



Lebanon's Parliamentary Elections: Expectations vs. Reality

Best-case Scenarios do not Fulfill Reform Aspirations

Despite the exceptional circumstances that Lebanon has been experiencing for more than two years, the Lebanese are preparing to hold the legislative elections on 15 May 2022 amid an array of local, regional and international challenges that dominate the internal scene and this particular event as a critical milestone in revitalizing political life by reproducing a people-backed government.

There is an internal challenge reflected in a fragmented electoral base after the fall of the political arrangement that has governed the country since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri between March 8 Alliance (representing the Syrian-Iranian axis) and March 14 Alliance (representing the sovereign powers that had emerged from the 2005 revolution that led to the exit of the Syrian army in the wake of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri) and the emergence of new alliances dictated by the electoral landscape on the one hand, and the common political interests on the other. As "Future Movement" (led by Saad Hariri and representing the majority of the Sunni community), a key player in Lebanon's political life, left the game, new players appeared on the scene as a result of the 17 October Revolution. These new players strive to join forces in preparation for imposing the agenda of change on the traditional powers whether the loyalists or the opposition amid an unprecedented economic, financial and

social collapse that tightens the screws on the Lebanese and limits their potential and options.

In parallel, there is a regional challenge of the continued fierce conflict between the Saudi and Iranian axes, combined with an international factor of Tehran's nuclear file and the faltering negotiations with the P5+1. A new international factor emerged: the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the consequent reshuffling in light of the emergence of a whole new world.

Amidst this bleak picture of the Lebanese scene few weeks away from the elections and given the multiple associated assumptions, the "Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Lebanon Office", under the Chatham House Rule, held a roundtable at the Lancaster Hotel, Beirut over two days (17-18 February). Under the title "Prospects of the 2022 Election's outcomes in Lebanon and their Fallouts", the roundtable discussion, using an interactive simulation model, brought together representatives of the Lebanese parties from the government and the opposition, representatives of the political blocs created by civil society after the 17 October Revolution, and representatives of the regional and international powers concerned with the Lebanese affairs, namely the United States, the European Union, the Arab Gulf states and Iran.

The simulation focused on the implications of three possible scenarios for the elections in Lebanon. The first scenario investigates the hypothesis that the current ruling class, i.e., "Hezbollah" and its allies, will emerge victorious.

The second discusses the consequences of the hypothesis of the victory of the traditional political opposition parties, movements and groups along with the political blocs created by civil society after the revolution.

The third scenario investigates the possibility that the elections will not be held and the consequences of the failure to hold or the delay of the elections.

These aim to predict the respective stances and positions of those parties and the entities or communities they represent and the impacts of each scenario on Lebanon's internal politics and regional and international relations and position. All these scenarios have one umbrella question: Will the upcoming elections, if held, help the current parliamentary majority retain their lead, or will the revolutionary forces be able to make a breakthrough and impose their agenda, based on the change in the mood of the voters and the reform slogans emanating out of the popular revolution and the economic, financial and social hell in which the Lebanese live or will the establishment take the easiest option: elections postponement? This will be the worst nightmare for the country which will get in a vicious circle of constitutional vacuum, starting with a vacuum in the higher constitutional institution if the Parliament does not extend its tenure, and ending with the vacuum in presidency. This might require a "constituent assembly" to make a new political system. The vacuum will also involve the executive branch represented in the government, which will turn into a caretaker government.

Will the country go to this scenario, or will the power brokers today resort to what the Lebanese fear the most: a deal in which the parliament will get an extension in return for extending the tenure of the President of the Republic?

While these challenges seem serious and disturbing for the elite classes across the Lebanese society and while this diagnosis of the deadlocked situation in Lebanon appears to be so bleak as the country appears to be on existential and structural crossroads, the roundtable discussions reflected that it is impossible to reach a common ground on the

proposed scenarios and the dangerous matters under discussion. This is either due to repercussions of each scenario on domestic politics in the areas of political, legislative, economic, financial, social and judicial reform, or the need to correct the internal power imbalance that extended for decades, which has thrown Lebanon into the furnace of conflicting regional axes, isolating it from its regional and international surroundings and leading to disintegration of the social fabric and attempts to change its identity and historical role. The thorny issue that hindered any criticism in the discussion was the position of "Hezbollah" at the local, regional and international levels and the impact of its influence and expansion outside the Lebanese borders on the domestic scene and the required reforms, including the negotiations with the International Monetary Fund as well as the repercussions on Lebanon's regional and international relations.

Scenario I: The traditional opposition parties, along with the political blocs emanating from the revolution, would win the parliamentary majority

Regarding the hypothesis that the traditional opposition parties, along with the political blocs emanating from the revolution, would win the parliamentary majority and reverse the victory achieved by Hezbollah and its allies in 2018, the scenario seemed to be unrealistic to any of the participants in the roundtable. They expressed their strong belief in the importance and need for holding the elections as a mandatory step to form the government and a good practice of democratic system.

Scenario II: The victory of the current ruling class, Hezbollah and its allies

The scenario of the victory of the current ruling class, which includes Hezbollah and its allies, was not any different from the first scenario of the victory of the conventional parties along with the 17 October groups. Most of speakers did not see any chance for the first scenario under the great influence enjoyed by the Hezbollah-led ruling alliance. The opposition and change groups are only expected to win 15 - 20 seats or a little more. Therefore, speakers maintained their expectations that there would be no real or radical change in the political landscape, as long as power would remain in the hands of the same ruling group. Accordingly, the groups that emerged from the 17 October Revolution agreed that if Hezbollah the party and its allies win the majority, they will recreate themselves, will leave this majority to govern alone and will not provide any cover for this majority by participating in settlements or governments of national unity, as usually happened in Lebanon.

Scenario III: Postponement

In addition to the two scenarios discussed above, a third scenario discusses elections postponement. This scenario is widely proposed by forces that feel their declining popularity and the possibility of losing some parliamentary seats. This option would have serious repercussions given the possibilities it would open up at the level of the imminent constitutional processes. The parliament's mandate may either be extended or dissolved. For presidency, with the term of the current president ending next October, will the country go to an extension for the president as a trade-off with the extension for the parliament, or the highest position will be left vacant in parallel with the legislature vacancy? What about the government, which is the executive branch that will be forced to resign upon the expiry of the parliamentary term?

All these questions and concerns met with consensus among the various pro-government, opposition or change forces. The country will not experience a vacuum because the ruling group will not allow this to happen. It will proactively conclude an agreement to settle the extension of the current situation under the pretexts of fear about security stability and prevention of vacuum and chaos. This means that the country will be on the verge of a new settlement in which the forces of change and the opposition will have no say as long as they are out of power. This settlement will pave the way for the search for a new political system.

Conclusions

These discussions were designed to present an interactive simulation about the scenarios for the parliamentary elections. It was a successful attempt to open a serious and informed discussion that covers a realistic diagnosis of the crisis and the political and non-political dilemmas. The discussions were interactive and frank with direct communication between the traditional political components and the groups emerged from the 17 October Revolution. However, the results were disappointing particularly on the possibility of getting out of the state of seclusion and alignment between these components and groups under the slogans they raised which still make the headlines of their electoral campaigns. While the representatives of the ruling alliance were coherent and consistent in their proposals and their belief that the only feasible scenario lies in this alliance maintaining its influence with or without parliamentary majority or elections. It was remarkable that this conclusion also applied to the opposition and change group which seemed to have a strong belief that there are little chances for change. Although the group did not rule out the idea that their victory with any percentage, even if very small, would lay the cornerstone for change.

This conclusion did not cover the external factors to provide a realistic approach, while this factor greatly overlaps with the Lebanese situation, after "Hezbollah" has turned into a regional player and has become a part or partner in any future settlement, in addition to the other international factor: the Russian-Ukrainian war and international involvement in it. This has marginalized the Lebanese file and remove it from the radar of foreign interest. This requires the local force to rethink the internal approach to such factors and how to deal with it.

At the national level:

- › Lebanon lacks unified criteria for national affiliation; this matter should be given high priority in order to establish sound and correct concepts of the principle of belonging and identification.
- › Parliamentary elections constitute a critical milestone in the process of rebuilding the regime or reviving politics and democratic practice. The Lebanese people urgently need to have a real opportunity to become aware of the amount of responsibility they share in voting and selecting candidates.
- › Given the fragility of the political situation in Lebanon, and based on the role that the international community can play as part of its efforts to promote the concepts of democracy, preservation of individual freedom of expression and

democratic practice and spread a culture of awareness, this society, including its donor organizations and bodies, should channel the support given to Lebanon in the right direction that prevents political misuse of this support in favor of certain groups and helps achieve the desired goals.

At the political level:

- › At the level of the traditional opposition and the groups of change: these parties and groups should develop mechanisms of cooperation and coordination that allow them to join forces in order to reach unified and complete lists that express the clear line of their goals and change project for future Lebanon. In conclusion, they should develop a unified program and a clear vision of the strenuous issues in policies, internal and foreign politics, security, economy and reforms. With such a program, they can turn to their voters to be aware of their aspirations as they seek to come to power with new faces, which are not familiar to the voters.
- › This underlines the urgent need to have clear programs for the electoral campaigns and to avoid populist slogans that aim to drum up support before the elections and will be dumped out later.
- › At the level of the regime alliance: These forces should reconsider their political practice and conduct a serious and responsible revision of their performance, in order to develop a new strategy to deal with the partners brought through the elections, if held, or those who will have reserved a seat on the table. Hezbollah must conduct an internal repositioning in which it restores consideration to its national partners. Its Christian ally, the FPM, must abandon the slogans and battles of the past, especially on the Christian side, and restrict them to presidential elections, towards a future vision of reconstruction of the state on the constitutional and national foundations that have been shaken by recent practices.

At the constitutional level:

- › The importance of holding the parliamentary elections on time should be underlined, calling on the Lebanese to massively participate in the polls in order to re-build the political regime in such a way that meets their expectations. All parties should accept the results of the elections and should not jump over them by establishing a fait accompli that thwarts any hopes for change in Lebanon.
- › Regardless of the results of the polls, those who would be brought to power should open a serious and responsible dialogue on the political and economic system, after the practices and circumventions in implementing the constitution demonstrated the urgent need for a Lebanese agreement on the principles and foundations that foster a common national life.
- › The government emerging from the elections should take the initiative to move immediately in the direction of arranging the priorities that would curb the collapse and put the country back on track, through a program with the International Monetary Fund, which is the only way to obtain international

support and rearrange Lebanon's Arab and international relations through a clear and unambiguous foreign policy.

- › If elections do not take place, the political forces should avoid compromises and deals made on the ruins of the country and should respect the constitutional institutions. This requires joint pressure from the Lebanese people and the international community to prevent chaos and vacuum that leads to the security instability and to prevent the influential political parties from continuing to control the country from outside the established constitutional frameworks.
- › It is a national responsibility on the Lebanese people to protect Lebanon from external interference and threats and fortify its people and civil peace to rebuild a democratic society that secure quality life, political stability, economic prosperity and social welfare for future generations.

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