

Teim



TEIM Election Watch Analysis

OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

LEBANON/ Municipal elections in Beirut and Beqaa

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Day Two of Elections: Beirut and Beqaa

09 May was Day Two of Lebanon's municipal elections, with elections coinciding in two regions: Beirut and the country's eastern region, Beqaa.

In the capital, the news of the day was the very low participation rate of 21%. The absence of reform and the existence of agreements fixing almost all the results in advance led to the apathy of some, and the rejection of others. The rejection of this form of managing elections made for an unusual percentage of panachage in all the capital's districts, and especially in Beirut I¹.

Concerning the results, it is necessary to differentiate in the capital between the municipal council and regional council elections, as a result of the strategy followed by Michel Aoun and Hezbollah. The Christian leader, supported by Hezbollah, refused to participate in the municipal council election, but in a deal with the Armenian party, Tachnag, did present lists in the regional elections in Beirut I and II².

The *muhafazah* or governorship of Beirut, is divided into 3 districts in which a total of 108 mukhtar or regional councillors were elected. The only constituency in which there was something at stake was Beirut I, a predominantly Christian area comprising the neighborhoods of Ashrafieh, Saifi and Rmeil. This was evident in the streets of Ashrafieh especially. Indeed, it was the only place in Beirut where in the days before the election, there were banners, posters and gatherings of neighbors around the candidates' offices, recreating the ambiance of a pre-election period Lebanese-style. The results in Beirut I saw victory go to March 14 in the neighborhoods of Ashrafieh and Saifi, but Aoun won 7 of the 12 councillorships of Rmeil, thanks to his deal with Tachnag. Overall, March 14 won 21 of the the 28 mukhtars up for election in Beirut I. However, analysing the vote along religious lines, Aoun obtained 54% of the Christian vote. It was the Sunni electorate that tipped the scales towards March 14 in these mostly Christian neighborhoods. Given that the elections in this district were been presented in both camps as a referendum on Christian leadership, the end result gives rise to various interpretations. Both Aoun and March 14 have reasons to consider themselves winners.

With regard to Beirut II, Aoun ran his own list in coalition with Tachnag, and the number and discipline of the Armenian community's vote guaranteed him victory. Finally, in Beirut III, a prominent Sunni area, there were no surprises. The lists sponsored by Saad Hariri swept the board. Nonetheless, despite that victory there was some feeling of disappointment. Firstly, due to the lack of mobilisation of Sunni voters. Despite the efforts of Hariri and his men to mobilise the community, the response from part of his electorate was worse than expected. Secondly, the number of votes separating the winning lists from their independent rivals was relatively small. In this sense, the problems the Sunni leader is having trying to impose an agreement in his hometown Sidon, as well as his desire to avoid electoral clashes in all the country's major Sunni zones, reinforces this idea of disappointment.

On the other hand, for the municipal council election, the capital is a single constituency in which, according to the unwritten rule imposed by Rafik

¹ Panachage refers to the practice of voters altering the lists of candidates to their own liking in certain party list proportional electoral systems. In Lebanon this is a very unusual practice, given that voters tend to respect 100% the agreements and alliances of their leaders.

² Tachnag allied with Aoun for the regional council elections in Beirut I and II but in the Beirut municipal council election it ran as part of Rafik Hariri's list.

Hariri in 1998, 12 Muslim and 12 Christians councillors are elected. This time round, 157 candidates ran, although, the only complete list was that sponsored by Saad Hariri, Beirut Unity. It grouped candidates from the country's major parties, with the exception of Hezbollah and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), and left little room for surprises.

In Beqaa, the key point was the capital city of Zahle. In this city, local grandee Elie Skaff, opposed any agreement from the outset. He would not even align himself with Michel Aoun, his usual partner on issues of national policy. This major landowner and former Agriculture minister, sought to avenge the defeat he suffered during the last legislative elections, and there were no surprises – Skaff's list won without difficulty.

Regarding the results in the rest of the region, noteworthy was the change of direction of the Sunni electorate. During recent years, central and western Beqaa had become one of the strongholds of Hariri and his organisation Mustaqbal. However, in these elections Hariri's party suffered a significant drop in support compared to the elections of June 2009. In the 24 Sunni municipalities of western Beqaa, the opposition's lists won in 18 municipalities, while Mustaqbal won in just two (the other four had mixed concord lists). In the same line, in Zahle about 60% of the Sunni electorate voted for Skaff's list. And yet, the support of the Sunni community was key to March 14's victory in the last legislative elections. According to some media interpretations, this drift could be related to the rapprochement between Hariri and a section of March 14 with Syria. In this area of Beqaa, where the Syrian army had its operations base for 30 years, anti-Syrian sentiment is relatively pronounced. Similarly, money, normally so important on any election day, seems to have been insufficient this time round. The lack of competitiveness and the low level of politicization of these elections meant that the parties, and especially Mustaqbal, spent less money than usual on this election³. Indeed, the national news media all coincide that this was one of the reasons for the Sunni electorate's demobilization, both in Beqaa and in Beirut.

With respect to irregularities in the electoral process, according to LADE (Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections) the number of irregularities increased dramatically on Day Two of the elections, especially in Beqaa. According to the association, the most serious irregularity was the high percentage of vote buying in the municipality of Zahle. In this regard, on Monday 10th, the association's executive director, Ziad Abdel Samad, stated that the amount of vote-buying had been such that the results could be challenged.

³ Musctacbal, a party led by leading businessmen, is known for spending large sums of money in election periods.