

Lebanon's future in hands of small number of districts

Contributed by Nicholas Kimbrell, Daily Star staff
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BEIRUT: Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese will head to the polls Sunday, for what has been dubbed one of the most important elections in the country's history. The vote, which has garnered intense international interest, will decide the composition of the next parliament and the formation of a new cabinet.

As mandated by law, the final round of campaigning wrapped up Friday with leaders, like the Future Movement's Saad Hariri, urging supporters to remain calm and respect Sunday's results whatever they may be.

The elections have taken the shape of a highly partisan, two-coalition contest, between the ruling March 14 majority and the March 8 opposition.

Polling suggests that the elections will be decided by a small margin of votes in a select number of districts. Either of the blocs could take a slim majority, according to analysts, but neither is expected to win a definitive mandate. In addition, the presence of several independents, with a declared allegiance to the president, has the potential to prevent either side from winning a majority, which would force the formation of a unity government.

According to most counts, many of the races have effectively been decided - over 100 for a 128-member parliament - thanks to Lebanon's unique political system, a majoritarian democracy with confession-based quotas.

The remaining seats, primarily in majority Christian areas, have been fiercely contested. Lebanon's Shiite and Sunni communities are expected to hold ranks during the polls, while the Christian vote will likely decide the shape of the next government.

The Metn, Baabda, Zahle, Jbail, and Kesrouan districts, all predominantly Christian, will gauge how the Christian community, deeply divided between opposition leader Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and March 14's Lebanese Forces and Phalange parties, will swing.

March 14 currently holds 68 deputies, and Aoun, to whom some analysts have given a slight advantage, must reach 36 wins to turn the balance. The Metn, in particular, with eight Christian seats, will be instrumental to a victory for either side.

The elections also showcase several high-profile contests. In Beirut I, March 14's Nayla Tuani, the daughter of assassinated MP and journalist Gebran Tuani, is running against Deputy Prime Minister Issam Abou Jamra. And in Sidon, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora is taking on Nasserite candidate Osama Saad, whose family has represented the district for decades.

A new election law, the first since the 2005 Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, was passed last September to govern the polls. Despite shortcomings cited by both civil society groups and Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud, the law was seen as incorporating several important reforms, like moving the elections to one day and regulating campaign spending and media coverage.

Money has nevertheless been flowing into country, financing expensive ad campaigns, local public-works projects and outright vote-buying.

Lebanese living abroad have also poured back into the country, tens of thousands in recent weeks, to take part in the elections, as Lebanese law forbids citizens from voting abroad.

In addition, a long list of international observation missions have deployed monitors across the country. The EU has sent the largest, with 100 short- and long-term observers.

"We are encouraged that the Lebanese citizens are going to participate in the vote and hope polling day and the day after will pass in a very calm way," Jose Ignacio Salafranca, the EU mission's chief observer, said Friday.

In response to security fears, the Interior Ministry plans to deploy 50,000 personnel across the country on Sunday, and security analysts have told The Daily Star that incidents are unlikely thanks to the ministry's preparations.

Businesses will be shuttered starting Saturday evening, through Sunday.

On Monday afternoon, official election results will be announced to a chorus of local and regional reactions.

Coming on the heels of US and Israeli elections and falling just days before the Iranian presidential polls, the Lebanese elections have been closely followed by the international community. Many inside Lebanon and out have painted the contests as a gauge of competing US and Iranian influence in the region.

The US lists Hizbullah as a terrorist group, and it remains to be seen how an opposition win would affect US-Lebanese relations.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden have both visited Beirut ahead of the polls, and each has said that the US will evaluate assistance to Lebanon - more than \$1 billion in recent years - after the elections.

Speaking with Reuters, former US President Jimmy Carter, who is heading the Carter Center's observation mission, said he expected the US to recognize the results "no matter who wins."

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