential vote could pave the way to...

In fact, nothing has substantively changed except for Lebanon adopting for the first time a proportional voting system along constituencies, tainted with a majority voting through the so-called preferential vote that greatly cancels the intended effect of the use of the proportional system, namely in terms of clearing the way for independent candidates outside the traditional political class to gain a foothold. Let us first note that we have neglected a reasonable project, ready to use, that presented in 2006 by the Commission headed by former Minister Fouad Boutros, designed in a way that allows for a proportional voting accompanied by elections held according to the majority system. Regardless of the details and in summary, the voting endorsed by the new law remains sectarian, with no women quota, a voting age still fixed at 21 and remaining lax campaign-financing regulations. The electoral revolution did not take place. The Lebanese voter will have to wait one more time. Worse, inequality of citizens before the electoral law is obvious for the number of registered voters greatly varies among constituencies, and running for the six seats granted by the law for the Lebanese diaspora will not be applicable before 2022. Finally, the National Independent Electoral Commission will not see the light of day this time. Notwithstanding, a genuine wondering-aloud arises as to what expect from elections likely to be held in the previously analyzed

regional context and electoral legislation? Basically, for what end are the elections held?

## The Lebanese Political Landscape

The answer to such a question is related to the power balance that was progressively established in the country and that will continue to prevail at the eve of the electoral consultation.

The relationship between political forces in Lebanon has been deeply modified during the latest years despite the fact that the political forces on the Lebanese scene did not quite change. Lebanese war protagonists still form the political scene of today. However, the alliances weaved since the liberation of the national territory and the withdrawal of the Israeli and Syrian armies were game-changing. The big division broke down. It used to separate the March 14 alliance, including a Sunni-Druze and Christian majority, opposed to Syria, from the March 8 alliance faithful to Syria and mainly represented by the parties and dignitaries of the Shiite community, in addition to the *Marada* in the North with the partisans of Sleiman Frangieh and some ideological parties like the *Communist Party*, the *Baath* or the *Syrian National Social Party*. The political binarity (*Destour/National Bloc ; Helf/Nahj ; Lebanese Front/National Movement*) did not continue after the Taëf. The traditional leadership formed of the cartel of dignitaries or traditional families survived in certain regions. However, partisan lines are often mixed with family lines, as it is the case for the Gemayel, Joumblatt, Frangieh, and Hariri families, and to a lesser extent, the Karamé, Arslan, and Salam families that were not formally structured into parties with an ideological component. These families are present in electoral calculations and combinations. Yet, since the Syrian

occupation and Damascus gaining the upper hand in Lebanese politics, the logic of regional alignments prevailed over the logic of ideological, local and familial affiliations. As a result, the Lebanese political life is structured today around regional axes. Embracing this regional division, the distinction between March 8 and March 14 alliances became ambiguous. Since the withdrawal of foreign armies in 2000 and 2005, Lebanon has never been that symbolically assaulted with the humiliation of a Prime Minister, ally of Riyadh, and the State placed under the tutelage of Teheran. Those are the dominating alignments. They dictate the alliances and coalitions that the upcoming elections will lead to. Otherwise, how would we explain lists based on puzzling alliances? The *Lebanese forces* of Samir Geagea, hostile to the Syrian-Iranian axis and close to Saudi Arabia, will be allied to the *Free Patriotic Movement* of General Michel Aoun and his son-in-law Gebran Bassil, linked to the *Hezbollah* by virtue of a memorandum of understanding. In some regions where Christians represent a minority, Christian candidates will be recruited from secular parties yet will join the *Hezbollah* lists to be elected. It is true that in this case, the opposition to Israel could be invoked to explain the logic behind this electoral alliance.

However, regardless of electoral political alliances and whether they would be respected or not contingent on circumstances and constituencies, the component of the Lebanese political power that will be established in the aftermaths of the upcoming elections, will essentially evolve around five partisan formations, represented in the Government of PM Saad Hariri, and entrusted with the mission of perpetuating the vulnerable yet resilient balance upon which rests the political power in Lebanon.

*Amal* party will be polarizing the popular Shiite votes, and

mobilizing its supporters around a charismatic chief who was able through clientelism, namely recruitments in the public sector, to attract followers.

The *Free Patriotic Movement* gathers a Christian clientele base from middle and disadvantaged Christian classes around a its charismatic chief, Michel Aoun, who bets with great insistence on the restored pride of Christians, powerful through their new alliances and through the revival of their role under the ceaselessly recalled slogan of the “strong President”.

The *Hezbollah* would have won the title of the dominating party within the context of a traditional democratic parliamentary system. A party of solid partisans, gathered around a strong religious and martyrdom ideology. It can count on a highly disciplined crowd, sensitive to the charisma of its leader. It is without contest the party that dominates all the others and that has a strategy and an agenda that goes beyond the Lebanese borders.

The *Lebanese Forces* party knew how to integrate political formations and personalities that formed the March 14 alliance. Its skilled partisan cadres and focus on defending the Christian presence, make it an ideological mobilization party welded around an undisputed chief.

The *Mostakbal* party has a bigger visibility thanks to the fame of its chief, the Sunnite Saad Hariri. Although composite and dispersed, political Sunni Islam still enjoys a considerable polarization power. While PM Saad Hariri remains its prominent pole, popular politicians play an eminent role like Fouad Siniora (in Saida), Najib Mikati, Mohammad Safadi or Omar Karamé (in

Tripoli) or Tamam Salam and Fouad Makhzoumé (in Beirut). A curious mutation of the Sunni leadership has led individuals from the financial world, ruling over big fortunes, to assume the leadership of the community. Yet after the disappearance of Rafic Hariri, no Sunni leader imposed himself on the national level outside the sphere of the strong presence of Saad Hariri. When it comes to relations with the Sunni world, things got complicated. The relationship with Syria is troubled since the assassination of Rafic Hariri, and tensed with Saudi Arabia since the last episode of Saad Hariri's trip to Riyadh, while the traditional mobilization of the community around the Palestinian cause was long ago monopolized by *Hezbollah*.

In a country where communal pluralism prevails, no one can be permanently excluded from political participation. Through singling out some mobilizing forces of the political landscape, one cannot ignore the authority of a Walid Joumblatt over the Druze community, and the national role he plays. In an electoral context, the role of the *Socialist Progressive Party's* chief cannot be neglected. The stability of the Chouf region is essential to him, without relinquishing to his national positions. The same applies to a number of Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Catholic and Armenian dignitaries in Beirut, Zahlé, Koura, Jezzine and the Metn. A major Christian party, the *Kataeb*, also differentiated itself by refusing to play the power game and refocusing on the demands of the civil society that the party wants to represent. It inaugurated a new approach in the political life that needs to be observed in light of the increasing power of a civil society tired of carelessness and mismanagement.

From this situation emerges what we can call the power circle, tightened around populist national parties like *Amal* or the *Free*

*Patriotic Movement*, or ideological parties like *Hezbollah* and the *Lebanese Forces*, whose volatile alliance is somehow keeping the Lebanese ship afloat. These parties are the main actors and beneficiaries of the political action. A pact of alliances emerged around these four poles of the political life, to which we have to add the Druze pole and a Sunni pole represented by a shaky *Mostakbal Movement* although still participating unequivocally to the management of the country. These alliances were at the same time a network of influence sharing, roles partitioning and economic benefits, to the extent that one forgets the peaceful Lebanon of the consociational theory (*tawafuqi*), dear to the Lebanese politology. The upcoming elections will not be held as per a sectarian pact with an electoral program or a political finality, but rather an extractive polyarchy (as it extracts the wealth then divides it). The only result for this electoral process is the support to the current power balance and status quo. Except for few, the pursuit of private interests will have them forget the seriousness of the situation and the threatening regional environment. Obviously, the biggest winner in these elections will be the *Hezbollah* who will succeed, regardless of the registered figures and the number of seats won, in pursuing its security and military objectives in Lebanon and the region, while avoiding breaking the Lebanese internal balances, and preparing for the proclaimed big regional confrontation.

Electoral processes are necessary for the democratic life of a nation. One should undertake them and accept their results even in an ecliptic democracy as it is now the case in Lebanon, where elections are held intermittently and unpredictably. They are necessary even if the citizen, who is the first one to be consulted,

will be the last one to be heard. They don't always lead to the desired change, and could unfortunately give legitimacy to new power balances and to the recognition of "faits accomplis" in some cases. They could also reflect the echo of a cracking political system, the sufferings of populations, and therefore reaffirm the need to move towards democracy.

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