



## The Christian Vote in Lebanese Parliamentary Elections

April 7, 2009

On June 7, 2009, the Lebanese will head to the election polls to vote for Lebanon's next Parliament. The Parliament in Lebanon is a very powerful institution within the government and the group that wins the elections of 2009 will politically dominate the country for the next four years, and likely beyond. There are 128 seats in the Lebanese Parliament divided equally between Christians and Moslems. These seats are distributed over 26 different districts of unequal size, constituency, and representation. Candidates can run in any legislative district of their choosing but only for seats earmarked for their religious affiliation. They usually form lists representing national coalitions with varying political platforms. Currently, the two major coalitions are the pro-Syrian/pro-Iranian March 8 and the pro-sovereignty Cedar Revolution Movement March 14. Recently, there have been indications that, in some districts, "third" lists of independents may emerge.

In a confessional system of governance such as Lebanon's, particularly where strong confessional sentiments remain present among the voters and the people in general, it is logical to look into the mood of the different religious communities ahead of the elections in order to try to predict the results. Many agree that the vast majority of Sunni and Druze voters will cast their ballots for March 14 candidates, while the overwhelming majority of the Shi'a voters will opt for March 8 candidates. This leaves the Christian vote as the determining factor in the upcoming elections. Opinion polls among Christian voters over the last several months point to a tie between supporters of March 14 and supporters of March 8, with still an undecided cohort of voters. Some polls indicate an even division of 1/3 for pro-M14, 1/3 for pro-M8 and an undecided 1/3. Others show a 40% for M14, 40% for M8, and 20% undecided.

This report focuses on the Christian vote in these upcoming elections highlighting the key issues and challenges facing the Christian community, the role of the March 14 leadership, the government of Lebanon and the US and concludes with relevant recommendations.

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### ***The practical effect of the Christian vote***

The total number of registered voters for the upcoming Lebanese Elections is 3,144,699, out of whom 1,253,788 are Christians, or roughly 40% of the total number. The current division of election districts produces the following situation:

1. The Shi'a are majority in six districts<sup>1</sup> which translate into 28 seats for M8.
2. The Sunni and Druze are majority in eight districts<sup>2</sup> which translate into 49 seats for M14.
3. The 2<sup>nd</sup> district of Beirut will likely split its 4 seats equally between M8 and M14, following an agreement between both coalitions.
4. The Christians are majority in 11 districts<sup>3</sup> which translates into 47 seats.

Without the Christian vote, the seat count for March 8 is 30 and for March 14 is 51. Clearly, both coalitions remain short of the 65 seats needed to secure the majority in a 128 seats Chamber. This explains why the confrontation in this election will be centered in the Christian-majority districts: *Whoever wins the Christian vote will secure the control of the Parliament.*

### ***Issues of importance to the Christian voters***

The primary issues on the minds of the Christian voters are centered on the following<sup>4</sup>:

1. Economy – Rising cost of living, unemployment; 71% of respondents said they supported any candidate willing to work with others to fix the economy.
2. Security – Including external threats, originating from Syria and Israel, and domestic insecurity caused by armed Lebanese and Palestinians groups.

A January opinion poll conducted among Christians confirm that the issues of economy and security both received highest priority for concern by over 90% of respondents.

3. Corruption – So far exploited exclusively by Aoun, who himself is aligned with some of the most corrupt figures in Lebanon, the issue of government corruption strikes a cord within the Christian community.
4. Christian role and influence – There is a strong perception within the Christian community that the Christian influence in national affairs is waning, the major political powers in the country are in the hands of the non-Christians, and there is a need to strengthen the political, social, and economic role of the Christians.
5. Unity of the Christian community – The issue of Christian influence is not likely to develop without advancing the Christian reconciliation cause, which was also identified as a national priority by over 75% of Christian respondents in the same poll as above.

### ***Additional factors***

In addition to the above issues of importance, other factors of significance will affect the outcome of the Christian vote:

1. March 14 cohesion – The image of a disunited and dysfunctional M14, that the March 8 camp attempts to portray, has a detrimental effect on the support M14 candidates need, particularly among Christian voters.

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<sup>1</sup> Districts with Shi'a majority are 6: Sour, Zahrani, Nabatieh, Bint Jbeil, Marjeyoun-Hasbaya and Baalbeck-Hermel,

<sup>2</sup> Districts with Sunni-Druze majority are 8: Western Bekaa-Rashaya, Saida, Dinnieh, Trablous, Beirut-3<sup>rd</sup>, Shouf, Aley and Akkar.

<sup>3</sup> Districts with Christian majority are 11: Zahleh, Jezzine, Batroun, Koura, Bsharreh, Zghorta, Beirut-1<sup>st</sup>, Metn, Baabda, Jbeil and Kesrwan.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the most recent independent polls.

2. Aoun's decline – Polls, By-elections, students and associations elections over the past couple of years have shown obvious drop in Aoun's popularity in the Christian community. From the 70% support he received in the 2005 parliamentary elections, Aoun appears now to be left with the approval of at best 40% of potential Christian voters.
3. Undecided and independents - The even support given by the Christian voters to the M14 and M8 groups is likely to be tilted to one side or another by the undecided and independents.
4. Expatriates – In the absence of out-of-country voting (OCV) mechanisms, it is expected that a large number of expatriates - in the thousands - will make the trip to Lebanon to vote in person. The majority of these “expats” is Christians who will vote in Christian districts and are more likely to vote for “pro-sovereignty, pro-democracy” candidates.
5. Security – The general state of security in the country around the time of the elections, particularly in the Christian areas, will undoubtedly affect the disposition of many voters, specifically the undecided and expatriates, to take risks and head to polling stations.

### ***M14 Role***

To win the Christian vote, and thus the elections, M14 should actively address all of the above factors. Thus, the M14 coalition must:

1. Demonstrate the unity of message, finalize their joint lists, and launch their coordinated campaign.
2. Make the general topics of concern to the Christians top issues in the electoral campaign, namely: Economy-Security-Fighting Corruption.
3. Address Christian sensitivities as follows:
  - regarding the decision-making process within the M14 Coalition, emphasize the value given to the opinion of Christian leaders, like Geagea and Gemayel, versus the perception of a M14 totally controlled by Jumblatt and Hariri;
  - seize the opportunity to promote Christian empowerment and wrestle that issue away from Aoun who has been using it to attract Christian support; and
  - continue to demonstrate high interest in Christian reconciliation and Christian unity, a popular theme among Christian voters.
4. Attract the undecided:
  - first, by using the above messages which, if elaborated properly by M14, will undoubtedly draw support from the yet non-committed;
  - in creating alliances with the so-called “centrists” particularly in light of recent polls showing that more than 70% of respondents expressed support for a non-partisan bloc of deputies backed by President Suleiman; and
  - in showing particular attention to the local needs of certain districts in matters of development and services.
5. Rally the expatriates.

### ***GOL Role***

The Government of Lebanon has the responsibility to ensure that free and fair elections are conducted in a fully secure environment. There are a number of challenges that are expected to face the state institutions including:

1. Security Threats, emanating from:
  - absence of any legal authority over many electoral districts, specifically the ones controlled by Hezbollah in the South, in Baabda, in Beirut, and the Bekaa totaling as many as seven districts out of 26.

- use of violence, assassinations, bombings, and different forms of intimidation against voters and candidates alike.

Thus the GOL has a responsibility in developing a major security plan focusing on the elections, which would include:

- Intelligence, surveillance and rapid intervention against sources of security threat.
  - Deployment of troops on major roads and critical infrastructures, including the airport and its vicinity; and
  - Stationing of additional security forces in sensitive districts, and particularly the Christian ones.
2. Fraud and other ways of tampering with voters' lists, with ballot casting and with ballot counting, all of which happened in previous elections. It is to be recognized that the GOL, and particularly the Ministry of Interior (MOI), has taken unprecedented steps to ensure the fairness and transparency of the upcoming elections. Still, the risks of cheating remain and should be eliminated or at least reduced by having appropriate human and technical monitoring systems in place to detect any illegality.
  3. Expatriate Vote: Since the GOL gave up on its promise to allow the OCV on this election, it is natural to expect the Lebanese authorities to assist the expatriates in acquiring the Lebanese IDs needed to vote, and in traveling to their motherland around election time.

### ***US Role***

While recognizing the need for the US not to appear as interfering in Lebanon's internal affairs, one cannot ignore the primal importance of these elections to our policy and interests in Lebanon and the region. Taking into consideration the above points, the US should:

1. Issue statements highlighting the commitment to a sovereign and democratic Lebanon, the support to the forces of moderation, the effect that the elections could have on US-Lebanese relations, and the importance of a democratic Lebanon to the region.
  2. Stress to the Lebanese officials, particularly the President, Prime Minister, Members of the Cabinet, Commanders of Armed and Security Forces, the need to implement broad and drastic security measures to ensure the safest environment possible for the elections in Lebanon and offer US technical advice where needed.
  3. Assist the Government of Lebanon, as well as Lebanese and non-Lebanese NGOs in ensuring the lawful progression of the upcoming parliamentary elections by offering technical aid in monitoring, reporting, and resolving any possible obstacle to the smooth and peaceful running of the elections.
  4. Send clear messages to the Syrian Regime insisting on non-interference in Lebanese elections.
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