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## **The Lebanese Parliamentary Elections:**

A Surprise, But No Real Change

By **Doreen Khoury**

*Lebanon's recent parliamentary elections, which resulted in a surprise victory for the pro-Western March 14 coalition after months of prediction that the Opposition would win, contradicted many of the myths and narratives that had surrounded the election since the signing of the Doha Accord in May 2008. Myths that were disproved were linked to each camp's strengths and weaknesses as well as an overestimation of the election's significance in terms of Lebanon's future.*

*Lebanon's elections were 'fateful' in that the March 14 win spared the country the international and regional isolation that would have most likely followed an Opposition victory. However the elections largely failed in terms of representing a step forward in democratic practices, because the new electoral law aggravated sectarianism, and did not effect a change in Lebanon's electoral culture. The election highlighted once again the need for extensive reform to the electoral system and the Lebanese political system as whole*



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## **Introduction**

*“The election will be remembered because of the erroneous predictions surrounding it.”<sup>1</sup>*

The 2009 Lebanese parliamentary elections which took place on June 7<sup>th</sup> 2009 were paradoxically the most heatedly contested yet anti-climactic elections in Lebanon’s recent history.<sup>2</sup> In the months and weeks prior to the election, most analysts, both local and foreign, pollsters and ordinary citizens predicted a win by the Opposition (an alliance mainly between Hezbollah and Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement). Western and Arab countries close to the pro-Western March 14 camp resigned themselves to a victory by the Opposition and dropped their hard-line rhetoric against Hezbollah in particular, declaring their willingness to work with any post-election government regardless of the result.

Yet when vote-counting began and results from individual polling stations began to emerge, the earlier predictions of March 14’s impending loss began to look increasingly shaky. In the early hours of June 8<sup>th</sup>, it became clear that March 14, against most expectations, had clung on to its parliamentary majority. This surprising victory forced local observers to re-evaluate their initial analyses.

For those who followed the elections on television, one of the most definitive moments occurred during a special elections program on the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), following the close of the polls. Talk master Marcel Ghanem hosted pollster and election specialist Kamal Feghali (who had confidently predicted an Opposition win) and pollster Rabih Habr (Statistics Lebanon) who presented the results of an exit poll conducted in Beirut’s Christian Achrafieh district predicting an

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Young, “Lebanon’s elections: an early inquest.” *Daily Star Newspaper* June 9<sup>th</sup> 2009, [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=10&category\\_id=5&article\\_id=102811](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&category_id=5&article_id=102811)

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed background on the 2009 elections please see: [http://www.boell-meo.org/download\\_en/Lebanon\\_Upcoming\\_Parliamentary\\_Elections.pdf](http://www.boell-meo.org/download_en/Lebanon_Upcoming_Parliamentary_Elections.pdf)

Opposition win (the March 14 camp eventually swept the entire district). Yet as the evening wore on, and the results began to show clear shift towards March 14, Feghali in particular began to look increasingly uncomfortable, reflecting on television what many analysts (especially those close to the Opposition) were feeling.

The March 14 win (71 seats to the Opposition’s 57 seats) was welcomed with a cautious sigh of relief in many Western and Arab capitals. Although the pro-Western group did not improve on its 2005 result, its victory was symbolic in that it won the elections with a law that was widely believed to favor the Opposition. However the Opposition’s defeat is by no means crushing, with Hezbollah and Amal maintaining dominance over the Shiite community. Their main Christian ally and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Michel Aoun, also increased his parliamentary bloc with key wins in a couple of districts<sup>3</sup>, but failed to win enough seats to deliver an overall majority to the Opposition.

## **The Election Result: Dispelling The Myths**

Now that election fever has died down, and Lebanon begins yet another chapter in its often volatile history, it can be safely said that the predictions of an Opposition win were based on certain suppositions following the Doha Accord which were adopted by many local and international observers without proper assessment as to their validity.

Firstly, the election result showed that the March 14 alliance is stronger and more cohesive than previously thought and that its foundations, at least for the time being, are secure. Secondly, the Opposition’s inherent weaknesses and contradictions were overlooked by many observers, and led to an overestimation of its ability to win a parliamentary majority. Thirdly, the elections disproved to a large extent the oft-repeated assumption that the Christian vote would decide the outcome of the elections. By contrast, it was largely Sunni and Shiite voters who

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<sup>3</sup> Notably Baabda and Jezzine.

eventually decided the result in key districts<sup>4</sup>.

And finally, the depiction of the election as 'fateful' was exaggerated to a certain extent, because regardless of the outcome, the Lebanese parliament is largely inconsequential when it comes to major national decisions, which by virtue of Lebanon's sectarian political system, are based on consensus amongst the key sectarian leaders (for example, the Doha Accord was negotiated in a foreign country by Lebanon's leaders with extensive interference from regional actors and not in parliament amongst elected representatives).

Very soon after the Opposition's surprise election loss, newspapers, party websites, blogs, and facebook groups were awash with heated analysis and discussion on why the Opposition did not perform as well as its supporters expected. In this regard, Opposition party activists on one hand were quick to blame March 14 campaign tactics for their own loss, while political analysts close to the Opposition called on it to engage in a serious self-evaluation.

Party activists and supporters, especially those of the FPM for whom the election loss was more painful than for Hezbollah<sup>5</sup>, justified their defeat by accusing March 14 and other forces of election violations. The Opposition claimed that the March 14 camp engaged in immense vote-buying which was widely reported but went largely undetected by local and internal observers. The March 14 camp allegedly bribed many voters with money and services, as well as using mayors and local officials to pressure voters. Polling station officers operating in battleground districts were also accused of working for March 14 interests, by slowing down the voting process in areas where voters were expected to vote for the Opposition. For example, Opposition MP Hussein Yaacoub who lost his seat in the Zahle district accused polling station officers of slowing down voting procedures in Shiite polling stations and speeding them up in Sunni polling stations. The Opposition

also charged that Christian religious leaders and President Michel Sleiman worked against them in the elections. The Maronite Patriarch was accused of violating the electoral law during the 'electoral silence period' the day before the elections, by making a statement warning of the repercussions on Lebanon if the Opposition should win. President Michel Sleiman was accused of supporting all lists running against the FPM in Mount Lebanon and using state agencies to do so. The Opposition also alleged that some police officers put pressure on voters on Election Day.

One of the more serious allegations by the Opposition was of a deliberate transfer of a large number of Sunni voters from other regions to the Zahle district, where the Opposition lost all of its seats, thus explaining the massive Sunni turnout on Election Day. Although not completely farfetched, it is difficult, first to determine without proper investigation the scale and legality of the vote transfer (i.e. how many votes were transferred and whether the procedure went through the proper legal channels), and second, to what extent it might have swung the vote in March 14's favor. As noted below, there are other more palpable reasons why Sunnis voted so overwhelmingly for March 14.

However, key newspaper columnists, by no means hostile to the Opposition (in particular *Al-Akhbar's* Khaled Saghieh and Ghassan Saoud, and *Al-Safir's* Sleiman Takieddine) derided the Opposition for resorting to accusations and recriminations to justify their elections loss, and their resistance to calm self-evaluation. Moreover, the Opposition was criticized for acting as if the vote-buying, the Maronite patriarch, and the President were not constant variables in every Lebanese election.

### **Why Did The Opposition Lose?**

The Opposition's key message following the election was that although the March 14 camp won the parliamentary majority, the Opposition represented the real popular majority (nation-wide the Opposition won 800,000 votes to March 14's

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<sup>4</sup> Such as Baabda and Zahle.

<sup>5</sup> While Hezbollah retained all their districts, the FPM gained 2 districts but lost 4.

700,000 votes). However, not only is this uneven result one of the ramifications of the majoritarian electoral system. The current electoral law ironically was also a key demand of the Opposition during the Doha discussions, which the March 14 camp agreed to unwillingly.<sup>6</sup>

While the Opposition's claims of March 14 electoral misconduct cannot be dismissed out of hand, it is clear that they do not alone explain the Opposition's failure to perform better at the ballots and that other factors must also be taken into consideration. We should also note that the Opposition also most likely violated the electoral law, and we must wait for the full report of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections, the main local elections monitoring group, before determining the scale of violations.

First of all, in terms of message and rhetoric, and despite internal disputes over the selection of candidates in most districts, the March 14 coalition was ultimately more coherent and united. Although each party used its own billboards, they did unite under the March 14 brand and common principles and slogans which appeared in all districts. Moreover, coordination between the different components of the March 14 coalition proved to be much better than that of the Opposition. In general, March 14 as an entity appears more concrete, at least in the medium-term, than the Opposition. Whereas March 14 maintained against all odds a united front, the Opposition failed to establish a common political front with one political program.

There was no common leadership and no common message. They did not act as a cohesive "national Opposition" but as contiguous blocs united only in their quest for gaining power.

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<sup>6</sup> Khaled Saghie, "Avoiding self-evaluation." *Al-Akhbar Newspaper* June 10<sup>th</sup> 2009. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/140448>. We should note here that the reason that the Opposition won more votes more than March 14 and yet still lost the election is essentially because Hezbollah and Amal beat their opponents by winning tens of thousands of votes more than they needed in their districts. By comparison, March 14 won its districts by much smaller margin.

Interests often appeared contradictory.<sup>7</sup> For example, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah made a series of aggressive polarizing speeches two weeks before the elections which most likely harmed the FPM's interests in some districts. In retrospect, the Opposition appeared more as an alliance of convenience, with each party adopting separate objectives and agendas. The Opposition was reduced to Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), and never organized an event uniting all of its components, almost as if Opposition members outside the two main groups were not serious allies.

The Opposition's political messages also partly worked against them. Messages such as the "blocking third"<sup>8</sup>, the "Third Republic"<sup>9</sup>, expanding the president's prerogatives<sup>10</sup>, or "freeing" one sect from control by another sect, were sectarian in intent and seemed to imply the elimination of other political groups.<sup>11</sup> The FPM increased the sectarian tone by stressing the "liberation" of Achrafieh and other Christian areas from other sects, as if non-Christian votes do not count.

The FPM's failure to produce a better result at the polls has also been linked to its alliance with Hezbollah. The FPM discovered that many Christian voters do not necessarily support the FPM's defense of Hezbollah over incidents such as Hezbollah's killing of army officer Sami Hanna in South Lebanon in 2008.<sup>12</sup> The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the FPM and Hezbollah signed in February 2006 was

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<sup>7</sup> Sleiman Takieddine, "Why did the Opposition lose?" *As-Safir Newspaper* June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=1255&ChannelId=28944&ArticleId=985&Author=سليمان%20تقي%20الدين>

<sup>8</sup> Veto power in the cabinet – i.e. the Opposition gets one third of the seats in cabinet and is able to block legislation.

<sup>9</sup> The title of the FPM's election manifesto which was interpreted by many as call to change the Constitution.

<sup>10</sup> The Maronite President's powers were reduced in the 1989 Taif Accord

<sup>11</sup> Sleiman Takieddine, "Why did the Opposition lose?" *As-Safir Newspaper* June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=1255&ChannelId=28944&ArticleId=985&Author=سليمان%20تقي%20الدين>

<sup>12</sup> On August 28 2008 Army Lieutenant Samer Hanna was on a mission in an Army helicopter in the Sujid Hills region in South Lebanon when Hezbollah fighters opened fire on the helicopter, killing Hanna. Hezbollah claimed that they mistaked it for an Israeli helicopter.

aggressively attacked by March 14 as an opening to 'Vilayat Al-Faqih' (the system of Islamic rule in Iran) in Lebanon, thus scaring many Christians. The FPM did not do enough to defend the alliance with Hezbollah to voters, and March 14 was able to aggressively market 'Vilayat Al-Faqih' as a threat to Lebanon's liberal Western outlook.<sup>13</sup>

Other events also propelled voters towards the March 14 camp, such as Hassan Nasrallah's depiction of the May 7<sup>th</sup> 2008 events<sup>14</sup> as a "glorious day" for the resistance weeks prior to the elections; Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's comments on the Lebanese elections and his declared support of the Opposition; comments by Na'im Qassem Hezbollah's deputy leader on the possibility of an international blockade similar to the Gaza siege imposed on Lebanon; and the Opposition's celebration of the release of the four army generals suspected of taking part in Rafik Hariri's assassination.<sup>15</sup> In retrospect, the events of May 7<sup>th</sup> 2008 had a deep impact on people's consciences, and were reflected in ballot boxes as an opportunity for revenge. A large segment of Lebanese society vented their frustration, particularly but not exclusively in the Sunni community.

Moreover, a reported 120,000 voters came from abroad to vote, most of them apparently voting for the March 14 coalition. Voting mechanism for Lebanese voting abroad are not in place yet, so expatriates have to travel to Lebanon to vote in elections. It should be noted that both camps lobbied overseas voters, and paid for their plane tickets; however March 14 was perhaps able to fly in more voters in its favor. Despite the new

<sup>13</sup> Claire Shikr, "Aoun lost Sunni support and diminished Christian support, and maintained his superiority." *As-Safir Newspaper*, June 10<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=1256&ChannelId=28971&ArticleId=1065&Author=كلير%20شكر>

<sup>14</sup> Hezbollah and Amal forces triggered by a government decision to dismantle Hezbollah's communication network temporarily took over West Beirut (predominantly Sunni). The stand-off was eventually resolved by the Doha Accord in a deal brokered by the Emir of Qatar and the Arab League Secretary General.

<sup>15</sup> Ghassan Saoud, "The Aounists and defeat: the clock ticks towards accountability... before change." June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/140448>

campaign finance regulations, campaign machines were able to exploit several loopholes in the law enabling them to finance the transport of voters from abroad. However, it does remain a form of vote-buying which can only be eliminated if Lebanon implements mechanisms to allow expatriates to vote in embassies and consulates.

The possibility of a reduction in international financial aid to Lebanon, particularly from the United States, in the event of an Opposition win also likely worried many voters. During a visit to Lebanon on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009, U.S. Vice-President Joseph Biden stated that Washington would evaluate its future assistance to Lebanon based on the policies of the post-election government. In a direct attack on Hezbollah he declared his country's support for "one army, one armed group, one police power, and one capability to control your own country."<sup>16</sup> Although a complete freeze on financial assistance was highly unlikely, Biden's comments gave rise to fears of international isolation if the Opposition won. As if in confirmation, the U.S. Senate approved \$69 million in security aid to Lebanon a few days following the March 14 election victory.<sup>17</sup>

Although a lot of post-election analysis has centered on the Opposition, the March 14 coalition's campaign and message should also be closely scrutinized.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the fact that the March 14 parties developed an election manifesto, it did not rely on

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Kimbrell, "Biden links US support for Lebanon to outcome of vote." *Daily Star Newspaper* May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009. [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=1&category\\_id=2&article\\_id=102277](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&category_id=2&article_id=102277)

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Kimbrell, "U.S. spending bill earmarks \$69 million for Lebanon." *Daily Star Newspaper* June 20<sup>th</sup> 2009. [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=1&category\\_id=1&article\\_id=103278](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&category_id=1&article_id=103278)

<sup>18</sup> The only serious attempt at self-evaluation in the March 14 camp was by former MP Nassib Lahoud, leader of the Democratic Renewal Movement, who chose to withdraw from the election race. He notes that the March 14 electoral campaign in several districts failed because narrow partisan interests and concern with individual gain overruled group interest. Campaigns were empty of policies and principles, and thus excluded a wide section of Lebanese voters whose support was important in hotly contested districts. For the complete statement please see: [www.tajaddod.org/index.php?id=5&aid=1016&p=](http://www.tajaddod.org/index.php?id=5&aid=1016&p=)

it in most districts, and resorted to feudal campaign tactics. For example, the Future Movement's popularity especially in the Sunni community remains very dependent on its clientelist network propped up by charitable and development aid, and sectarian rhetoric aimed at Sunnis.

While the Opposition tactically lost the election, March 14, in order to win the election, had to resort to vote-buying, fear-mongering, and aggressive sectarian rhetoric in many districts. Voters were scared into believing that an Opposition win equaled 'Vilayat Al-Faqih' even though this claim was unfounded and succeeded in intensifying sectarian tension between Sunnis and Shiites. Future Movement leader Saad Hariri also employed forceful rhetoric against the Opposition, for example indirectly accusing them of killing his slain father former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri during an election rally in Akkar. There is a serious contradiction between March 14's repeated and aggressive attacks on Hezbollah and its weapons, and Saad Hariri's conciliatory statements immediately after the elections. A visual reflection of this change in rhetoric is the Future Movement's post-election billboards proclaiming "We are all under the Lebanese sky", and displaying the colours of both March 14 and the Opposition. Moreover, Hariri and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah held a four-hour meeting following the elections, something almost unimaginable prior to them.

### **Evaluating The Doha Electoral Law** **How did the new reforms measure up?**

The 2009 elections were also an important testing ground for the reforms of the new electoral law, in particular the Supervisory Committee on Electoral Campaigns (SCEC)<sup>19</sup> tasked with monitoring campaign finance and media advertising, and holding elections in one day.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of detecting and stopping violations,

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<sup>19</sup> In the new law, SCEC is tied to the Ministry of Interior and is not an independent body.

<sup>20</sup> Elections in the past were held over 4 consecutive Sundays.

SCEC was in many ways a disappointment largely because it lacked the muscle to penalize violations itself, and had to rely on other institutions such as the General Prosecutor's Office and the Court of Publications. Media violations were rampant and several TV stations especially those owned by political parties, broadcast biased and partisan coverage during the election campaign period in clear violation of the new regulations. SCEC was unable or unwilling to penalize these violations, despite the fact that the mechanisms to do so are outlined in the law. Moreover, since its reporting was secret, citizens had to rely on the pre-election reports of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE)<sup>21</sup> to gauge the extent of the campaign spending and media violations. The only comprehensive post-election document on the scale of violations available to the public will be LADE's election report, due out at the end of July 2009.

Although it is unrealistic to expect SCEC or the Ministry of Interior to effect a complete change in Lebanese electoral culture and successfully curb well-honed vote-buying and voter intimidation techniques, SCEC's impotence sharply highlights the need for an independent electoral commission with the authority and capability, not only to organize elections, but to detect and penalize violations.

Holding elections in one day, although a logistical nightmare for the Ministry of Interior<sup>22</sup>, was the most successful reform because it relieved citizens of the month-long 'election circus' of past elections which tended to fuel sectarian and factional tension. This was one of the main successes of Minister of Interior Ziyad Baroud, who also injected the Ministry with increased transparency in its dealing with the public.

### **Increased sectarianism and polarization**

The electoral system agreed upon in the Doha

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<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.observe.ladeleb.org/>

<sup>22</sup> Initially, the Ministry did not have the sufficient security or polling station personnel to organize elections in one day.

Accord is based on the 1960 electoral law which stipulates that the *caza* (small administrative district) is the electoral district. Each *caza* has several seats which can range from just 2 seats and as much as 10 seats. The electoral system is majoritarian, i.e. the list or alliance with the highest percentage of votes wins the entire district.

Although this system is better than the old one in terms of representation, we should add that as long as the Lebanese electoral system remains majoritarian – with a winner takes all ethic – the implications for the political system as a whole are negative. First of all, it is difficult for independent groups to gain seats in parliament and break the power of established sectarian parties. Secondly, the majoritarian system encourages political horse-trading as the numerous sectarian leaders negotiate aggressively to get as many seats as possible. Thus the overall consequences of the 2009 elections were increased sectarianism and polarization, and weakened national unity. Lebanese politics is not just sectarian and factional; it is much “localized” in the sense that political power is based on exclusively controlling or ‘owning’ a district. In other words, sectarian leaders, political parties and political families feel a sense of entitlement towards district or several districts in which they have often historic clientelist networks. Prominent examples are Sleiman Frangieh in the Zghorta District, Hezbollah in many South Lebanon districts and the Future Movement in Akkar.

By concentrating electoral battles in single districts, and applying the majoritarian system, the 1960 *caza*-based law, according to veteran journalist and *Al-Safir* newspaper owner Talal Salman, succeeded in setting up buffer zones for the various sects. The elections in many districts were in reality calm referendums, reaffirming a leader or a party's control over the district. At the end of the day, sectarianism triumphed as the 1960 law divided citizens into tribes and clans governed by fear of each other.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Talal Salman, “The only loser in the election is the 1960 law.” *As-Safir Newspaper* June 10<sup>th</sup> 2009. <http://www.assafir.com/article.aspx?EditionId=1256&ChannelId=28969&ArticleId=1117>

Worryingly, a barely-concealed ‘militia’ mentality pervades both sides of the political divide, manifested in occasional armed skirmishes between, for example, the Future Movement and Amal Movement members. Moreover, celebratory gunfire has now become a staple following almost every speech by a sectarian leader or the appointment of a leader to public office, with young men firing rounds into the air following the re-election of Nabih Berri (Amal Movement leader) as Speaker of Parliament or a speech by Saad Hariri. Celebratory gunfire in Lebanon cannot be viewed merely as an innocent expression of support because it intentionally sends a message of power to the opposing faction through arms.

In short, deep sectarian voting patterns defined the elections and confessional animosities are entrenched now more than ever. Significantly, less than one percent of voters cast blank ballots, expressing their rejection of *both* political camps. This percentage was definitely higher in the past.

## Conclusion

Despite praise for Lebanon's democracy in the Western press following the elections,<sup>24</sup> and the attempt by some journalists to link the result to the new “Obama era”<sup>25</sup>, Lebanon's so-called democratic tradition remains messy and volatile and does not yet meet the aspirations of its weary and cynical citizens. Despite the fact that political parties presented election manifestos, the electoral battle was portrayed by both sides as an existential struggle and mobilized their voters massively along emotional and ideological lines.

At the end of the day, no faction really lost the election and the new parliament looks pretty much the same as the old one. Each leader remains firmly control of his sect and the prospect of new groups or parties breaking their grip is bleak,

<sup>24</sup> See Thomas Friedman, “Ballots over Bullets”, *The New York Times* June 9<sup>th</sup> 2009. [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/10/opinion/10friedman.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/10/opinion/10friedman.html?_r=1)

<sup>25</sup> See Simon Tisdal, “Lebanon feels the Obama effect.” *The Guardian*, June 8<sup>th</sup> 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jun/08/lebanon-elections-obama-effect>

unless there is meaningful and extensive reform to the electoral law, and the political system as a whole. Some of the required electoral reforms have been noted above, but probably the most crucial reform to Lebanon's election process is introducing the officially printed ballot, which will allow citizens to vote with more secrecy, and thus break the hold of aggressive campaign managers over voters.

Moreover, if the new parliament intends to address reform seriously, its most important measure will be to throw out the 1960 election law, and apply an electoral system based on proportional representation. A combination of these two reforms could in the long run weaken the sectarian stranglehold over Lebanon, and finally encourage Lebanese to implement two key stipulations of the 1989 Taef Accord: the abolition of sectarian seats in parliament and the establishment of a Senate which represent all sects. For the moment, this remains wishful thinking.