2013 Electoral Reform: Secrecy of the Vote

Focus Group Report

6 March, 2013
This report describes the findings of four focus groups conducted in various Lebanese regions (as shown in the table below) between 6 and 8 February 2013. All participants in the focus groups voted in 2009 and intend to vote in the upcoming elections. Focus groups were gender mixed.

**Profile of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>FG</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Confession</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>General Public</td>
<td>25-40</td>
<td>Shiite</td>
<td>Marjeoun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>General Public</td>
<td>25-40</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>Saida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>General Public</td>
<td>25-40</td>
<td>Druze</td>
<td>Shouf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>General Public</td>
<td>25-40</td>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>Metn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key Objectives**

1. Assess and understand voters’ perceptions regarding the upcoming elections and electoral reforms
2. Understand voters’ expectations regarding elections generally—why elections and voting are important, and what they expect to get out of them
Themes
The qualitative findings below are listed according to themes. Beneath each theme heading is a summary of the theme, followed by sub-themes including differences by subgroup if any, key findings, and verbatim quotes representing key themes.

1- Elections on time
2- Elections: a right and a duty

1- Elections on time
Summary: Across focus groups, participants from various regional and religious backgrounds expressed their desire to have the elections held on time for many reasons, notably to avoid a constitutional vacuum and prevent the deterioration of the security situation in the country. Many also said it was important to respect the constitutional deadlines and not to set a precedent of rescheduling elections. Christians in Metn considered that holding the elections on time would contribute to “reviving the country”, in the sense that it will lead to the formation of a new government, which might have a positive impact overall.

Sub-themes: The importance of the elections as a major political milestone was repeated throughout the groups, despite an underlying skepticism about the outcomes. For many, holding the elections on time was an indicator of the seriousness of the political process in the country: “this is not a game, we have to respect the constitutional deadlines”.

In addition, pronounced fears of deteriorating security conditions as a result of rescheduling the elections were recurrent throughout the groups. Across the groups, participants expressed anxiety about a possible outbreak of violence and strikes if the elections are not held on time. The security problems that broke out in May 2008 as a result of delaying the presidential elections were cited as an example to support this argument.

On the other hand, some participants from the Druze group in Shouf considered that it does not matter whether elections are held on time or not, as they believe there will be no drastic changes resulting from the process. A participant from this group considered that “Lebanon has passed through periods where there was no government formed at all, it is no big deal to have the same parliament for a few more months”. The Druze group was the only one where some participants did not mind elections to be postponed. Some of them also expressed their preference in this regard, saying that “it would be better to wait until things in the region get calmer”.

It is to be noted that one participant in Metn considered that elections should take place on time because “there is an accountability that needs to be respected”, in the sense that elections can serve to hold MPs accountable for what they have done during their four-year mandate.

While few participants considered that elections provide room for change, many of them also said that the hope for change is limited: “we have 1% hope for change left” (Metn).

Finally, many participants across the groups indicated that because there is nothing confirmed yet about the electoral law and the district division, they prefer to wait before they decide whether their vote will be impactful or not. When asked about the current debate on the electoral law, many participants cited the orthodox law and the 1960 law as those they mainly have in mind. While many participants in the Shiite and Christian groups expressed some sort of consent regarding the orthodox law, Sunnis and especially Druze categorically opposed it. Having said this, it is to be noted that neither group was well informed about the provisions of the law, especially regarding the
number of deputies per sect and the districting. One participant from the Metn group said that she prefers to vote based on the 1960 law, because “we got used to it, and we know how to do it”.

**Key Finding(s)**
The focus groups showed that participants across the groups are enthusiastic about the elections, yet swing between hope and despair, specifically when it comes to the outcomes of the electoral process. Having said this, enthusiasm about the elections was in many cases related to the desire of participants to bring back or keep the candidates who share the same political ideas - i.e. either 14 March or 8 March with their respective discourse, which was echoed by participants across the groups (most particularly Metn and Marjeyoun) - thus an opportunity for each camp to verify its claim on the majority. In that sense, it seems that elections become important not as elections per se, but rather to serve as a referendum between the two schemes of political rhetoric.

**Verbatim quotes**
- “Not holding elections on time means there is something wrong in the country, it becomes a chain of delays, and eventually affects us, economically and at the security level, there will be instability”, Druze, Shouf
- “They make us feel that not holding the elections on time is dangerous”, Sunnis, Saida
- “We feel bored, we are now enthusiastic about the elections, but if they are postponed, we will lose momentum”, Christians, Metn
- “If we have a new government, maybe there will be new reforms”, Shiites, Marjeyoun
- “The orthodox law is completely nonsense; how can I vote for someone from Akkar?!”, Sunnis, Saida

2 - **Elections: A Right and a Duty**
**Summary:** the focus groups showed that most participants perceive the elections as an important act they undertake in order to voice their political opinions. Many participants across the groups spoke in terms of “right”, “duty”, and “participation in decision making” when asked about their perceptions about the elections in general and the reasons why they voted in 2009 and intend to vote in 2013.

**Sub-themes:** The notion of change was recurrent throughout the groups, whereby the elections were considered an important tool to bring about change, despite a significant level of despair amongst participants, especially the Druze, mainly regarding the power of their votes. Across the groups, it was noticeable that all participants do seek political change, and consider that participating in the electoral process is an essential element to effect that change. Yet, participants across the groups seemed to be unaware of the electoral reforms and had nothing concrete to say about the current debate on the electoral law, even when explicitly asked about it. Rather, the only aspect that had most of their attention was the district division, and obviously the new element introduced by the orthodox law about the sect-based vote, whereby each sect elects its own deputies.

On another note, participants across the groups showed some sort of disappointment in the long term outcomes of the former elections, yet many of them expressed their satisfaction about the immediate results. Participants were mostly happy about those who they voted for and for those who won, but they admitted that those who won have not done much since they were elected. When asked about their expectations from MPs, participants in all groups talked about services, job opportunities, provision of basic needs such as electricity, water, health and education. It is also to be noted that of all the participants in all the groups, only one in Metn mentioned the ineffectiveness of MPs, because they passed only 10 laws over their four-year mandate. Another participant in Metn considered that the vote can induce some sort of activity at the local level, such
as bringing some improvements to the infrastructure of the region: “look at Metn and Hay el-Selloum, Metn is way better, and this was possible because of the elections, whereby we were able to bring people that can do something, maybe not at a higher level, but at the local one, which is not bad”.

In addition, most participants across the groups indicated that they usually vote under the influence of a sectarian buildup that tends to increase during electoral periods. This refers to intense sectarian language and political discourse, including a sort of victimization of one’s sect versus the demonization of the other. This was particularly mentioned in the groups of Shiites in Marjeyoun and Druze in Shouf, as well as in Saida, to a lesser extent. Shiite participants overtly said that they are usually inflamed as a result of a provocative sectarian discourse and growing feelings of insecurity. This was the case in 2009, where they felt that there was a growing danger threatening the resistance, and thereby their survival as a community. Today, Shiites indicated that they fear the increasing salafi influence, which, according to them, can constitute a serious threat to their identity and existence. It is to be noted as well that some Christian participants in Metn also expressed their fears of Salafis. Druze, who also linked the elections to sectarianism, indicated that they have to support Walid Joumblatt as he is the protector of their sect.

When asked about their expectations regarding the elections, most participants indicated that they hope for increases in security, stability and economic prosperity. Some participants also expected some services from the deputies they vote for. Provision of basic needs such as electricity, water, health, education, and job opportunities were recurrent across the groups, together with bitterness and resentment as a result of a consistent disappointment throughout the years.

Key Finding(s)
Again, participants seem to swing between hope and despair. The first stems from an ambitious attitude about the ability to affect change – this is mainly the case with strong supporters of political parties – while the second reflects a sort of resignation and feeling of helplessness, noticeable amongst more independent voters. In both cases, there is a significant level of sectarianism as well as an important lack of knowledge about the electoral laws and electoral reforms across the groups – with some exceptions amongst strong supporters who seemed to be more informed than others – which makes the very basic process of voting – with the responsibility it entails – a haphazard and instantaneous decision made without consideration of long term consequences and implications.

Verbatim Quotes
- “We vote because we have to give some strength to our sect”, Shiites, Marjeyoun
- “When people underestimate the resistance, we have to vote for deputies of the resistance”, Shiites, Marjeyoun
- “I am afraid of the salafi movement nowadays, we do not fear Israel anymore”, Shiites, Marjeyoun
- “We are afraid for our sect, we can’t allow Wiam Wahhab’s list to beat Walid Joumblatt’s”, Druzes, Shouf
- “As Druze, we have nothing in the state, the one who represents us is Walid Joumblatt, that is why we are supporting him”, Druze, Shouf
- “I voted to change the political elite”, Christians, Metn
- “I don’t mind which law eventually passes, you will vote for those who you want regardless of the law”, Christians, Metn