



Mediterranean Insecurity

*Lebanese 2022 elections: a new possibility or a lost opportunity?*¹

Giulia Salvatore

After months of uncertainties, political turmoil and discussions the elections' official date was eventually set up for May 15th, 2022. The Lebanese 2022 elections come at the lowest period for the country: three-quarters of the population has been plunged into poverty, as the economic crisis continues to devastate the citizens; the country has lost more than 90% of the value of its currency, the Lira; inflation rate raised unimaginably reaching 145% and putting Lebanon as one of the most inflationary countries worldwide. The World Bank described the Lebanese situation as “*a deliberate depression*”, in which Lebanese authorities have stubbornly refused to carry out any reform to mitigate the impact of the crisis.²

The Lebanese 2022 elections are the first ones after the mass movement known as *thawra*, happening in October 2019. Despite this “revolution” was considered as one of the most ambitious to date, it still lacks a common leadership to probably be considered as a leading force in the next political elections. On the other hand, *thawra* might play a role in these elections. In 2019, many politicians were asked to be

¹ The writing of this article could have never happened if it was not for Dr. Elie Elias' help. Therefore, I would like to thank Elie, who has always supported me in every project and the one who gave me the opportunity to work with him, being one of my greatest mentors and a friend to me. To Elie, to his immense love for Lebanon and to the courage of staying, resisting and being part of the change he wants to see for his country.

² World Bank. 2022. Lebanon Economic Monitor, Fall 2021: The Great Denial. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36862>
License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.



removed from the ruling political élite, because of corruption, nepotism and clientelism. Most of them are still in charge, but the role of the people from the *thawra* will be decisive: are they going to vote for other, maybe independent candidates, or will they prefer to find protection in those confessional – but corrupted – politicians that they asked to leave?

In this difficult political, social and economic scenario, the international community looks at the Lebanese 2022 elections with great attention. If on the regional side, Saudi Arabia seemed to have lost its influence with the withdrawal of Saad Hariri from the political scene, Iran is looking at the Sunni vacant seat as an opportunity for its proxy, Hezbollah, to gain the votes of that part of Muslim electorate which is disoriented after having lost its perfect candidate: Saad Hariri. On the other side of the Mediterranean, the European Union and the United States know that if elections are going to be a failure, there is a risk of a huge flow of migrants from Lebanon, even more than the current number of people from the Lebanese diaspora.

The international community, as a whole, is demanding that Lebanese elections must be held on time, without further postponements, since it will affect the democratic, free and fair nature that elections should have.³

Since the end of the civil war⁴, Lebanon has experienced a strong political deadlock and had – almost – the same people in power.⁵ In this atmosphere, what Lebanese people dream about is seeing new and young faces in the political élite of their country, as 2022 election might represent an historical turning point in this regard. Indeed, a great role is played by the Lebanese of the diaspora. It has been estimated that almost 200.000/300.000 people have left the country since 2019, when the economic collapse of the country was gradually starting.

However, this has not detached them from national politics: compared to 2018, where the Lebanese of the diaspora who registered were only 98.000, for the 2022 elections

³ During the parliamentary discussions about elections' date, President Michel Aoun was contrary to held elections in March, as it would have created logistic problems to Lebanese living abroad, as well as it would have lowered the number of people going to vote. The initial date of the elections was meant to be in March, then it was officially postponed to May 15th, 2022.

⁴ Lebanese Civil War covered a period of 15 years, from 1975 to 1990 following the signature and the adoption of the Ta'if Agreement.

⁵ Rafic and Saad Hariri served twice as Prime Minister and current Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, covered the same position three times now.



the number has soared to almost 300.000 people.⁶ Most of them decided to leave their country because they probably lost everything, or due to the scarce possibilities Lebanon offers to the young generation. Therefore, there is the hope that these people will eventually vote to get rid of the current political élite.

However, after analysing the background of the elections, the fears and hopes of Lebanese people, four main scenarios might arise before, during or even after the elections. In this regard, just one of these four scenarios might lead to the best outcome for the country, despite being the most ambitious as well as the most utopian one. These scenarios will be subsequently analysed in detail, taking always into consideration that some Lebanese political parties have the life of the country at the sharp end of the knife. So far, the only certainty that everyone has is that on May 15th, 2022, the country will face its destiny in what might be the last tango for Lebanon: will the sinking ship find the forces to get back to the surface once again?

I. Understanding the Lebanese electoral system: the electoral reforms from 1992 to nowadays

The Lebanese pluralist political system has always presented many contradictions, one of them is certainly related to the different and controverse electoral reforms.

In 1992, the first electoral reform after the adoption of the Ta'if Agreement was finally adopted. According to Article 1 of this new reform, in line with the provisions contained within the Ta'if Agreement, the Lebanese Parliament increased the number of representatives from 108 to 128. The electoral constituencies were based on the *muhāfaza* (governorate) and the number of constituencies was distributed as following: one for the Beirut's governorate, one for the Southern part of Lebanon and Nabatiyyeh, one for the Northern part of Lebanon, one for each Mount Lebanon's *qadā'* (district) and for the Beqaa Valley, with the exception of Baalbek and Hermel districts which had their own governorate.⁷ As a consequence, the new electoral system was conceived so that each congressman could simultaneously represent his own constituency and his own religious community. The seat was reserved for his

⁶ The Arab News, "Lebanon's 2022 elections: What to expect from the diaspora vote", January 26th, 2022, available at: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/what-expect-lebanons-diaspora-vote-2022-election>

⁷ Di Peri, R., *Il Libano contemporaneo: storia, politica, società*, Roma, Carocci Editore, 2013, p. 110.



community, but he/she should be elected by the entire constituency which is usually multi-confessional.

The Parliament approved the electoral law which was different from the Ta'if's projections: the basis of the constituency was only in the *muhāfaza*, with the consequent abolition of the *qadā'*. With the constituency enlargement any candidate would have had a broader electoral basis.⁸

In this way, broader and bigger coalitions could have been created, enhancing national integration dynamics, both socially and politically, at élite's level. However, what happened in the 1992 elections was the result of a mass discontentment. The elections, which should have been the starting point for a new Lebanese political scenario, were instead opposed by several actors. The reasons behind were varied: there were those who believed that national elections should have been held only when Syrian troops had withdrawn from Lebanon; there were instead other opponents who believed that the new electoral law was very different from the Ta'if provisions, and they were afraid this would have undermined the already fragile equilibrium reached in 1989. As a result, the elections had an abstention rate of 70%.

After the elections, the big and old Lebanese families kept occupying parliamentary seats, but at the same time there were several changes in the political scenario. One of them was represented by the entrance into Parliament of the representatives of the militias, such as Amal and Hezbollah. Furthermore, Nabih Berri was elected President of the Chamber of Deputies, once again. After the elections, 24% of parliamentary deputies represented parties which were directly involved during the war. The newly elected Prime Minister was instead Rafik Hariri, strongly supported by the President Elias Hrawi.⁹

The period before the 1996 elections saw institutional problems related to the Hariri's government crisis¹⁰ and to the new electoral law. Indeed, the 1996 electoral law

⁸ Broader in terms of confessions and less localized from a political point of view.

⁹ Elias Hrawi was elected President of the Republic of Lebanon on November 24th, 1989. He was the one in charge of signing into law amendments to the Constitution that formalized the Taif Agreement reforms. He also signed the treaty of fraternity and cooperation with Syria in 1992 and the one who appointed Rafik Hariri as Prime Minister in the same year.

¹⁰ When Rafik Hariri was appointed, the direction taken by Lebanese politics was clear: to implement a revaluation of the Lebanese pound, to bring down inflation, the economic recovery, but above all to launch an unprecedented architectural reconstruction plan, SOLIDERE (Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction de Beyrouth). However, about the economic reforms, Hariri's plans did not foresee any concrete form of aid to the poorest sections of the population. This was because, according to the Prime Minister, the influx of foreign investments

should have regulated the elections, but many controversies and oppositions started to emerge. The topics of discussion were several, among them:

- The constituencies.¹¹
- Preparation of the electoral lists.
- The electoral certificate.
- The right to vote of non-residing Lebanese people.
- The elections in the occupied South.¹²
- Supervision and monitoring of the elections to avoid fraud and manipulation.¹³

Ironically and despite all the new proposals, the 1996 electoral law presented just few adjustments as compared to the 1992 one. For instance, the new electoral law gave a special status to Mount Lebanon dividing the area into six different electoral districts.

When Émile Lahoud¹⁴ became President of the Republic in 1998, he modified the electoral law once again. Indeed, on December 22nd, 1999, Lahoud approved a draft legislation concerning the modification of 1996 electoral law through the addition of

deriving from the reconstruction project would have generated positive effects. Hariri's projects mainly involved the area of Beirut, rather than the entire country, and focused on the financial sector, while stopping the development of the industrial and agricultural sectors. A great importance was given to monetary stability, preferred to a real process of global growth of the country's economy. The Prime Minister was also accused of financial speculations by the Lebanese authorities. This led to the huge wave of accusation between the legislative and the executive branches concerning corruption of both institutional and public administration authorities. These accusations became public knowledge starting from 1994.

¹¹ About this topic there were three main opinions: the first was that of creating a unique district for the whole country; the second, instead, provided for the elections at a muhāfaza level, finally, the idea of having small electoral constituencies.

¹² The South of the country was then occupied by Israeli troops.

¹³ Di Peri, R., *Il Libano contemporaneo: storia, politica, società*, Roma, Carocci Editore, 2013, p. 116.

¹⁴ When Émile Lahoud became President of the Republic in 1998, he aligned himself with Hezbollah, and picked Selim al-Hoss as Prime Minister. All of this led to strong tensions between Rafiq Hariri and Lahoud. Moreover, during his term, he exerted more control over government decision-making than both Prime Minister and Speaker of the Chamber. He is known for modifying the limits on the executive authority of the presidency which were stipulated in the 1989 Ta'if Agreement. After that, he ordered security forces to launch a massive arrest against nationalist dissidents without informing the Prime Minister nor the ministries.

fourteen more constituencies.¹⁵ This electoral law was at the top of the political agenda of Lahoud, because it had the aim of facilitating the democratic process of the country and, at the same time, to respond to the need of political reforms.¹⁶ Nevertheless, once again the new electoral law did not comply with the provisions contained within the new Constitution and, at the same time, a new hybrid system emerged. As a matter of fact, in some areas such as those of the Chouf, Metn and Beqaa the principle of the small constituency prevailed. On the other hand, in the South of Lebanon the principle of the big constituency predominated, while the medium one was used in some other areas, embodying two or three small constituencies. All these aspects were useful in order to support one or more candidates.¹⁷

The 2005 new electoral law was extremely controversial. The country was undergoing a strong economic and institutional crisis, which along with the political assassination, led to an increased public awareness about corruption and controversies in Lebanon.¹⁸

The new draft legislation provided for a constituency division that should have had the *qadā'* as the administrative basis. The *qadā'* resulted as “damaged” by the previous electoral law, because in the biggest Lebanese districts trans-confessional alliances were the only way to get elected. This electoral law was not approved, due to the opposition’s idea that this would have led to an increased confessional division. Therefore, the 2005 elections were held with a new electoral law, although very similar to the one adopted in 2000.¹⁹ Furthermore, the 2005 electoral law potentially

¹⁵ 3 in Beirut, 2 in the North of the country, 4 in Mount Lebanon, 3 in the Beqaa Valley and 2 in the South of Lebanon. Those in the South were exceptionally united, creating just one constituency because of the Israeli occupation.

¹⁶ Nassif, N., Les élections législatives de l’été 2000, in “Monde Arabe Maghreb-Machrek”, 169, 2000, p. 116.

¹⁷ Di Peri, R., Il Libano contemporaneo: storia, politica, società, Roma, Carocci Editore, 2013., p. 118.

¹⁸ The year 2005 was marked by many important events concerning the internal politics and social life of the country. It was the year of the assassination of Rafik Hariri which caused a shock in the population. After Hariri, the new government was headed by Najib Mikati, who had as main goal that of preparing the next elections and to secure they were not surmounted by the already well-established wave of political corruption.

¹⁹ According to the Constitutional text, the formalities should have been completed no later than May 2005 together with a new electoral law. Due to the situation in the country and the lack of time the institutions had, the new electoral law, as reported above, remarked almost the same characteristics of the previous one. Some of the small modifications regarded the inclusion of new *muhāfaza*, such as Akkar e Baalbek-Hermel. The system was composed by some constituencies at the *qadā'* level, the rest were all *muhāfaza*.

increased the confessional divisions. Indeed, many parties feared the exclusion from Parliament, therefore they tried to seek for new – and controversial – alliances. Indeed, one of the most important turning points in this period was the return of General Michel Aoun from his exile in France after the Syrian attack to the Presidential Palace in Baabda in 1990.

The return of the General was a matter of concern both for Saad Hariri and the Maronites, who feared a further internal fragmentation caused also by the creation of these new and controversial alliances. Namely, the one involving the Sunni Muslim, Saad Hariri and the Druze, Walid Joumblatt along with the one composed by Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party; on the other side, instead, Michel Aoun decided to create an alliance with Hezbollah and other Maronite forces, such as the one of Michel Murr. At the same time, the alliance created between Amal and Hezbollah led the two political parties to present themselves as a joint force at the 2005 elections. These new alliances were the cause of the non-presence of a political agenda in Parliament. This hybrid government increased the confessional divisions, and the use of political-religious slogans became the new reality.

The 2009 electoral law maintained the status quo and the division of power following a communitarian point of view. The new electoral law strengthened it even more and it laid the foundations for an élite preservation, corruption and the institutional stalemates that were at the basis of the political crisis which Lebanon was undergoing. Indeed, the 2009 results to the elections reinforced these aspects: the maintenance of the status quo was essential for the political class and the promotion of self-interested or confessional policies was even more important than adopting a consensual action for the entire country. Another time, the possibility of unifying Lebanon faded away and clientelism prevailed once again.

After the parliamentary elections held in 2009, the life of the Lebanese Parliament was extended on several occasions, and Presidents, Prime Ministers and governments have come and gone. Following years of discussions and political turmoil, the 2017 electoral law was bringing something new into the Lebanese scenario. Indeed, unlike the former “winner takes all” system, the proportional representation was promoted for the first time in Lebanon. This new electoral law allowed every citizen to vote



wherever he or she wanted, without resorting to his or her *muhāfaza*. This electoral law was praised as the first fully home-grown electoral law.²⁰

The article dealing with the proportional representation is Article 98 of the electoral law.²¹ The new system adopted in 2017, differentiated from the one of 2008. Something that both had in common was the division of constituencies and the allocation of seats among the same constituencies through a representative table. However, both in the case of 2008 and 2017 electoral laws, there was no information given about the specific criteria used to determine constituencies and allocations of seats. This electoral law made the country shifting from a majoritarian to a proportional representation, even though the electoral threshold was quite high (10%) and the permanence of the division of seats was still based on the confessional affiliation of the candidates.

The aim of these numerous electoral laws had as the main objective that of diminishing the confessional basis of elections. However, as hereabove analysed, despite the many modifications, what endured overtime was the very strengthening of the confessional divisions, in contrast with the Ta'if provisions. It is indeed evident that new electoral law presented just few adjustments to the previous ones. The controversy lays exactly in the idea of responding to the need of new political reforms through the modification of electoral laws, although they eventually resulted into the reinforcement of a pluralist political system based on élite preservation, corruption, nepotism, clientelism and institutional stalemate.

In this scenario, the new electoral reform for the 2022 elections sees the major turning point: the diaspora will vote for the 128 seats, and no more for only 6 seats as it was in 2018. However, many fear the very small rate of participation at the 2022 elections. This is related to many violations that can arise from some parties' delegates in foreign countries, as it happened in 2018. Along with this, the LADE organization (Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections)²² has also highlighted how in certain areas elections did not take place secretly as it is supposed to be, rather cameras were placed near the voters. In addition, several escamotages were found in

²⁰ Lebanese electoral law of 2017: Full text in English, The Daily Star Lebanon, May 5th, 2018. Available at: <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2017/Jul-07/411988-lebanese-electoral-law-2017- full-text-in-english.ashx>

²¹Article 98 of the 2017 electoral law, available at:

https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/lebanons_2017_parliamentary_election_law_final.pdf

²² LADE (Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections), available at: <http://www.lade.org.lb/Home.aspx>

order to annul the votes. Moreover, according to LADE, even though civil society has continued asking for a real electoral reform since 2018, the country has not proceeded as such yet.²³

This has been gradually reinforced through the postponement of the adoption of several electoral reforms or innovations, as for the creation of mega-centres, where everyone can vote without resorting to their own constituency. President Michel Aoun expressed himself in favour of this reform, along with his son-in-law Gebran Bassil. However, their proposition to create mega-centres came only three months before the elections, meaning that the current political élite will have more chances of postponing the elections due to technical problems that may arise.

II. Winners and losers

The Konrad Adenauer Institute published an Opinion Survey, reporting about the Lebanese 2022 Parliamentary elections. In this survey, 50% of the respondents declared they will go to vote, while 34.8% have decided not to vote and 15% have not made up their mind yet. Those who responded they will vote, are more willing to vote for independent candidates (26%), while 15% will possibly vote for Hezbollah, instead 12% will possibly vote for the change movements/October 17 uprising groups. The same percentage of respondents also declared they are prone to vote for the Lebanese Forces, followed by the Free Patriotic Movement (7%) and the Future Movement (6%). Despite this, the survey also shows how some respondents' voting attitude has not changed from 2018 Parliamentary elections: 52.7% will vote for the same people in the past 2018 elections, while 44.8% declared they will change their voting habits. Coming to the ideal Lebanese political figure, looking at those already in charge, he/she does not currently exist (60%), meaning that none of them corresponds to the ideal political figure that respondents want to see in the upcoming elections, followed by Hassan Nasrallah (10.4%) and Samir Geagea (6.1%). In any case, KAS declared that the percentage might change while approaching the elections' date.²⁴

²³ L'Orient-le-Jour, “*Un terrain propice à la corruption et au clientélisme*”, March 7th, 2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1292834/un-terrain-propice-a-la-corruption-et-au-clientelisme.html>

²⁴ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, “*Study of Perceptions and Attitudes of Lebanese Citizens Towards the Economic, Social and Political Situation in Lebanon*”, December 2021.

The Lebanese elections will possibly be a turning point for the country, deciding its destiny and that of the current political élite. It is for this precise reason that many politicians now fear to lose their seats. It is almost impossible to predict the winners and losers of these elections, but if we come back at the images of October 2019, and the famous *thawra*, we might imagine that these elections might be the opportunity for the population to actually contribute to that change they were asking for more than two years and to eventually held accountable those in charge for the current disastrous situation of the country.²⁵

As for the Lebanese of the diaspora, the expectation is that they are keener to vote for independent figures, rather than for old and well-known political parties. However, long-standing expats might always prefer traditional parties. Indeed, not everyone is hoping that a change might happen – or might be led – by the diaspora voters. This is not only linked to the fact that a percentage of them might prefer traditional political parties, but also to the fact that expats might experience several problems during elections' day, e.g. lack of ballots at the embassies or the possibility to be contacted from Lebanese political parties and ask to buy their votes, as they collected data from the registration procedure.²⁶ However, not everyone is of the same opinion. Exactly for the same reason that expats are abroad, it will be more difficult to convince or to control them. But how they can help for a change?

FREE PATRIOTIC MOVEMENT – possible loser: the Free Patriotic Movement is Christian political party founded by General Michel Aoun in late 2005, guided by President Aoun himself, who will be replaced by Gebran Bassil, his son-in-law. People have always blamed the FPM for its alliance with Hezbollah in 2006 under the signature of the Mar Mikhael Agreement, and for this reason many think that it might be one of the losers of the elections, along with Bassil's obstruction of the government

²⁵ The Arab News, “*Lebanon's 2022 elections: What to expect from the diaspora vote*”, January 26th, 2022, available at: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/what-expect-lebanons-diaspora-vote-2022-election>

²⁶ During the expat registration campaign, several political parties acquired data on expat voters and pre-emptively contacted them to ask about their voting intention or offer to help them register. Such personal data breaches represent another tool in the hands of political parties to affect the diaspora vote. Acts of corruption become even more frequent during elections period, as it normally is. Moreover, in times of great economic depression buying votes becomes easier for political parties. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/what-expect-lebanons-diaspora-vote-2022-election>

formation process after the August 2020 Port of Beirut explosion and his acts of corruption highlighted by the *thawra* movements in 2019.²⁷

For the FPM, and for Gebran Bassil, the diaspora vote is a source of enormous concern. Indeed, the FPM was the only party trying to limit the vote of the expats to only 6 seats, as it was in 2017 electoral law, thus containing the impact of the diaspora vote to the elections. At the end, the provision in favour of the vote for 128 seats was adopted. The Beirut-based International centre, estimated that out of 225.000 abroad-registered Lebanese, 119.454 are Christians. Those expats can possibly vote for FPM's rivals, such as Kataeb, the Lebanese Forces or other independent figures. In Mount Lebanon, where FPM has 12 MPs, 7% of those who registered to vote are expats, having a great influence. In Jbeil-Kesrouan, 7.1% of expats registered to vote, being in total 12.925, including 12,158 Christians (94%). The same happens in Metn, Baabda, Chouf-Aley, with almost the same number of Christian voters.²⁸ Even in the North (Batroun, Bsharri, Koura and Zgharta) seems to be real battleground for the presidential candidates.

Indeed, some estimate that the FPM might eventually lose eight seats. But if this is going to happen what will be the destiny of its ally, Hezbollah?

HEZBOLLAH – between a rock and a hard place: Hezbollah seems to be the first supporter of the “old” political parties for the elections to take place on time and without further delays. Indeed, it was even confirmed by the Sheikh Nabil Kaouk, member of the Hezbollah's Central Council. However, many believe that the position the Party of God is taking, it is just to calm down the fears and to confirm its popularity within the Shia community.²⁹

What appears to be the only certainty about these elections is that both Hezbollah and its Shia ally, Amal, will obtain more or less the same seats as 2018 (27 seats). This long-lasting alliance is something that Hezbollah does not argue about, since it will secure a greater support from Shia Muslims. Indeed, the two parties decided to divide

²⁷ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “*Hezbollah Leaders Are Dreading the Election—But They Have a Plan*”, February 1st, 2022, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-leaders-are-dreading-election-they-have-plan>

²⁸ L'Orient-le-Jour, “*Why is Bassil afraid of the diaspora vote?*”, February 11th, 2022, available at: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1290481/why-is-bassil-afraid-of-the-diaspora-vote.html>

²⁹ L'Orient-le-Jour, “*Pas de report ni d'annulation des législatives*”, *martèle le Hezbollah*”, February 10th, 2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1290349/pas-de-report-ni-dannulation-des-legislatives-martele-le-hezbollah.html>

the areas in which they are leading their electoral campaigns: Amal leads the southern part of Lebanon (Tyr - Zahrani - Nabatiyé - Bint - Beil - Marjeyoun - Hasbaya); while Hezbollah presented its campaign in the three districts in the Beqaa valley (Zahle, Bekaa-West; Rachaya and Baalbeck-Hermel).³⁰

The Shia battle does not actually exist, it is locked upstream by the tandem, which ensures that no competing list with a chance of challenging its hegemony can present itself. Despite this, opposition movements are growing in some Shia majority areas, as in the North of the country, hoping in the force of change. However, elections experts also declared that even though in 2018 half of the Shia population voted for Hezbollah and Amal, reaching half a million votes in total, today this figure is to be revised downwards as after the 2019 *thawra* many Shia Muslims took the streets against their political representatives, especially for what concerns the clientelist attitude of one of the two leaders: Nabih Berry.³¹ Some also tried to compare the case of the Lebanese Shia community to the Iraqi one, where in November 2021 the pro-Iranian representatives suffered a major setback at the elections. In Lebanon, neither Hezbollah nor its biggest supporter, Teheran, want to replicate the setback which happened in Iraq.

However, Hezbollah fears to lose support in the following elections. This is related to the fact that almost everyone knows the capacity of the Party of God to turn things to its own interest. This is not only due to the fact that Hezbollah has a great support from outside Lebanon, but also because it has the capacity to operate within and outside the State, without being accountable, thus, influencing State's institutions. However, what is extraordinary of this big project that Hezbollah was able to create during time, becoming a real political actor in the Lebanese State, is that its current power has been achieved through political pacts and agreements and by taking advantage of the weakness of the Lebanese institutions.

Through these political measures, Hezbollah is able to not only have an influence in the political life of the country, but also to exert its upper hand over its political allies,³² as to say: “you cannot have a say on any matter without my consent, first”.

³⁰ L'Orient-le-Jour, “*Les trois priorités électorales du Hezbollah*”, February 5th, 2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1289948/les-trois-priorites-electorales-du-hezbollah.html>

³¹ L'Orient-le-Jour, “*Les cinq grands enjeux des législatives libanaises*”, February 9th, 2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1290268/les-cinq-grands-enjeux-des-legislatives-libanaises.html>

³² Chatham House, “*How Hezbollah holds sway over the Lebanese state*”, Research Paper, June 30th 2021, available at:

For all these reasons – and even more – people lost trust towards Hezbollah, and discontent towards the Party has become more collective and widespread given the group’s habit of paralyzing State’s institutions and to block the judicial investigation over the Port of Beirut blast, happened in August 2020, by threatening judge Tareq Bitar.³³

Another important aspect for Hezbollah is the withdrawal from the political sphere of Saad Hariri, former leader of the Future Movement. Hariri’s leadership of the Sunni political sphere was fulfilled with the engagement in detaching Lebanon from the Iran’s sphere and, therefore, from Hezbollah hegemony. Saad Hariri has never been an ally of the Party of God and the first part of his political activities were even marked by the confrontations with the Party and its allies.³⁴ This period went from the events of July 2006 to those of May 2008, when Hezbollah took over several districts of Beirut city, which were Sunni populated neighbourhoods. The harshest exacerbation of the relations between Saad Hariri and the Party of God happened on February 14th, 2005, when his father, Rafik Hariri, was assassinated. However, Saad Hariri has not always been the counterpart of Hezbollah. Indeed, he compromised with Nasrallah’s party, in two occasions: in 2014, and in 2016 after the presidential compromise.³⁵ The decision of leaving the political sphere is basically bread for Hezbollah’s teeth.

The Saad Hariri’s political departure presents itself as an opportunity for Hezbollah, but at the same time the risk of seeing two contraposition blocks in Parliament might be tricky for the Party of God. Indeed, Nasrallah might see its block restricted and in contraposition with another big protagonist to 2022 elections’: the Lebanese Forces, which might also be supported by Saudi Arabia, getting the ball rolling for (another) Iranian – KSA proxy. In addition, Saad Hariri was the best candidate as Prime Minister, according by Hezbollah because he represented the perfect Sunni fit to the needs and whims of the Shia counterpart.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state/summary>

³³ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “*Hezbollah Leaders Are Dreading the Election—But They Have a Plan*”, February 1st, 2022, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-leaders-are-dreading-election-they-have-plan>

³⁴ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “*Saad’s Sad Goodbye: Hariri Leaves Lebanese Politics*”, January 25th, 2022, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saads-sad-goodbye-hariri-leaves-lebanese-politics>

³⁵ L’Orient-le-Jour, “*Pour le Hezbollah, la vie sans Hariri*”, February 8th 2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1290149/pour-le-hezbollah-la-vie-sans-hariri.html>

The LEBANESE FORCES – a better replacement to Hezbollah’s hegemony? Be them the winners or losers of 2022 elections, no one can really know. But what seems to be a certainty is that a considerable number of voters will prefer to vote for Samir Geagea’s party, rather than someone else. The Lebanese Forces electoral campaign has a strong slogan “We want, and we will do”, placing themselves as the representatives of the “right direction” that Lebanon should take.³⁶ What is almost sure in these elections is that the Lebanese Forces will welcome the votes of that part of the electorate which once belonged to Aoun’s party, The Free Patriotic Movement. This is also due to the fact that after the Tayyouneh clashes, the Lebanese Forces seem to be the best rival to the Hezbollah hegemony and to the collapse of the FPM as a Christian political party.

It is in this sense that Samir Geagea is playing his cards: “a vote for the FPM is a vote for Hezbollah”, said the leader of the Lebanese Forces.³⁷ Will the party succeed to really present itself as the rival to the Hezbollah hegemony? We will probably have to wait until May 15th to discover it, but another pawn can have a great influence: after the withdrawal of Saad Hariri, will Saudi Arabia officially step aside from the Lebanese elections? Or will it put all its efforts to another party in order not to leave the country in the hands of Hezbollah and Iran? If so, will the Lebanese Forces fit for the KSA?

III. The four main scenarios³⁸

For the first time since October 2019, Lebanese have the opportunity to – partially or entirely – change the political class of the country. Indeed, May 15th should be seen as the wind of change, along with the wave of protests as a breakdown. However, the importance of 2022 elections is still under discussion. There are those who believe that the outcome of the elections will have positive results in the political and economic spheres of the country; on the other hand, instead, there are also those who firmly believe that elections will be another mean to strengthen the old and current

³⁶ L’Orient-le-Jour, “Geagea lance la campagne électorale des FL : La "bataille est existentielle"”, March 14th 2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1293575/geagea-lance-la-campagne-electorale-des-fl-la-bataille-est-existentielle.html>

³⁷ L’Orient-le-Jour, “Geagea : Voter CPL c'est voter Hezbollah”, March 17th, 2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1293966/geagea-celui-qui-vote-cpl-vote-hezbollah.html>

³⁸ For this part I would like to thank Dr. Elie Elias, with whom I had a conversation on the topic and, together, we identified the four main scenarios to the 2022 elections.



political élite.³⁹ This is also linked to the general conditions of the electoral law. Indeed, it gives an advantage to traditional parties that find themselves in a better position to reach a very high eligibility threshold, therefore it is easier for them to create winning – and essential – coalitions and to rely upon the use of the best weapon they have: clientelism.

In this context, there are basically four main scenarios that can happen in the 2022 Lebanese elections. Just one of them would be the perfect one, in which free and fair elections will take place.

The first scenario: what almost every Lebanese is looking for, is to have free and fair elections, to get rid of the old political élite and to welcome new faces in the political scenario of the country, as well as – and most importantly – to rebuild the economy of Lebanon. In this sense, the elections might play a great role. Supposedly, if the Lebanese expats will effectively have the possibility to vote from abroad and for the whole number of seats, this might result in a possible loss for the old political parties, especially for the FPM and possibly even the other Hezbollah’s ally, Amal. Subsequently, this great outcome of the elections would also increase trust among the international community to invest on Lebanon and to revitalise the economy of the country.

Second scenario: however, the first scenario looks like an apparent utopian event. Indeed, when talking about Lebanon one must always resort to the influence and power of one specific actor: Hezbollah. How to behave in front of a political actor who refuses any kind of rule and threatens society when it finds its interests at stake? In this precise sense, elections might not bring a great outcome to the political scenario. Indeed, and as stated above, the Shia representation will remain almost the same. Consequently, if the trend of overthrowing the current political élite will be confirmed, there is the possibility to postpone the elections, at least until the current Hezbollah-controlled Parliament can select a new President of the Republic or until economic hardship and public discontent will eventually fade.⁴⁰ This scenario has been analysed through its precedents. Indeed, in 2013 the Parliament extended its

³⁹ L’Orient-le-Jour, “*Au Liban, les législatives sont-elles la clé du changement?*”, January 10th, 2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1287060/au-liban-les-legislatives-sont-elles-la-cle-du-changement-.html>

⁴⁰ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “*Hezbollah Leaders Are Dreading the Election— But They Have a Plan*”, February 1st, 2022, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-leaders-are-dreading-election-they-have-plan>



mandate for two years, because of the war in Syria and the threats it might have caused to Lebanon. However, the same move was used in 2014. In this sense, the Party of God might use the same excuse of the security concerns or of the possible uprisings happening before the elections' day. Security concerns might arise from Hezbollah's supporters themselves guided by the leaders of the Party, as it is Lebanon's most powerful armed faction.

Third scenario: by supposing that Hezbollah will lose the elections (which seems one of the most improbable aspects at this moment), it will use another weapon: paralysis. Indeed, coming back to 2005, when the country was hoping of renovating its political class and to embrace a wave of innovation, Hezbollah blocked the formation of the government. This game played by – apparently – the most powerful actor in the political scenario of Lebanon, can happen again after the results of the 2022 elections. Notwithstanding that, the Party of God might slightly lose the elections, but it will certainly try to obstruct the government formation for months or even years. Even in this scenario, the use of military power will possibly be used by Hezbollah.

Forth scenario: another possible outcome of the elections might not lead to any change. This means that the political élite will remain the same and those who hoped for a change carried out by the elections will just remain hopeless. Thus, the political élite and the parliamentary representation will be divided as they currently are, maybe with few changes that will not weight enough to bring a change.

In all these cases – except the first utopian scenario – Lebanon will find itself in a difficult position and the international community will look at the defeat of the once upon a time little Switzerland of the Middle East, paying the consequences of its downfall: a massive wave of migration.

IV. The weight of the external and regional actors in the Lebanese 2022 elections

In Lebanon – as elsewhere in Middle East – the elections are never a home game. Rather, many regional and international actors put their hands into the different aspects of the elections. This is because regional actors do not want to lose their “superiority” at the expenses of someone else, as this seem to be the case between Iran and Hezbollah, but also because they want to have an influence into the internal politics of a given country by promoting a political figure or a party. This is the case of Lebanon, at least for what concerns Saudi Arabia and Iran.

On the one hand, The Islamic Republic is hoping to gain even more importance in Lebanon through these elections, this is why Iran is greatly supporting Hezbollah in its electoral campaigns as well as it is aware that its allies might instead lose the elections, causing a negative shift for the Party of God. That is also why Iran has tried to put lights on its actions towards Lebanon by providing the country with fuel and gas when there was a serious shortage, or by sending money to help poor Lebanese families. However, as the KAS Public Opinion Survey on Lebanon shows, a strong majority of the respondent (78%) do not trust Iran or do not trust it at all (62%), compared to the small percentage (22%) who trust it.⁴¹ At the same time, Hezbollah is hoping that the Iran – USA nuclear talks in Vienna will soon lead to an agreement, therefore lifting the sanctions that Iran is still facing. However, despite the fact that the lifting of sanctions will of course not lead to the economic and financial recovery of Lebanon, this can strongly facilitate Hezbollah’s election logistics and expenditures while enabling the militia to provide more largesse to its constituents.⁴²

Meanwhile, as for what concerns Saudi Arabia, the question might be more complicated this time. Since the withdrawal of Saad Hariri, the Sunni counterpart lacks a strong leadership. Indeed, no one among the former Prime Ministers will present himself as leader of the Future Movement, as this is the case of Faoud Siniora, of Tammam Salam and of the present Lebanese Prime Minister, Najib Mikati. Another problem is related to the block of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon in October 2021, right after the statement of the Lebanese Ministry of Information and the following withdrawal of the Saudi Ambassador, Walid Boukhari, following the kidnapping of the journalist Jamal Kashoggi.

As elections are at the doors, KSA does not seem very much interested to be involved in Lebanon, but it will never leave the stage to Hezbollah and Iran, without trying to fight for the Sunni cause. Moreover, Saudi Arabia will never stand the fact that the majority of the Sunni electorate might decide to vote for Hezbollah, since it feels disoriented after the withdrawal of Saad Hariri. At present, Riyadh does not take official stances about the Lebanese situation, but it is moving its hands in the backstage by convincing its allies to take a step into the elections. The only fear here

⁴¹ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, “*Study of Perceptions and Attitudes of Lebanese Citizens Towards the Economic, Social and Political Situation in Lebanon*”, December 2021.

⁴² The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “*Hezbollah Leaders Are Dreading the Election— But They Have a Plan*”, February 1st, 2022, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-leaders-are-dreading-election-they-have-plan>

is that the Sunni electorate might feel abandoned by the non-expressed support of Saudi Arabia, and it might opt for voting its enemy.⁴³

Western countries and the International Community as a whole, are instead greatly insisting on: the non-postponement of the elections; free and fair elections; and to re-establish a (even minimum) political equilibrium and to take seats off to the majority, composed by the alliance between Hezbollah, Amal and FPM. The pressure the International Community is putting towards the non-postponement of the elections, might have positive outcomes in this sense, but will it be able to stop possible engineered street clashes or other security incidents providing an excuse for postponement or creating fear among citizens diminishing voter turnout? However, the pressure given by the presence of the international community into Lebanon can represent a source of hope, as it is the case for the EOM Commission to Lebanon.⁴⁴ This not only is a great means not to postpone the elections, but also to control if effectively elections will be free and fair and to possibly sanction those responsible of the contrary. Indeed, this can be seen as a great external pressure, that is also why the International Community should play the card of increasing the presence of external observers in Lebanon and shifting it from being a short-term presence, to a long-term one.

In this case, the Holy See is playing a great role. Pope Francis sent Paul Gallagher, the Holy See's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Lebanon to control the situation and to give the impression to citizens that they want to be – and they actually are – present in the territory. Moreover, Pope Francis himself declared he will come back to Lebanon several times during the elections, despite the delicate moment the elections represent even from a security point of view. The Holy See's diplomacy and moves in the Lebanese elections are seen positive from Lebanese people as well.

Following this line, the countries of the International Community should be more present in the territory, asking for what they advocate for Lebanon and menacing the annulment of international funds to help the country recovering from its economic, financial and humanitarian crisis.

⁴³ L'Orient-le-Jour, “À l’approche des élections, l’Arabie saoudite regarde à nouveau le Liban”, March 17th, 2022, available at: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1293899/a-lapproche-des-elections-larabie-saoudite-regarde-a-nouveau-le-liban.html>

⁴⁴ European Union External Action, “Lebanon: the European Union deploys an Election Observation Mission”, February 23rd, 2022, available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/lebanon-european-union-deploys-election-observation-mission_en

V. Conclusions

The Lebanese elections represent one of the controversies of Lebanon, in general. Whether the elections will take place is still another controversy. The country advocates for change: everyone is hoping for a change to happen, but at the end the same and old political parties will possibly prevail. This is because the country has been invaded by the evilness of what the country itself created: clientelism, corruption, nepotism. In addition, it has also created what it is seen as on the worst things Lebanon could have asked for: Hezbollah. Indeed, the Party of God is the one that makes the rules of the game, and it moves the pieces of it as it prefers, and no one can say anything about it. Still, the elections represent the greatest occasion for Lebanon to change and to give proof that they are able to rise from their own ashes.

Predicting the outcome of the Lebanese elections will be meaningless, since every second of it counts, for better or for worse. For the moment, Lebanese elections seem to be one of the international events that everyone should cautiously monitoring, every step of it. Therefore, lights on: elections are coming... eyes on Lebanon.