

Lebanon votes in closely-watched election

Contributed by Agencies
Sunday, 07 June 2009

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The race for the 128-member parliament will set Lebanon's political course for the next four years, with repercussions beyond this tiny Arab country's borders. A win for the Shiite militant group, which the United States considers a terrorist organization, and its allies could bring isolation to Lebanon and possibly a new conflict with Israel.

It could also set back U.S. Mideast policy and boost the influence of Hezbollah's backers, Syria and Iran.

"I voted for the first time in my life today simply because these elections will decide in which direction the country will go," said Elie Yacoub, a voter in his 30s who cast his ballot in Beirut.

Lebanon has long been a main front in what many see as a power struggle between two main camps in the Mideast – the U.S. and its moderate Arab allies Saudi Arabia and Egypt on one side, and Iran and Syria and militant groups such as Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas on the other.

A steady stream of vehicles headed south, north or east from Beirut to outlying parts of the country early Sunday, a weekend here, carrying voters to hometowns. Some vehicles had flags of political groups fluttering to show loyalty.

Voters lined up outside polling stations in government buildings and public schools across the country after polls opened. There are some 3.2 million eligible voters out of a population of 4 million. Early unofficial returns were expected late Sunday and official results as early as Monday afternoon.

Army troops in armored carriers and in trucks took up positions on major highways to ensure peaceful voting. Authorities have deployed some 50,000 soldiers and police.

President Michel Suleiman was among the early voters, casting his ballot in his hometown of Amchit on the coast north of Beirut.

"Democracy is a blessing that distinguishes Lebanon in the Middle East, and we must preserve it," he told reporters.

There were widespread complaints about delays in the process, forcing voters to stand in lines. Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud asked people to be patient.

Scores of foreign observers, including former President Jimmy Carter, will monitor the vote.

Speaking at a polling station in Beirut's Christian sector of Ashrafieh, Carter expressed hope the U.S., Iran and other countries "will accept the results of the election and not try to interfere in the process."

Going into the election, the race for a majority appears too close to call. In the outgoing parliament, the pro-Western bloc had 70 seats and Hezbollah's alliance had 58.

The vote is the latest chapter in four tumultuous years for Lebanon that began with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 in a car bombing. The pro-Western factions swept into power in elections the same year on a sympathy vote. But the government has been virtually paralyzed since by the power struggle with Hezbollah.

The campaign has been bruising, with accusations of vote-buying by both sides. Outside a Beirut polling place Sunday, one man said he was willing to vote for whoever would pay him the most.

Hezbollah's coalition includes the Shiite movement Amal and a major Christian faction led by former army chief Michel Aoun. Opposing it are the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim supporters of current majority leader Saad Hariri, allied with several Christian and Druse factions.

Lebanese tend to vote mainly along sectarian or family loyalties. Sunni Muslim and Shiite Muslim districts around the country are largely locked up, so the battle has been over the Christian districts, where some races are a tossup.

Hezbollah's Christian allies argue that a victory by their coalition will not have such a dramatic impact and will ensure peace in a nation divided by sectarian tensions. They say that involving Hezbollah more deeply in the political process — rather than shunning it — is the only way to bridge the sectarian divides.

Their opponents counter that the heavily armed Hezbollah would be driving Lebanon into the arms of Iran, which could use it as a front in the Islamic republic's confrontation with Israel.

The influential Maronite Catholic Church has remained largely neutral.

But on Saturday, church head Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir warned voters that Lebanon as an entity and its Arab identity were threatened, a clear reference to the Hezbollah alliance. The election commission ordered the statement withdrawn from circulation because it violated an order limiting political statements 24 hours before voting. -AP

 Long Lines, Slow Voting in Lebanon's Parliamentary Election

By Chip Cumins, Wall Street Journal

Lebanese men lined up at the entrance of a polling station in downtown Beirut.

BEIRUT -- Long lines formed outside polling stations across Lebanon's capital Sunday, as voters showed up early and in large numbers for parliamentary elections.

The contest has become a closely-watched battle between a Western-leaning bloc of politicians and one backed by Hezbollah, the Shiite political and militia group backed by Iran.

Results aren't expected until Monday, though early unofficial results might trickle in late Sunday. Voting kicked off at 7 a.m., and polling places will be open for the most part until 7 p.m. across the country.

Some voters and candidates complained early of long waits at packed polling stations. The country's interior minister asked voters to be patient but said there were no plans to extend voting hours.

Despite the crowds, voting was peaceful, if not jubilant at a handful of polling stations early Sunday. In the Shiite Muslim neighborhood of Ghobeireh, volunteers dressed in Hezbollah yellow helped infirmed voters out of ambulances to cast votes at a local school. Inside, hundreds of voters waited in queues snaking down the school's hallways.

Poll workers there said by 9:45 a.m. about 30% of the district's registered 601 voters, almost all of them Shiite, had already cast ballots. Hezbollah and its allied parties are expected to sweep the contest here. Families were decked out in yellow t-shirts, waving Hezbollah flags. Many elderly women, dressed in black robes and head coverings, sported yellow Hezbollah scarves tied jauntily around their necks.

Washington and governments across the Middle East are watching the outcome closely as a barometer of Tehran's regional influence. A win by Hezbollah and its coalition allies would give the group the upper hand in forming Lebanon's next government. But Lebanon's convoluted political system would likely limit the bloc's ability to dominate the government or embark on any radical policy changes.

Currently, the Western-backed coalition holds 70 seats, compared to 58 by the opposition. But because of new electoral districts and new alliances between parties, the bloc dominated by Hezbollah is set to make big gains. That's despite expectations by Hezbollah officials that the group itself will forfeit one of its 14 seats. Analysts and pollsters have predicted a close split in the new parliament, with a majority perhaps as thin as one or two seats.

Supporters of Hezbollah, which fought a month-long war with Israel in 2006 and is designated a terror group by Israel and Washington, were especially galvanized by the possibility of victory on Sunday.

"If they win, everything will change," said Fatme Raad, 57 years old, after voting for the Hezbollah slate in Ghobeireh. "They protected us, they saved us from Israel," Ms. Raad said.

Though rhetoric between the two sides heated up considerably in the days ahead of the polls, there haven't been reports of disturbances early Sunday.

In the mountain-side Beirut suburb of Beit-Mery, voters complained of waiting an hour or more to vote. Still, the mood was jubilant in long lines at a polling station inside a school here.

"I've voted three times before, but never anything like this," said Nancey Abu Khalil, a 41-year-old school teacher. She said she was voting for most of the candidates on the pro-West slate, called the March 14 movement. "They support sovereignty, they're against terrorism and they're democratic," she said.

The police and military presence was heavy through the streets here. An army of international election monitors, including European Union observers and former President Jimmy Carter, were fanning out across the country.

Many Lebanese left Beirut earlier in the weekend to cast ballots in their ancestral homes across the country. That left the capital uncharacteristically quiet. But car-loads of supporters, with colored flags streaming and music blaring, zipped through streets, horns blaring.

 Lebanese voters turn out in numbers
 By Ferry Biedermann in Beirut, Financial Times

Lebanese voters turned out in numbers early on Sunday in parliamentary elections which could see the armed Shia Hizbollah movement and its allies gain power.

As the polls opened, many analysts gave the Hizbollah-led March 8 coalition a slight edge over the pro-western March 14 bloc, which currently holds the majority of seats in parliament.

On Saturday Cardinal Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, the patriarch of the country's Maronite Christian community, spoke obliquely of "a threat to the Lebanese entity and its Arab identity". The comments appeared aimed at Hizbollah's Christian allies who are led by the former general Michel Aoun.

Army and police were out in force, securing polling stations and roads particularly in Christian areas, where most of the strongly contested seats are located. But the run-up to the polls was remarkably calm for a country with a recent past of violence between its two main political camps.

Analysts say that only about 25 seats are really up for grabs with the rest being locked in. Most of these available seats belong to the Christian community that is still allotted half of the total in parliament, even though its share of the population has probably fallen far below that. No census has been held in Lebanon since the 1930s.

Tens of thousands of Lebanese living abroad have returned home to cast their vote as they are not allowed to do so overseas. Both blocs were rumoured to have paid airline tickets for their supporters and, as in previous elections, there were widespread allegations of vote-buying.

The expected closeness of the vote as well as the tense relationship between the two blocs led many analysts to predict that the formation of a new government after the elections is likely to be fraught. The presence of independent candidates loosely allied to the country's Christian president further complicates the picture.

The possibility of a Hizbollah-led coalition coming to power has sparked speculation about a reduction in international support for Lebanon, particularly from the US and its Arab allies in the Gulf.

On the eve of the elections, Hizbollah accused the US of "interference" following remarks by Jeffrey Feltman, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. Mr Feltman was quoted in the pro-March 14 Lebanese daily An-Nahar as saying, "the election's outcome will naturally affect world's stance towards the new Lebanese government and the manner in which the United States and Congress deal with Lebanon."

March 14 is the anti-Syrian coalition that successfully agitated for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country in the wake of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. It is led by Mr Hariri's son, Saad, who is expected to retain the loyalty of the country's Sunni Muslim community.

Hizbollah is only contesting 11 seats in the 128 seat parliament while its allies in the Amal movement are expected to take the remainder of the seats which are reserved for Shia Muslims under the country's complex confessional quota system.

Lebanon votes in high-stakes election

Hundreds of voters flock to polls in parliamentary election that could change course of Lebanon's politics.

BEIRUT - Lebanese voters flocked to the polls on Sunday in a high-stakes election that could see an alliance led by the Shiite militant group Hezbollah defeat the country's current ruling Western-backed coalition.

Hundreds of voters, many of them sporting their party colours, lined up outside the polling stations even before the vote opened in a country which has endured years of wars, sectarian unrest and political instability.

Police and soldiers were out in force nationwide to prevent any outbreak of violence between the rival political camps during the closely-fought parliamentary election.

"We are voting so that the Lebanese can decide their own fate," said Fadia Saade, 37, as she waited in line to cast her ballot in the town of Jounieh north of Beirut. "We don't want any outside interference."

At stake is whether multi-confessional Lebanon keeps on a pro-Western course or takes a tilt towards Iran, the regional Shiite powerhouse which backs Hezbollah (the Party of God.)

Analysts predict a tight race for the 128-seat parliament, with the winner likely to clinch victory by just a few seats.

A handful of key battleground constituencies are likely to be crucial in determining the outcome, with the Christian vote, which is divided between the two camps, set to tip the scale.

"Lebanon: Which path after the elections?" questioned a front-page headline in the Saudi-financed newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat, which said the vote "will decide which path Lebanon takes and its regional and international alliances."

The United States, which backs the current Sunni-led coalition and considers the Hezbollah a terrorist organisation, is anxiously eyeing the election and is expected to suspend military aid if the Shiite movement wins.

Lebanese President Michel Sleiman, elected last year after a deal was hammered out to end a protracted political crisis that left the post vacant for months, urged all political parties to tone down their rhetoric.

"If we manage to improve the situation in Lebanon, everyone will benefit, however if we fail, we will all be losers," he said after casting his vote.

Majority leader Saad Hariri said after voting in Beirut that the election represented a "great day for democracy, a great day for Lebanon".

But independent newspaper Al-Anwar cautioned that the country's deep political divisions would cast a long shadow even after the election.

"The music voters have listened to in recent month is that of war drums and dramatic scenarios that give the impression that election day is apocalyptic and that the vote is a choice between two Lebanons," it said.

"But everyone knows that we will not emerge from the crisis we're in after the election."

Under Lebanon's complex power-sharing system, the 128 seats in parliament are divided equally between majority Muslims and minority Christians, who make up about a third of the population in the small Middle Eastern nation.

Top political posts are also allocated along confessional lines. The president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of parliament a Shiite Muslim.

The current Sunni-led majority swept to power in 2005 on a wave of popular anger following the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in a massive Beirut car bombing.

The murder was widely blamed on Syria, which denied any involvement, and the ensuing public outcry led to Damascus withdrawing its troops after 29 years of military and political domination.

It also marked the beginning of a turbulent period which saw Hezbollah thrust to the political forefront through the devastating 2006 war with Israel in which 1,200 people died in Lebanon, most of them civilians.

Political unrest last year also saw a six-month vacuum in the presidency and sectarian clashes that killed more than 100 people after Hezbollah staged a spectacular takeover of mainly Sunni parts of Beirut.

More than 200 international observers from the European Union, the Carter Centre and other institutions and countries are overseeing the election.

Polling stations close at 7 pm (1600 GMT), with early unofficial results expected late on Sunday before official results are issued on Monday.
