*Christine Strassmaier & Peter Nassif **

Lebanese Municipality Elections 2016:

Local decisions with national and regional ramifications

Municipal elections in Europe as in the Middle East usually hardly raise the attention of international pundits. In the case of Lebanon, this is different, where the last legislature elections have been held in 2009 and the seat of the country's president has been vacant from May 2014 on. Since then, parliament has extended its term twice, citing security concerns that would render safe elections impossible. Therefore, the municipal elections that took place in four subsequent rounds during May have taken additional importance as the first public inquiry over the population's opinion on politics in 6 years – especially as these years have seen major changes in the region: a civil war in neighboring Syria has forced more than an estimated 1.5 million refugees into the country of only 10,452 square kilometers and a population of approximately 4.5 million; Hezbollah has been deeply entangled in the fight in support of Bashar al-Assad, and all other political groups in the country do have a stance on the proxy war in Syria. This has led to a stalemate of the political system and in July 2015 resulted most visually and sensibly in another escalation of continuous garbage crisis that lasted well into 2016 and led to large popular protests in the capital Beirut. In light of these events, the elections turned out to be surprisingly competitive with local initiatives challenging the country's old political class that has for years focused on keeping themselves in power while leaving the country paralyzed at the expense of the Lebanese.

Municipal elections generate first political accountability since 2009

In Lebanon's unique sectarian power-sharing political system, the country's 18 sects fill political offices and create political parties according to Lebanon's sectarian layout. Following late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in February 2005, the country's political scene has been divided between the March 14 and March 8 coalition, both commemorating dates of public rallies during the so-called Cedar Revolution in 2005. The March 14 coalition known for its anti-Syrian stance and receiving support from Saudi Arabia is led by Saad Hariri, Rafik Hariri's second son. Main players of the coalition are the Sunni Future Movement as well as the Maronite Christian Phalange and Lebanese Forces. The pro-Iranian March 8 camp is dominated by the Shiite Hezbollah and Amal Movement, but also the Maronite Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). Due to the fact that all sects have to be represented within a Lebanese government, both camps include several smaller parties belonging to the sects not represented by major players, including Druze, Armenian and Christian Orthodox sects. Despite both coalitions' rigorous division, there have been several breakaways and changing alliances over the years. Yet, the coalitions represent the influence of regional powers and hence are easily affected by regional developments, above all by the war in Syria. In parliament, both coalitions are in a gridlock but shy away from new elections due to disputes over a new electoral law. Both Muslims and Christians are calling for a new electoral law which they hope would give their sects more favorable representation.[1] The parliament's failure to agree on key political issues concerning gerrymandering and the vote of expatriate Lebanese has rendered reaching a common legal framework impossible until today. Parliament did however agree on extending its own term twice: the first time in May 2013 for 17 months, and the second in November 2014 for 31 months, until June 2017.

In contrast, municipal elections proceed at regular six-year intervals, with elections taking place in 2004, 2010 and now 2016. Elections started on 8 May with the first of total four consecutive Sundays ending May 29 and covering all Lebanese provinces. Lebanon's municipal elections are therefore the last remaining institutional mechanism for generating a modicum of political accountability and their successful completion increase pressure to hold general elections in 2017. Similar to national politics, the presentation of programmatic platforms and concrete agendas for local development are rare in municipal elections. Since traditional political families usually ally themselves with national sectarian parties and candidates, the elections may be seen as a mirror to the national political climate.

Despite their formal importance as stated in a 1977 law, stating that any "work having a public character or utility" is within municipal jurisdiction, the municipal level has never gained this level of influence.[2] This is mostly due to their poor financial situation and the national government cutting municipal mandates for political reasons: Almost half of the municipal funding comes from local taxation, but many municipalities' small size and their inability to actually collect these taxes shrink this budget immensely. Another source of funding comes from nation-wide taxes and other government sources such as from the ministry of telecommunications and is distributed by the central government. While in general an important concept to redistribute wealth between richer and poorer municipalities, the outcome is mostly negative with funds being withheld due to political bickering and corruption. The missing resources make them incapable of funding public works projects and local development and regular public services.

The issue of waste management in Lebanon is an example for the need to strengthen the municipal level. While in most cities worldwide and even in parts of Lebanon, waste management is handled

by the municipality, the Beirut and Mount Lebanon area use a system of centralized waste management overlooked by the Ministry of Environment and managed by the private contractor Sukleen. During the 1990s, dump sites in Beirut's suburbs where used to dispose garbage until a sanitary landfill was opened in the town of Naameh, south of Beirut. Intended as a temporary solution until a more sustainable landfill was found, Lebanese central governments have never been able to agree on a permanent waste disposal solution for the capital and its densely populated surroundings. As a result, the Naameh landfill kept receiving garbage for a total of 17 years. Due to the absence of political agreements on the issue, almost no recycling was ever implemented. When the landfill was finally closed in July 2015 after surpassing its capacity, no agreement on any of the alternatives had been found, leaving the garbage for the next eight months to rot in the streets of Beirut and in unsanitary makeshift dumps spread all across metropolitan Beirut. With the crisis impacting the health and daily lives of Lebanese citizens, an activist movement began to form under the banner "You Stink" and grew over the summer under repression by the government and the political class's inability to work towards any sustainable solution.

Activists have continuously been pushing to move the mandate for waste management to the municipal level, secure political support for recycling initiatives and back municipalities up with the necessary funding. While the impact of the garbage crisis on citizens was lessened by independent initiatives and cooperation of the civil society and some municipalities, so far, they have not had any support by the central government. Instead, lawmakers in the capital were only able to agree on an interim plan for the next four years that would reactivate the old suburban dump sites for the time being. The public demands for a further decentralization of public services however echo the distrust and disappointment that Lebanese feel towards their national government – a feeling they share with large parts of the population of the Arab world. From a regional perspective,

the disregard towards municipalities by the Lebanese government is at odds with a general trend that shows citizens relying increasingly on municipal services and a decentralization of government. This development is particularly important given that more than half of the world's population now lives in urban areas with strong tendencies towards further growth: From 1980 to 2010, the urban population in several Arab countries more than doubled, tripling in Palestine and Syria, quadrupling in Sudan and growing by a factor of 6 in Yemen.[3]

More than any other region of the world, the Middle East and North Africa is an area of contested power structures. In recent years, the concept of the nation-state as a central institution has been massively challenged. With national states such as Syria, Iraq, Libya effectively breaking apart, numerous Arab states are decreasingly able to deliver basic services while maintaining their monopoly of power. States in this part of the world have always had difficulties in representing the collective identities of their inhabitants, but cities offer an alternative structure that may fulfill this task more successfully. Major cities are commonly centers of demographic, economic and social clout and as such are natural partners in the promotion of human development. In a very real sense, the city represents the rich and the poor, the weak and the powerful, the government and the opposition as well as its inhabitants from all confessions, ideologies and ethnicities. When it comes to services that impact on people's daily lives, such as electric power, water and waste management, transportation, but also y, knowledge transfer, public space and environmental protection, it is the city – not the central state – that takes over the responsibility. Cooperative management initiatives by major municipalities worldwide are proof of an international trend towards the decentralization of services. In a Middle East where states are plagued by mistrust, corruption, political strife and conflict, the weakness of the central state's power requires a counterbalance from strong municipalities. With state structures de facto dissolving, naming Syria, Libya and

Yemen only as worst case examples, cities as the smallest administrative level have to take up that responsibility. As a result, civil society will have to wrestle municipalities from the grip of the old feudal families that have traditionally been in power.

The Outcome of the 2016 Municipal Election

Since in many towns and cities the elections are fought out between the sectarian parties reflecting the corresponding local population, the municipal elections were used by most political actors as a testing ground for their national standing. While most Shia areas were won by a coalition of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, it came to some close calls for them as rival lists, often allying local families with smaller parties, chose to challenge the traditional parties. In Southern Lebanon where Shiites make up the majority of population, several towns and villages were won by the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and local families. A week earlier, in Beirut's southern suburbs (Dahia) – another Hezbollah dominated area –several municipalities experienced very close victories of the Hezbollah-Amal list against local lists.[4] Besides being a protest vote against the disregard of traditional parties towards their constituents, this result is also seen as a disapproval of Hezbollah's growing commitment to the fighting in Syria, Iraq and Yemen and a growing body count, while the resistance rhetoric is sounding increasingly hollow to everyone not directly benefiting from the parties' patronage systems.

In Christian areas, the parties tried to push legitimacy for their presidential candidates by winning municipal elections. This was the first public query for the newly-forged alliance between two old foes, the Lebanese Forces (LF) under Samir Geagea and the FPM who had already been fighting during the end of the Lebanese Civil War for Michel Aoun as their candidate. The Mount Lebanon elections therefore saw strong battles between the LF-FPM alliance and local coalitions, often supported by the Phalange Party and Michel Murr, a politician who had grown to unite

Christian municipalities in the area under his patronage over the past 20 years. The Northern Christian towns also saw some heated battles between the LF/FPM and the Marada Party of rival presidential candidate Suleiman Frangieh who is traditionally particularly strong in and around his home town Zgharta. Oddly enough, both presidential favorites are from the March 8 coalition and have been nominated by members of the March 14 coalition: Aoun was nominated by the LF's leader Samir Geagea while Frangieh was nominated by the Future Movement's Saad Hariri. Geagea and Hariri have been allies since both of them entered the political arena after the assassination of Saad's father Rafik Hariri but this coalition seems to be slowly dissolving as well.[5]

The elections were also an important indicator for the popularity of Hariri's Future Movement versus other rising Sunni actors and shifts in Druze politics headed for the past six decades by the Jumblatt clan. In a surprising turn of events, the high-profile list supported by the two billionaire former Prime Ministers Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati was defeated by retired Internal Security Forces Chief and recent Minister of Justice Maj. Gen. Ashraf Rifi, after Rifi catering to Sunni sectarian sentiments while running also as an alternative to the establishment that has long been ignoring the city.[6]

Rifi's victory has also led to Christian and Alawite minorities not being represented in Tripoli for the first time in years.[7] In all these cases, local population appeared fed up with the lack of public services provided by the traditional parties, whose decades-old patronage systems have proven to benefit only a close circle of members. Despite the victory of Hariri in his hometown of Saida and the Beiruti list, the major defeat of his list in Lebanon's second largest city Tripoli demonstrate how his financial and political stance is decisively weakened. Hariri's business in Saudi Arabia is facing unprecedented and appears close to bankruptcy. In addition, also the personal, traditional thicker-than-blood relationship between the Saudi kingdom and Hariri has cooled of significantly.[8]

In Beirut, it came as no surprise when the "Beirutis" list under the lead of Saad Hariri and backed by mainstream Lebanese parties won all seats of the municipality elections.[9] Traditionally the 24 member city council in Beirut is made up of 12 Muslims and 12 Christians to ensure a more equal representation of sects in a city that was divided on these lines during the civil war. What came as a surprise however, was the strength with which the civil society movement – although ultimately being defeated– came out of the elections. Into Beirut's traditionally uncompetitive voting process dominated by personal and party alliances rather than programmatic content, broke a Beirut initiative that incorporated a list of independent of technocrats, academic, activists and artists. "Beirut Madinati" (Arabic for "Beirut, My city") is the first such initiative in the country's history and has presented a 10-point program that prioritizes "the primacy of the public good, social justice, transparency, and stewardship of our city for future generations." While this may seem like a conventional platform, it is a historic change from the typically personalized and sectarian rhetoric that surrounds Lebanese elections. Having emerged out of the protest movement of the previous summer and a growing alliance pushing against feudal politics and for more public services, Beirut Madinati was able to gain 40 percent of the votes – only three months after its formation.

But despite the strong grassroots movement that emerged ahead of Lebanon's elections, the country's election system makes this vote flawed. The vast majority of Lebanese citizens can only vote in their hometown of origin and not in the municipality in which they may be currently living. This is particular critical for elections in Beirut. Despite hosting around 2 million inhabitants, only less than one fourth are registered voters in the city. In addition, many of Beirut's original inhabitants live abroad where unlike other country's diaspora voting laws, they are not allowed to vote. Furthermore, as elections are mostly majority-based, disregarding proportionality to large extent. As a result, elections under the current law lack legitimacy as

only few vote who will govern about all. Given the turnout for the first election in Lebanon in six years was around 20 percent, it seems that only a minority of Beirut inhabitants went to cast their vote, especially as supporters of Beirut Madianti had probably a higher turnout than most other parties. In addition, Lebanese electoral law allows for ballots to be prewritten – either by hand or printed – and taken into the voting box. It is therefore common practice for parties to ballots and hand them to undecided citizens just before they enter the voting box. This and other pressure tactics such as shaming people into voting for a particular list and vote buying have a negative impact on the election process. A monitoring group said there had been a big increase in irregularities compared with the last election, included vote buying, violence and a report of an official interfering with voting to help one of the party lists.

In the Middle East that has not recovered from the eruption of the Arab Spring 5 years ago, Beirut Madinati and other local movement are a small, but positive example how public discontent can be successfully channeled into the political process. While Lebanon's democratic system might show more defects than output, its system is still capable to include. The successful completion of the municipal elections causing only minor security threats demonstrated that from a logistical and security point of view, parliamentary elections are very much possible in 2017. What remains to be seen is if this is desired by the traditional parties, keeping in mind how they only barely secured their victories during the much less contested municipal elections.

* Christine Strassmaier is Associate Fellow at the AIES. Peter Nassif is expert at the MEIA Research e. V.

Notes

1. Esperance Ghanem, Baby step: Lebanon's municipal elections inspire hope, May 12th 2016,Al Monitor,http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/lebanon-municipal-elections-parliamentary-elections-extended.html.

2. Sami Atallah, Decentralization in Lebanon, March 2012, The Lebanese Center for Policyy Studies, http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=6.

3. Barry Mirkin, Arab Spring: Demographics in a region in transition, 2013, United Nations Arab Human development Index, http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdrps/AHDR%20ENG%20Arab%20Spring%20Mirkinv3.pdf

4. Hussein Dakroub, Rivals posed unprecedented challenge to Hezbollah, Amal, May 24th 2016, Daily Star, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/May-24/353522-rivals-posed-unprecedented-challenge-to-hezbollah-amal.ashx

5. Geagea Decries 'Major War' on LF, FPM in Elections, Says Both Mustaqbal, Hizbullah against Maarab Agreement, June 1st 2016, Anahra Net, http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/210681-geagea-decries-major-war-on-lf-fpm-in-elections-says-both-mustaqbal-hizbullah-against-maarab-agreement.

6. Alex Rowell, Rifi's gamble pays off, May 30th 2016, Now Media, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/567046-rifis-gamble-pays-off

7. Bassil blames Rifi's rivals for Christian, Alawite absence in new Tripoli council, May 31st 2016, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/May-31/354595-bassil-blames-rifis-rivals-for-christian-alawite-absence-in-new-tripoli-council.ashx.

8. Ziad al-Zaatari, The Saudi Bailout of Hariri, February 14th 2012, Al-Akhbar, http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/4155.

9. Lisa Barrington, Hariri-backed list wins Beirut vote, May 9th2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-election-idUSKCN0Y00IA.