

Teim



TEIM Election Watch Analysis

PRE-ELECTION ANALYSIS:

LEBANON/Municipal elections 2010

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Ever since the Lebanese Interior Minister, Ziad Baroud, submitted his proposed electoral law reform bill to the country's Cabinet on January 13th, the organization of municipal elections has been one of the major political issues of the year in Lebanon. After nearly two months of debate and negotiations, on March 1st, the Cabinet gave the go-ahead to Baroud's proposed reforms, and the bill went to Parliament. However, not unexpectedly, given the lack of political will shown by politicians across the board, the bill's debate in the House has become interminable. The constitutionally prescribed deadlines have elapsed without any type of political agreement, leading politicians to end up opting for the most conservative alternative: municipal elections will be held in the established timeframe (between May 2nd and 30th), but the reforms will not be applied until a later date.

The reform bill promised, among other things, to adopt a proportional voting system, to standardise ballot papers and to reduce to five years the Council's period of office (the current electoral law stipulates municipal elections every six years). Adopting a proportional model would have been an especially significant advance for the Lebanese electoral system given that, at present; in both legislative and municipal elections a Block Voting system is employed. In a country like Lebanon, where family networks and clientelism are all-pervading, the present system is something of a life insurance policy for those in power¹.

Municipal elections are a thorny issue in Lebanon, as the few occasions (1960, 1998 and 2004) in which they have taken place indicates, in spite of the six year terms stipulated by the country's Constitution. The complexity of this situation is due to the family networks and clientelism that dominate municipal life in Lebanon, frequently going beyond and sometimes even contradicting the political configurations at national level. Because of this, both national politicians and local elites are inclined to be somewhat reticent about holding municipal elections.

This type of elections do nonetheless, have a special importance in Lebanon, given that at least in theory, they are not held along the sectarian lines that define, for example, the country's legislative elections. Although this means that voters should not vote along predetermined sectarian lines, in practice however, the distribution of town councils always respects a district's confessional reality.

With just a few weeks to go before the elections, the mood among the country's political class is, broadly speaking, positive. The vast majority of national politicians and political parties have made demonstrable efforts to cooperate and reach pre-election agreements to offset some level of election day confrontation. Thus, Hezbollah and Amal have reached a comprehensive agreement regarding the Shiite majority municipalities, leaving room for the notables and traditional family networks of each region. In this way, they have managed to neutralize potential conflicts of interest that might have otherwise undermined the March 8th Alliance's image of unity. It seems that Hezbollah and Saad Hariri's Future Movement have also reached agreements to water down competitiveness in key Sunni cities around the country. In this regard, it seems that Hezbollah has called on its allies in predominantly Sunni cities like Tripoli and Sidon, to avoid confrontation with Hariri, by forming consensus lists. That said, while reaching agreements seem more likely in Tripoli and Northern Lebanon in general, Sidon is a different story. Osama Saad, a local notable,

¹ On this subject, see:

http://observatorioelectoral.es/en/ImgBase/EP-Lebanon_parliamentary_2009.pdf

defeated in last year's legislative elections by Hariri's coalition, seems to be out for revenge and unwilling to accept any agreements². In Beirut, the Shiite parties would seem to have turned their back on their Christian ally, Michel Aoun, and avoided confrontation by creating a council built on consensus.

As a result of inter-Shiite and inter-Muslim rivalry having been seemingly neutralised, it seems probable that this time round electoral competition will be limited to the Christian camp. These elections will thus, once again be a referendum on the legitimacy and leadership of the major Christian leaders, in which Michel Aoun does battle with the Christian leaders of the March 14th coalition. In this regard, the key municipalities to watch this time are as follows. Firstly, Zahlé, where local notable and former March 8th component, Elias Skaff, who was surprisingly defeated in last year's legislative elections, has proved unwilling to compromise with his March 14th rivals. Meanwhile, in Beirut, although initially a municipal council formed through consensus was envisaged, no agreement has been reached. It seems that Michel Aoun is reluctant to negotiate with the March 14th Christian candidates. The final decision will depend, probably, on the upcoming meeting between Aoun and Saad Hariri.

A third hot spot may be Jezzine, a southern Christian town in which Michel Aoun and Nabih Berri, partners in national politics, are vying for votes. According to L'Orient le Jour newspaper, a group of notables may already be negotiating with the dominant political forces in the area to try to avoid a confrontation. This group aims to forge a consensus council made up of six members allied with the MPs Samir Azar and Edmond Rizk (allies of Berri), another six close to Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), and three independents³.

In short, what the pre-election situation seems to demonstrate is that, the Lebanese political elite's vested interest in maintaining the status quo means that once again, an election is being prepared that holds no possibility of surprises.

Finally, Hadath and Hazmieh, two Christian towns in the region of Baabda may prove essential in the Christian leadership struggle. In Hadath, the independent (March 14th) Antoine Karam, mayor of the municipality, and Michel Aoun's candidate, George Aoun, will face off knowing that in last year's legislative elections, Aoun's party took 60% of the vote. In Hazmieh, on the other hand, the industrialist Jean al-Asmar, close to March 14th, will run against the FPM, which has already announced it will back any candidate opposing al-Asmar. As things stand, May 2nd, the day that elections will take place in the majority of the Christian regions, will undoubtedly be the key date in this electoral process.

² Saad's candidate for mayor is the incumbent, Abdel-Rahman Bizri.

³ L'Orient Le Jour 16/04/2010