

## **Elections in the Post-Revolution: A Simple and Democratic Framework**

*Carmen Geha*

Reforming the electoral law is a crucial step in responding to the demands of the millions of Lebanese protestors. The priority here and now is to form a competent government which can oversee this reform and administer early elections. Elections in Lebanon are very complicated and are maintained through a complex web of clientelism. And yet at any time we have proposed reforms to the system, the political class either refused the reforms entirely or said that they were too complicated to manage. Take something as simple as the pre-printed ballot paper, which Lebanon only introduced in 2018. Libya's first and only election after a 42-year-old tyranny had pre-printed ballot papers, oh and it also included a women's quota. But one could argue that Libya's somehow better managed electoral process did not lead to a better electoral outcome. Actually some may say that Lebanon's sectarian system is good in that it maintains some sort of representation of all the major communities. I am writing here to tell a different story and to defend the fact that a democratic electoral framework is indeed a simple and doable endeavor, without which the revolution would stand to lose.

### *Business as Usual: How Elections Usually Work*

Elections are far from democratic in Lebanon. Research shows that as early as in the 1950s the Lebanese parliament was an elitist club of men who got together to renew their commitment to power-sharing and to legislate based on their partisan interests. Even after the civil war, those men granted themselves amnesty for war crimes, put on fancy suits, and become the self-proclaimed leaders of their sectarian communities. Coupled with a clientelistic system so complex, that it has its own system of loyalties corresponding to benefits and favors. If you can prove you voted for them, you get a certain benefit. If you can prove you recruited others to vote or that you got beaten up for them, you get another benefit. The state, so weakened by corruption, is not the provider of basic health, education, and security. Elections are simply one juncture that has been engineered to produce the same leadership. A ton has been written about this including by yours truly but a point to be made here is that the 2009 elections reportedly had the highest cost per vote. Actual cash bribes are very common but most voters have already made their choice before they cast a ballot. Their vote has been shaped by a media that is sectarian and financed by their political parties. Their vote has also been shaped by the way elections run in Lebanon. Here's how.

Gerrymandering districts to ensure a majority of a each sect is in one district making it easier for parties to run solely on a sectarian basis. This also means that districts and representatives are not proportional to size and population. In one district historically a member of parliament could win with 15,000 votes (since it was historically a majoritarian system) but can lose in another district with 150,000 votes). Gerrymandering is designed around and near health centers and schools funded by sectarian groups backing up sectarian political parties. Easy.

The other way votes are shaped pre-elections is the complete disregard of issue-based politics and the total focus on sectarian rhetoric. Every election is existential in the sense that it is “us or war” again. There are no incentives for cross-communal platforms and certainly no regulation of hate-speech and the incitement of violence. Before every election, some blood is shed in one way or another. Before the Doha 2008 agreement and the election law agreed upon them for the 2009 elections, on May 7 Hezbollah led an insurgency killing tens of people before politicians agreed to sit together and share power, again. Before the 2018 elections, parliament simply extended their own mandate because of a lack of consensus on an election law, and because folks were busy in Syria or divided around the Syrian conflict next door.

### *Elections after the Revolution: Translating Demands into Reforms*

But political and geo-political realities are not the only obstacles to democratic elections. Lebanon also lacks an independent commission for administering the elections. The judiciary is entirely politicized and appointed by the political class. The uprisings that began on October 17 were unique and different than any other political mobilization or protest movements in Lebanon’s modern history. Firstly, these truly were leaderless protests largely decentralized. Secondly, they were openly political in that they blamed socio-economic failure to the performance of public officials. Thirdly, they were gendered both in terms of their participants, with women playing major roles, and in terms of their demands, with gender equality in citizenship and representation at the frontline. The uprising was also unique in the narrative and in its explicit anti-system discourse. People were cognizant and clear that the post-Taif politicians, including the 2005 politicians, and “all of them, means all of them” were to blame for their situation. This was not a movement about the price of bread per se, but about who has raised the price of bread. In that sense the discourse remained held together by these main demands: accountability, representation, and competence. People wanted to hold politicians accountable whether by asking them to step down or by asking them to give back stolen funds. People said that this class no longer represents them as youth or their aspirations as women. And people demanded competence to be the criteria for a new government. A new democratic electoral law is the only guarantee for these three demands. Citizens have spoken up and it is now the time to begin to consolidate an electoral reform agenda for the transition phase. The call for early elections should be coupled with a very clear agenda for electoral reform; without which we risk going back to business as usual. Here’s how we can translate accountability, representation, and competence into reform.

### *Reconciliation and redistricting*

The revolution allowed men and women who had been raised to fear and hate one another to reconcile around shared suffering and shared demands. The only way to produce a new parliament that can have an agenda for a nation is to redistrict; away from the Qada (small district) to larger districts with Lebanon as one district being the optimal option. This encourage lists to be formed to address national concerns as well as candidates to collaborate from across the nation.

### *Campaign finance and independence of the judiciary*

People want to hold their politicians accountable but they cannot as long as their livelihoods are connected to their pockets. The only way to control election campaign finance is through the independence of the judiciary. Elections have always been monitored by local and international observers, recording high rates of voter pressuring and bribes, but never has the judiciary moved to investigate these documented cases. There is no use for an election if politicians can pay off voters and incite hate speech.

### *Representation through a women's quota*

Ofcourse the question of representation after the revolution goes beyond gender. People, and young people, want their issues and aspirations to be represented by a competent parliament. But women, who shone during the revolution and who consist more than 50% of the population, are merely represented by 5% in the parliament (a rise from 3%). This parliament lacks legitimacy as it cannot and is not equipped to represent all its citizens. Women stand to win the most from eradicating sectarianism, and stand to lose the most if they are not included in the post-revolution phase. The debate has been settled, a temporary women's quota is the only way to give women a seat on the table.

### *A Word of Caution*

The empowering thing in this revolution is that it has shown that we have learned so much from the past. We keep escaping traps of co-optation and counter-revolutionary strategies by the political system. But we must be aware of the NGO-ization trend of topics like electoral reform and of state-technical-ization of the reform. This is not an issue that few NGOs can pick up and certainly not a question of technical assistance to the Lebanese government. We have had technical assistance with foreign expertise for more than a decade already! The amazing work of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections has highlighted a million times the how and what of reform is needed. But this time it is different. This time it needs to be a public citizen-led consultative approach pushing towards priority reforms that translate the revolution into tangible electoral processes and practices. We took the streets to demand accountability, there can be no accountability without a democratic election. And for the record, democratic, fair and free elections are simpler and easier to manage than the mess of a system this country has maintained for so long. The revolution has been leaderless, but if we want to usher in new national leadership, we all need to be engaged in reforming the electoral framework. Between our brilliant students and our seasoned activists, this should not be too difficult to envision.

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