15 May 2022 put to rest many of the sceptics who doubted that these long-awaited parliamentary elections would take place and who did not believe that the forces of the opposition that emerged from the October 2019 popular protests (“the Revolution”), would fare well at the polls. Yet, with the closing of the polls the gradual announcement of the results indicated that this election, contrary to what many believed, was not merely an occasion for the ruling elites to reconfirm their dominance over their fiefdoms but opened a perspective for real change in the future.

This sign of optimism was mainly brought about by the fact that the independent opposition lists, which are commonly referred to as the “forces of change” (qiwa at-taghyir) – or, rather erroneously, “civil society lists” (mujtamaa madani) – were able to clinch 13 seats compared to just one seat in 2018 in an imposing increase in votes received, from 39,075 in 2018 (2.1% of the votes) to 300,000 votes in 2022 (16.2%), second to the votes for Hezbollah and the Amal movement, and ahead of the Lebanese Forces. Hezbollah, Iran’s proxy in the Levant, lost its majority in parliament, as many of its allies, particularly the Free Patriotic Movement, led by President Michel Aoun’s son-in-law and political heir Gibran Bassil, who are considered to be close to the Assad regime lost all of their seats, some of which they had held since 1992.

Regrettably, the severe underrepresentation of women in parliament continues: the recent election did not achieve much change, with only a marginal increase from 6 to 8 elected members, 5 of whom are from the opposition.

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VOTER TURNOUT: A BLOW TO THE RULING ESTABLISHMENT

The spike in voting for the non-aligned opposition lists was not simply a punitive move against political elites who have relinquished responsibility for a state teetering on the brink of failure, but rather it is a shift in behaviour whereby traditional voters broke a voting pattern in favour of a seemingly more promising political alternative.

While the established political parties continued to wager on a solid bloc of votes secured by faithful followers who are either ideologically aligned with them or are recipients of clientelist services, many Lebanese with partisan sympathies voted, this time, for opposition lists denouncing the very system that previously benefited them. This turnaround likely resulted from the depletion of clientelist services and the disillusionment toward politicians and ideologies that have repeatedly dodged the calls for reform.

There were, also, those who did not vote. Many media reports suggested that in some areas people were intimidated in order not to vote. Also, for example, some may have lacked trust in the alternative. The turnout was lower than the 2018 and 2009 elections (49.7% and 54%, respectively), a result that contrasts with the enormity of the stakes associated with the current election. The drop in turnout was particularly marked in some regions, perhaps a correlation with the Hariri “boycott” and the fear to challenge Hezbollah’s supremacy. The Hasbaya-Marjeyoun district, where the opposition won two key seats, and Tripoli, witnessed a 10% decrease in turnout, Saida-Jezzine (South I) a 16% decrease, and the North II district a 33% decrease, all of which eventually served the opposition lists. The unprecedentedly high vote of the Lebanese diaspora was largely in favour of the anti-establishment factions, with 60% of the 130,000 out-of-country voters casting their vote for opposition lists.

New independent contenders captured two seats in the districts where Hezbollah and Amal had until now claimed hegemony, a significant achievement. The lukewarm Shiite participation (42%) – not to say the reluctance to vote – is largely the result of the shelving of a socio-economic and political reform agenda.

Hezbollah and the Amal Movement succeeded in retaining all 27 Shiite seats but, for the first time, failed to secure the re-election of key non-Shiite allies who ran on its ticket. Nevertheless, securing the parliamentary seats that are earmarked to the Shiite community gives leverage to the Shiite duo in its quest to re-elect the head of the Amal movement, Nabih Berri, to the Speakership, and thereby, to maintain the “institutional legitimacy” of Hezbollah’s weapons.
SECURING THE GAINS OF “THE REVOLUTION”: DIVERSITY WITHIN A SEMBLANCE OF UNITY

The inability of the traditional sectarian parties to keep the entrenched clientelist system functioning, the compounded tragedies unfolding since 2019, and the derailing of the investigation into the August 2020 Beirut port explosion have tilted many voters toward the agenda of the independent candidates and built a growing momentum in their favour.

Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s self-declared boycott of former of the elections also benefited the new contenders, who were able to garner part of the Sunni vote. Hence, if Hariri does succeed in making a political comeback in the next elections, many of these voters might revert to their old loyalties. The performance of the opposition MPs and their ability to consolidate their supporter base will be a key factor in this regard.

The new members of the opposition do not necessarily share identical views on all matters of governance, but they do share a broad common vision on key issues pertaining to state sovereignty and anti-corruption. Although such a programmatic stance did appeal to many voters, the 13 new members of parliament could not achieve a better score because of the high electoral thresholds imposed by the electoral law, which disenfranchises political minorities, in addition to limited media access, lack of resources, logistics, and lack of campaigning experience compared to the established political parties.

The May 2022 election may be a watershed moment in the ongoing struggle to establish a state that is immune to regional interference because of the ongoing Iran-Arab tug-of-war. The opposition should work toward the election, in September–November 2022, of a President of the Republic who represents the aspirations of most Lebanese people rather than the agenda of one group over another. The presidential election would be the second concrete step in the right direction.

The challenge of the new opposition is now not to dwell on the vagaries of the political trends that helped them into parliament but to join forces and become a political centre of gravity that generates its own trends to become a serious competitor for the ruling establishment. This can only be done if these small and at times disjointed groups, transition into building cross-national networks that can become modern political platforms having a strong convening power that appeals to disenchanted Lebanese voters who long for a truly democratic political system. Otherwise, the deeply resilient Lebanese system of clientelism will be quick to astutely cannibalise, lure, or co-opt its newcomers to claim a renewed legitimacy.

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