

Libanon

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Parliamentary Elections in Lebanon

A long way to go

The long awaited parliamentary elections in Lebanon will take place in the upcoming months of 2017.

The legislative period of the last parliament, elected in 2009, has already passed its regulatory mandate of four years in 2013. Yet, in consideration of the current events in the region and the resulting safety issues, the parliament independently extended its legislative period two times in 2013 and 2014 through a formal juridical revision. The official end of the parliamentary mandate is set for the 20th of June 2017. With respect to the Ramadan month, the elections have been set for May 2017.

However, Lebanon's path to new parliamentary elections is marked by many multidimensional difficulties.

The political situation

A reflection of the complexities that come along with the parliamentary elections could already be seen within the appointment of the president of the republic. Preceding a two and a half year dispute for the presidential position, the controversial general Michel Aoun was elected as the president of the Lebanese Republic in the 45th attempt on 31. October 2016. The long-lasting negotiations on the presidency can be mainly attributed to the complexity of Lebanon's multiconfessional political system, which is determined by the many diverse religious denominations and partly by inter-party conflicts.

The governmental structure of Lebanon is based on a confessional system determining the distribution of power, in which political positions and functions are allocated to the specific candidates of the different religious groups. Since the formal independence in 1943 and the unwritten "national pact", the president of the republic always has to be a

Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister always a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of the parliament a Shia Muslim. Moreover, an equal allocation between Muslims and Christians counts for the distribution of the seats within the parliament. This distribution, which is based on the last official population census from 1932, took a ratio of 1:1 since the Taif – Agreement in 1989. The overall aim of this structure is to ensure a political balance between the different confessions of the country – there 18 officially recognized confessions. Next to the president Aoun, the current prime minister is Saad Hariri and the position of Parliament speaker is held by Nabih Berri.

The political landscape can be divided into two rivalling coalitions, the anti-Syrian March 14th Alliance – backed by western powers – and the pro-Syrian March 8th coalition which is strongly influenced by Hezbollah. This current landscape is a direct outcome of the civil war, the Syrian military presence in Lebanon and the anti-Syrian influence of the Cedar Revolution of 2005. Yet, the strict separation of the opposing parties was unclenched by the necessity of finding an alliance that reaches both coalitions in order to elect president Aoun in 2016.

The elections of 2009

The outcome of the 2009 elections should still be viewed through a perspective of the two opposing coalitions. The majority of Shia Muslims and Alawites has voted for the Hezbollah-dominated 8th March coalition (98,4 % and 95,29 %). Sunni Muslim voters, however, mainly voted for the anti-Syrian 14th March coalition (81,85%). The Christian confessions are divided and support both the 8th March coalition (50,67%) and the 14th coalition (49,33 %). In detail, the 8th March coalition has received the majority of the Christian votes by the Armenian-Orthodox and Armenian Catholic

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Confessions (74,67% and 69,46%). For the 14th March coalition, the majority of Christian votes came from Maronite Christians (50,50%).

The 128 Seats in the parliament are still distributed according to the valid electoral law and are divided equally among Christians and Muslims.

Criticism and New approach to the Election-System

The confessional division of the parliament together with the majority voting system in the different districts causes inconsistencies regarding the representation of the population and leads to much criticism of the overall voting system.

A majority of the political forces therefore aim for a reform of the current electoral system. Since such a reform could lead to massive power shifts, favorable or unfavorable for the different confessional groups, there is an extensive on-going debate about how these reforms should look like. In total there are 17 different drafts for the voting-reform. For this reason, no common ground on a new voting system has been found in the past years.

The central questions within this debate are on the one hand, whether the voting system should remain in its confessional form or become independent of confessions, and on the other hand whether the majority voting system should be replaced by a proportionally representative election system or a mixture of both. Moreover, the question remains whether the electoral constituencies should remain the same or if new boarder-lines should be set. This in turn could have a great impact on the proportional distribution of the different groups in the particular districts.

Status quo

In 2014 the "*Conseil constitutionnel*", a political institution similar to the German Constitutional Court, decided that a further extension of the elections by the parliament after 2017 would be unconstitutional. Therefore all political actors are under pres-

sure to either quickly find an agreement on a new voting system or to simply hold elections in May 2017 based on the old voting system of 1960 (amended 2008). Additionally, external pressure from international partners is amplifying this need to hold elections in order to prevent a further decrease of democratic legitimation in the Lebanese parliament.

In January 2017 president Aoun announced that he would only accept elections based on a new voting system and otherwise prefers a vacuum of power without an active parliament.

Future Outlook

With respect to the political influence of developments in the region, and especially in consideration of the crisis in Syria, it is hard to estimate when exactly and under which circumstances the parliamentary elections in Lebanon will take place.

Preferably for the country would be, if political actors would set aside their internal conflicts in order to find an agreement on a new electoral law that actually represents the proportional distribution of the population, allowing representatives to truly stand for their voting districts and feel responsible for it. Such a legitimized democratic parliament would be well suited to control the executive branch and have actively take part in politics.