

Lebanese Elections in Brief

Election News From NDI

May 26, 2009

With the support of USAID, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is conducting an international observation mission for the Lebanese parliamentary elections scheduled to take place on June 7, 2009. Below is the fifth in a series of election updates that will be published on a weekly basis until the election.

Town Hall-Style Debates Come to Lebanon

Last Thursday, MP Hadi Hobeish (March 14-Maronite) and Dr. Soud el Youssef (opposition-Sunni) engaged in Lebanon's first town hall-style televised candidate debate in the district of Akkar, in North Lebanon. The debate was organized by Centre D'Etudes Strategiques pour le Moyen-Orient (CESMO) with the support of NDI's *Citizen Lebanon* program and attracted 170 residents of Akkar and six prominent media outlets, namely Future News, An-Nahar, NTV, NBN, Télé Liban, and Sada Akkar. The candidates debated economic, political, and social issues specific to the region, and took questions from the audience. Akkar is the most impoverished region in Lebanon and the debate gave its citizens the rare opportunity to hear politicians engage in substantive dialogue on issues that directly address their lives. The audience was enthusiastic to interact with the candidates and put them on the spot on specific issues; they posed 70 questions, 10 of which were selected by CESMO due to time constraints.



(Left to right) Dr. Soud el Youssef (L), Ahmad Omar, Citizen Lebanon facilitator, MP Hadi Hobeish

Deadlock Jeopardizes Constitutional Council Appointments



Later today, the Cabinet of Ministers will meet to discuss two critical issues that have long been shelved by the Lebanese government because of political deadlock: appointing the remaining members of the Constitutional Council and passing the national budget bill. The former is crucial and time sensitive as the Constitutional Council, which disbanded in 2005, is the sole authority able to adjudicate electoral complaints and declare an electoral process invalid; the latter is a central political matter, but not as time sensitive.

The two issues were introduced in the last Cabinet meeting as a "package deal" put forth by Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, who stipulated that the ministers would vote for the appointments only if they came in tandem with an agreement on the state budget that includes the controversial Council for the South budget. Opposition ministers, who hold veto power in the Cabinet, blocked the Constitutional Council appointments, and other administrative positions critical to the elections, including the governors of Beirut and Mount Lebanon and the general director of political affairs in the Interior Ministry.

Domestic Observation

Exactly two weeks before election day, the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), the domestic observation group, rallied in preparation of its election day activities. District coordinators from LADE's 26 district offices and approximately 1,000 observers came to Beirut to coordinate election day plans and to state their independence and impartiality through the signing of an Observer's Oath.



The Association launched a media campaign entitled "Each Citizen is an Observer" attesting to the role of every citizen in ensuring the rule of law during the electoral process. LADE also trained the observers on the SMS reporting system and performed a trial run of texting in violations.



A LADE observer signing the Observer's Oath

Election Administration

Last weekend, the second tier of cascade training for polling staff took place. The Ministry of the Interior (MOI), with the help of IFES, conducted its first training of trainers session the previous weekend for high level civil servants including Qaimaqams (district commissioners) and their deputies. The 45 Qaimaqams and deputies who were trained by the Ministry the previous weekend trained approximately 312 persons in all districts, who will then train the remaining bulk of the polling staff (approximately 11,500). The third tier of training will take place next weekend. The MOI, with the help of IFES, printed a polling station handbook for the trainings, which covers everything from the set up of the polling station to sorting and counting of ballots.

The MOI has started to distribute polling materials to the districts commissioner's offices (ballot boxes, indelible ink, envelopes, etc). TV and video equipment for counting will be delivered on a later stage by Security Forces, and voting booths are going to be delivered to district locations by a private company.



The newly opened Observation Accreditation Unit within the Ministry has been busy issuing accreditation badges for international observation missions. This photo is of a sample observer's badge belonging to Rabab al-Medhwahi, an NDI long term observer based in South Lebanon.



District in Focus: Batroun

Seat Distribution:

2 Maronite

Total Voters: 57,065

Muslim Voters: 3,982 (7.0%)
Sunni: 3,070 (5.4%)
Other: 912 (1.6%)

Christian Voters: 53,083 (93.0%)
Maronite: 41,998 (73.6%)
Greek Orthodox: 9,081 (15.9%)
Greek Catholic: 1,574 (2.8%)
Other: 430 (0.7%)
Other: 4,814 (2.6%)

2008 Figures



Batroun is a northern district with a majority of Maronite registered voters (74%) and pockets of Greek Orthodox (16%), and Sunni (5%) voters. Because of the smaller districts adopted in the new electoral law, Batroun is one of the most hotly contested, majority-Christian districts in Lebanon. In this year's election Batroun is its own district, whereas in 2005, it was grouped together with Koura, Zgharta, Dinnieh, and the overwhelmingly Sunni population in Tripoli; the larger district's majority Sunni vote swung the entire district in favor of March 14. With just two Christian seats up for grabs this time around, the race is much more competitive as it pits the March 14 Christian parties, Lebanese Forces (LF) and Kataeb, against the largest opposition Christian party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). Adding to the electoral drama, each list is headed by high profile candidates, from prominent Batrouni families. In fact, in Batroun, prominent local families hold as much political clout as parties do.



Former Education Minister, presidential candidate, and current MP Butros Harb (independent), is one such candidate. Harb, whose family is historically powerful in Batroun, heads the March 14 list. The selection for the second Maronite seat on the list was a controversial compromise between the LF and Kataeb parties. Current MP and former LF commander Antone Zahra was chosen for the Batroun seat, and 32-year-old Samir Saade, Kataeb's choice, was instead slated for the Maronite seat on the March 14 list in Tripoli. Zahra currently enjoys popular support as an MP for Batroun.

The opposition list is headed by another political family, Gebran Gerge Bassil, Minister of Telecommunications and son-in-law of FPM leader General Aoun. He is not to be confused with the Batroun local Gebran Estephan Bassil who is also registered as a candidate in Batroun. The candidacy of a near-namesake has led to speculation about an effort to pull votes from Minister Bassil. Minister Bassil is joined on the opposition list by, Fayek Younis, head of the Doctor's Syndicate, who like Harb is not a member of a political party and comes from a powerful local family.

Quotable

On May 22, U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden visited Lebanon and met with President Michel Suleiman, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, Defense Minister Elias Murr, and leaders of the March 14 coalition.



"We will evaluate the shape of our assistance programs based on the composition of the new government and the policies it advocates."
~U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden



"[He [Biden] should know that Lebanon refuses American guardianship."
~Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General



"It appears that this visit is part of a U.S. bid to supervise the electoral campaign of a Lebanese party which feels threatened politically ... in light of the expected outcome of the legislative vote"
~MP Hassan Fadlallah, Loyalty to the Resistance (Hezbollah)

Ad Watch: National Bloc

Carlos Eddé, head of the National Bloc (March 14) and candidate in Kessrwan, launched an advertising campaign directly taking on General Michel Aoun, head of the Free Patriotic Movement (opposition), who is also running in the district. In the series of posters below, statements in blue represent the National Bloc, and orange represent FPM:



Translation (right to left): Reform/Ethics



Translation (right to left): First poster "Change /Principles; second poster: Arms / Army



Translation (right to left): Wrong/Right



Link to National Bloc advertisement "Don't vote blindly"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smTIFozBrU>

By the Numbers

- 5,187** Total number of polling stations in Lebanon
- 1,741** Number of polling stations mapped by the Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union (LPHU);
- 6** Number of polling stations that are handicapped accessible meeting all six of LPHU's criteria;
- 7** Number of polling stations that meet five of LPHU's criteria;
- 21** Number of polling stations that meet four of LPHU's criteria;
- 12** Percentage of the Lebanese population living with some form of physical disability;
- 12** Number days until election day;

Resources

In the News:

- http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/26/world/middleeast/26armenians.html?_r=2&ref=middleeast
- <http://experts.foreignpolicy.com/blog/6843>
- <http://www.reuters.com/article/ReutersEdge/idUSTRE54K32620090521?pagenumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=10531>
- <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=94205&MID=11&PID=2>
- http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=102109

Resources:

A blog about Lebanese politics and elections by Elias Muhanna, a Ph.D. candidate in Arabic and Islamic studies at Harvard University:

<http://qifanabki.com/>

Second periodic report on findings from the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE):

<http://www.observe.ladeleb.org/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?nodeguid=fabdec41-0730-4688-b5cc-c07531f268e6>

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