

Lebanon: US-backed coalition retains narrow majority

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In the Lebanese elections last Sunday, the March 14 alliance of Saad Hariri and Prime Minister Fuad Seniora held on to power, losing one of the 72 seats won in the 2005 election.

Its victory over the opposition forces led by Hezbollah and backed by Iran and Syria was welcomed by the imperialist powers and their allies in the region. But the result is far from a resounding success for the ruling coalition, which had been expected to lose to Hezbollah by a narrow margin. It is primarily the result of enormous pressure from the United States, political skullduggery, massive vote buying and the deployment of 60,000 troops to police the election.

The narrow margin of victory resolves nothing in a country bitterly divided on religious, ethnic and, above all, class lines. Once again, the March 14 alliance will be forced to form a coalition with the opposition forces in a misnamed National Unity Government. The deep schism between the two rival alliances, as well as the divisions within each, means that there will be weeks of horse trading to form a government, unleashing sharp rivalries, tensions and a fresh political crisis.

Since Lebanon is a focal point in a region-wide contest between the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, France and its allies on the one hand, and Syria, Iran and its allies, Hezbollah and Amal within Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, on the other, the outcome will have repercussions far beyond Beirut.

Under Lebanon's undemocratic power-sharing system between the majority Muslims and minority Christians, the seats are divided equally between the two major religions even though Christians make up only a third of its four million people. With each of the religions internally divided, the sects also have their own constituencies.

There was a relatively high turnout at 52 percent of the electorate, compared to the 45 percent turnout in 2005, and near-uniform sectarian voting, with just five or six seats in Zahle region in the Bekaa valley and in Christian East Beirut holding the balance of the 128-seat parliament.

The March 14 alliance of Sunni Muslims, the Druze Party led by Walit Jumblatt and the Phalangist Christian groups, won 69 seats. Hezbollah, the Shi'ite fundamentalist party, and its allies, the Shi'ite Amal party led by Nabih Berri, speaker of the

parliament, and the Free Patriotic Movement, led by Maronite former general Michel Aoun, won 58 seats. The remaining two seats went to independents allied to the government.

The March 14 candidates provide a revealing insight into the dynastic nature of political life in Lebanon. The leader of the alliance is Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated former premier, Rafiq Hariri. The 26-year-old Nayla Tueni is the daughter of assassinated journalist and MP Gebran Tueni, and granddaughter of another MP. Her maternal grandfather is a former minister and her uncle a present minister. The 27-year-old Nadim Gemayel, is the son of Bashir Gemayel, a former president-elect assassinated days before his inauguration in September 1982, while his cousin, 29-year-old Sami Gemayel, is the son of another former president. All the Gemayels belong to the rightist Christian Phalange party.

The predominant issue was Lebanon's relations with its neighbours, with little said about the economic problems facing its people. While the European Union has been providing \$84 million a year for the last three years and Lebanon has arranged a \$114 million loan with the IMF, the support is due to expire soon and member states, led by the US, could block any future money.

The election was characterised by massive interference and intimidation by the US and its regional allies. Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, made a surprise visit to Beirut at the end of April and met Michel Suleiman, the Lebanese president in a show of support for the current government. "We want to see a strong, independent, free and sovereign Lebanon," she declared. President Barack Obama had sent Suleiman a letter expressing the same sentiments.

Two weeks ago, US vice-president Joe Biden, also made an unexpected visit to Beirut. He insisted that future US financial aid would be tied to the policies of the next Lebanese government. "We will evaluate the shape of our assistance programs based on the composition of the new government and the policies it advocates," he said.

Since Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon, the US has sent Lebanon some \$410 million in military aid to bolster its armed forces and undermine Hezbollah. His was a threat that if Hezbollah, which the US has outlawed as a terrorist organisation, won the election, the US would cut off both

military and economic aid—as happened when Hamas won the Palestinian elections in January 2006.

Saad Hariri is also very close to Saudi Arabia, which has spent huge sums of money supporting him. According to a report in the *New York Times*, a Saudi government adviser said, “We are putting a lot into this”—citing hundreds of millions of dollars. “We’re supporting candidates running against Hezbollah, and we’re going to make Iran feel the pressure,” he added.

While bribery is common in elections in Lebanon—it ranks 101st out of 180 countries on Transparency International’s corruption perception index—it was particularly marked this time because of the fear that Hezbollah would win.

Talal Suleiman, editor of the Lebanese newspaper *As-Safir*, estimated that about \$1 billion would be spent on the election—not the official sum in the state budget or the \$20 million spent on election supervision but the amount the candidates were spending on buying votes—an average of \$5 million per candidate. There were local reports that in the swing constituencies in Zahle, votes were costing up to \$1,500 each.

Carmen Geha, deputy coordinator of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Election (LADE), told Reuters that LADE’s monitoring of the election showed that votes were being traded for “up to \$2,000 in some districts, in others \$100, \$150”. LADE says it has even documented a case of one candidate writing \$5,000 cheques to buy the votes of whole families. Another candidate pays school fees and hands out petrol coupons.

Expatriates were flown home to cast their vote in greater numbers than usual, with both campaigns offering to pay airfares.

Lebanon’s Internal Security Force (ISF) arrested at least 50 people alleged to have worked as spies for Israel. With at least some of the names of the alleged spies provided by Hezbollah, the government was forced to act after widespread criticisms that it colluded with Israel during the 2006 war to eliminate Hezbollah.

The arrests came just after a United Nations special tribunal ordered the release of four senior pro-Syrian Lebanese generals, who had been held for four years without charge on suspicion of involvement in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and 21 others in 2005. The UN prosecutor said that the evidence was not sufficiently credible to warrant the indictment of the men.

In view of the fact that Washington has always insisted—without much evidence—that Syria and its place men were responsible for the assassination, the release raises the suspicion of some rapprochement between the White House and Damascus, and an inducement to Syria to keep out of Lebanese affairs in future. Certainly, Syria sat on the sidelines in the run-up to the elections.

An article in *Der Spiegel* reported that the UN tribunal is now focusing on Hezbollah as the potential murderers, which

Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has called a lie and an “Israeli plot”. The tribunal denied giving any such information to the German magazine. Egypt, another of the March 14 alliance’s supporters, accused Hezbollah of planning to attack Egyptian institutions and Israeli tourists and arrested 49 Egyptian, Palestinian and Lebanese men linked to Hezbollah.

The Maronite Patriarch, Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir, warned Christians that the poll could “change the face of Lebanon,” implying an Iranian threat to its Arab identity.

Nasrallah acknowledged within hours of the official results that Hezbollah and its allies had lost the election and congratulated “all those who won, those in the majority and those in the opposition.”

It is far from clear that Hezbollah, mindful of what has befallen Hamas, had wanted to win. It fielded only 11 candidates compared with 14 in the last election. Certainly, the outcome suits Syria, at least for the time being.

Irrespective of its electoral calculations, Hezbollah could only fight a reactionary campaign based on sectarian politics. Its appeal to Shi’ite Muslims could not unite the Lebanese masses across the sectarian divide. It goaded the March 14 alliance with reminders of its superior physical force and its armed seizure of sections of Beirut last May, raising the spectre of civil war.

Moreover, Hezbollah accepts the anti-democratic and sect-based framework of the Lebanese state, devised under the auspices of French and American imperialism to fracture the working class along confessional lines. The constitution prescribes that the president be a Maronite Christian (although that sect now comprises less than a quarter of the population), the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim (likely to be Saad Hariri), while the third-highest position, speaker of the parliament, is reserved for a Shi’ite Muslim, although Shi’ites are now by far the largest confessional group.

Hezbollah’s base of support lies with the most impoverished layers, but it is organically tied to and dependent upon Iran and Syria, bourgeois regimes that are seeking to reach their own accommodation with US imperialism. It is therefore incapable of genuinely opposing imperialism, or addressing the needs and aspirations of working people. Like all such sectarian and ethnic-based parties, it can only further divide the working class.



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