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Lebanon's Parliamentary Elections:

Anticipating Opportunities and Challenges

A REPORT BY:
The U.S. Institute of Peace

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is the first of two papers addressing Lebanon's parliamentary elections. It is based on research conducted in Lebanon as part of a pre-election observation trip sponsored by the National Democratic Institute as well as the author's ongoing work as director of the Institute's Lebanon Working Group. Topics discussed include power-sharing in Lebanon; opportunities for reform; electoral challenges; and stakes in the Lebanese parliamentary elections.

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INTRODUCTION

The June 7th parliamentary elections mark another important step in Lebanon's post-civil war transition. The Cedar Revolution opened a new chapter in Lebanese history, inaugurating the end of outright Syrian hegemony. The mass protest movement mobilized following the February 14, 2005, assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri forced the Syrian military to withdraw in April 2005 after thirty years of occupation. Syria's withdrawal ushered in a new era in Lebanese politics, rife with opportunity, yet fraught with peril. For the first time since the civil war ended in 1990, the Lebanese were afforded the chance to govern themselves free from the yoke of an occupying power. At the same time, however, they were also compelled to abide by the confessional power-sharing arrangement set forth by the 1989 Ta'if Agreement without the benefit of an external enforcer and arbiter.

While no longer under Syrian control, Lebanon's political system is fragile and remains threatened by sectarian tensions as well as external interference. Indeed, significant violence and instability have marred the past four years, including Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel, a shadowy assassination campaign targeting Syrian critics, and an eighteen-month political impasse that erupted last May in the most serious civil violence since the end of the civil war. The May 2008 Doha Agreement—which helped pull Lebanon back from the brink—led to the election of President Michel Suleiman and the formation of a unity government comprised of both the majority March 14th coalition and the opposition March 8th bloc. The Hezbollah-led March 8th opposition insisted on holding eleven seats in the cabinet, known as a "blocking veto." The accord also stipulated that Lebanon pass a new electoral law in advance of the 2009 elections.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Neither of the two key competing political alliances—the governing March 14th coalition and the opposition March 8th bloc—will decisively win the June 7th parliamentary elections.** Rather, the victor is likely to win only by a slim majority, ideally leading to the formation of a consensus government representing both blocs. The Christian community will play a key role as "swing voters," essentially determining the election's

outcome. The vote itself is unlikely to be marred by major violence, although both inter- and intra-sectarian skirmishes could occur in certain hot spots.

- **The election provides an important opportunity to place Lebanon on a positive trajectory toward greater reform and reconciliation.** Glimmers of a new, pro-reform political culture have started to emerge. The September 2008 electoral law governing the election contains small but important measures that could lay the groundwork for more significant reform in the future. At the same time, key issues—the lack of preprinted ballots, potential difficulties adjudicating electoral disputes, and sparse political competition—underscore critical flaws in the electoral process.
- **The stakes are high, but the election is *not* an existential battle for Lebanon's identity.** Ideology and external patrons with broader agendas will certainly play a role in the vote. However, the election's likely muted outcome militates against tectonic change in Lebanon. While concerns about a Hezbollah victory are understandable, the organization will hold *fewer* parliamentary seats than its current fourteen seats (having opted to run in fewer districts), even if its March 8th alliance wins a majority. Moreover, the likelihood of a pos-election consensus government suggests an outcome similar to the current government in which neither side will be able to impose a highly partisan agenda.

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Lebanon's Parliamentary Elections: Anticipating Opportunities and Challenges

Power-Sharing in Lebanon

Lebanon has long been governed by a power-sharing arrangement based on the confessional breakdown of its eighteen officially recognized sects.[1] Its elections must be understood within the unique context of this confessional system which allocates parliamentary seats by sect using a 50:50 Muslim-Christian ratio. The parliament has 128 seats—64 seats for Christians and 64 seats for Muslims, with specific sects assigned a fixed number of seats. Within the Christian and Muslim allotments, seats are further divided by specific sect.

Parliamentary elections are conducted using a simple majority system with multiple member constituencies, rather than a proportional system that would allow for greater representation across political parties. Each district is assigned a certain number of seats by sect, depending on the size and composition of its population. For example, the Akkar district in northern Lebanon has seven seats: three Sunni, two Greek Orthodox, one Maronite, and one Alawite. Citizens vote across confessions, i.e., they do not only vote for candidates from their sect. In this district, voters select up to seven candidates, and the selections are made according to confessional district, that is, they can vote for not more than three Sunni candidates, two Greek Orthodox candidates, one Maronite candidate, and one Alawite candidate. Candidates are elected based on a simple majority, according to the confessional distribution of seats. In this example, the three top Sunni vote getters would win the Sunni seats; the top two Greek Orthodox candidates would win those

[1] The 1943 National Pact, an unwritten gentleman's agreement, laid the foundation for the current system. The Pact stipulated a grand bargain among Lebanon's key confessions, instituting communal guarantees, a compromise formula on Lebanon's identity, and a power-sharing formula governing the proportional distribution of power in parliament, the executive branch, and civil service based on sect. Among other measures, the Pact established that the president should always be Maronite; the prime minister, Sunni; and the Speaker of the Parliament, Shia.

confessional seats. The Maronite candidate with the most votes would win the Maronite seat, and the leading Alawite candidate would win the Alawite seat.

This peculiar political and voting system relies on long-standing practices designed to manage competition among the country's sects. In practice, political parties and sectarian leaders negotiate the candidate lists within parties, within coalitions, and even among parties well before the election, meaning that the election results are largely predetermined in all but a handful of seats where competition is especially fierce. In essence, Lebanon has adopted a slate system of politics where power brokers present pre-agreed lists to voters for concurrence. There are few surprises in a system like this, and voters are expected to act according to the dictates of their clan, party, and religious leaders.

The system is lubricated by numerous practices—gerrymandering, vote auctioning, political horse-trading, and soft and hard intimidation—that effectively disenfranchise individual voters. Feudal leaders take the lead in bargaining and negotiating candidate slates well ahead of actual voting. Citizens are mobilized by family or clan to vote along sectarian lines, with clan leaders, called "keys," charged with delivering the votes. Voters are impelled to vote as directed in exchange for the patronage of their confessional leaders. Constituents stand as "chips" in a vast bargaining game among Lebanon's traditional power brokers, with individual voters' interests playing little if any role in the outcome.

While the number of parliamentary seats per sect is always fixed, the electoral law determines how districts are drawn, with specific numbers of seats per sect depending on the district's boundaries. The 2005 elections were administered according to the 2000 electoral law, passed during the apex of Syrian power in Lebanon. This law reflected extensive Syrian gerrymandering of districts to ensure a quiescent parliament. Based on large, heterogeneous districts, the law resulted in significant cross-communal voting, forcing Christian deputies to rely heavily on Muslim votes.

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Soon after the 2005 elections, the Lebanese government sought to reform the deeply flawed 2000 electoral law, establishing the National Commission for a New Electoral Law, headed by Fuad Butros. Known as the Butros Commission, its work provided the foundations for the new 2008 electoral law. Electoral districting in the new law is based on the 1960 electoral law, which featured smaller voting districts (a total of twenty-six electoral districts) that may ensure greater confessional homogeneity (i.e., Christians voting for Christians) but will also deepen sectarianism.

Negotiated as part of the May 2008 Doha Agreement, the new electoral law includes a basket of reforms introduced by the Butros Commission, such as campaign finance and media regulations, as well as the establishment the Supervisory Commission on the Election Campaign (SCEC). However, other reforms, such as the creation of a preprinted ballot, considered essential for moving Lebanon away from its corrupt, feudal system of confessional patronage politics, were not included.

The 2009 Vote: No Landslide Victories, Few Surprises

The June 7th elections pit the governing March 14th coalition—named for the massive March 14, 2005, street protest that prompted the Syrian military withdrawal—against the opposition March 8th bloc (fittingly named for its demonstration day). The March 14th coalition is comprised of the Sunni-dominated Future Movement led by Saad Hariri (son of the slain prime minister), various Maronite Christian factions (such as the Lebanese Forces and the Kata'eb party), and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist party. The pro-Western March 14th coalition has built strong ties with both the United States and Europe as well as moderate Sunni Arab governments, notably Saudi Arabia. Led by Hezbollah, the March 8th bloc also includes Amal, Lebanon's other main Shia group, as well as Maronite leader General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). Aoun's FPM is among the most powerful Christian factions. The March 8th bloc has strong ties to Iran and Syria by virtue of Hezbollah's leading role in the alliance.

As noted, Lebanon's idiosyncratic electoral system makes for largely predictable results, with many of the districts decided weeks before Election Day. In many ways, the

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pre-election period is decidedly more important with regard to the outcome than the actual voting day. For the most part, parliamentary elections simply validate the horse-trading and politicking that occurs well in advance. The 2009 parliamentary vote is no exception. More than three-quarters of the races have already been determined in the backroom bargaining that typifies Lebanese elections.

Pre-election predictions can thus be made with a fair degree of confidence. In terms of the June 7th elections, neither side will win decisively. Instead, the "winner" will only have a slight margin of victory (perhaps only a few seats) over the "loser." The key unknown is which side—March 14th or March 8th—will have the slim majority. Alternatively, neither alliance could win: a centrist bloc of independent candidates could score a number of seats and thus comprise a third force in the parliament. Regardless of the scenario, neither the March 14th nor the March 8th bloc will attain commanding control of the parliament, that is, the two-thirds majority required to pass constitutional amendments.

Christian "Swing Voters"

While most parliamentary seats have essentially been decided, an estimated twenty to twenty-five seats (about 15 to 20 percent of the total parliamentary seats) remain "up for grabs." Key battleground districts are predominantly Christian and include Beirut 1 (East Beirut/Achrafieh), the Metn, Zahle, Batroun, and Koura. The winners in these critical districts will determine the election's final results. As such, the fractious Christian community (approximately one-third of the electorate) will serve as important swing votes, bestowing their community with disproportionate electoral influence. The Christian community's inability to coalesce around either the March 14th or the March 8th bloc virtually ensures that the electoral results will remain a surprise until Election Day when eleventh-hour compromises and deal-making will confer a winner.

Electoral divisions among Christian parties reflect long-standing rifts within a community whose allegiances are split among numerous feudal leaders. Moreover, ideological differences over the community's evolving role in Lebanese politics, such as

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whether to ally with the increasingly powerful Shia community, further divide the Christians. General Aoun—whose populist platform promises protection for the Christian community and rails against corruption—has been considered the Christians' strongest leader. His ability to attract supporters will be a critical factor in determining how these swing districts vote. Aoun's party performed well in the 2005 parliamentary elections, but some question whether his ongoing alliance with Hezbollah will turn off a significant segment of the Christian electorate.[2]

Striking differences in campaign rhetoric distinguish Christian parties from March 14th versus March 8th blocs. Aoun's campaign platform deems itself one of "change and reform," calling for an end to corruption and claiming that the policies of the governing March 14th coalition have impoverished the Lebanese people. General Aoun also trumpets his ability to protect the Christian community. For its part, the March 14th electoral platform emphasizes the need to regain and protect Lebanese sovereignty from external threats as well as to ensure that "there are no weapons besides those of the State," a clear reference to Hezbollah's non-state militia. Christian parties within the March 14th coalition frame the election as nothing less than an existential battle for Lebanon's destiny. If the opposition wins, March 14th candidates warn, Lebanon will once again come under the thumb of Syria and Iran (via Hezbollah).

Meanwhile, the Armenian Tashnaq party, which boycotted some districts in the 2005 elections, is positioning itself in its traditional role of broker/mediator by forming independent lists. The party seeks to regain its parliamentary bloc and appears to be allying with the March 8th coalition in districts with Armenian seats. The Tashnaq party will be particularly influential in the Beirut 1 and Metn districts. The Armenians may play the ultimate kingmakers in this election, which is ironic considering their small minority status.

Opportunity for Reform and Reconciliation

[2] General Aoun signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah in February 2006 establishing a political alliance between his Free Patriotic Movement and the Shia group.

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Lebanon's parliamentary elections, despite significant shortcomings, could pave the way for important progress on reform and reconciliation. The elections surely will fall short of meeting international norms. Yet, they still provide an opportunity to build on nascent reforms and to nurture a new political culture that seeks to change "politics as usual" in Lebanon. If the election runs smoothly and leads to the formation of a consensus government, conditions might be ripe for promoting critical political reforms and advancing consensual politics—two key ingredients for Lebanon's long-term stability. A successful election could accelerate momentum for broader change in the wake of upcoming 2010 municipal elections.

Small-scale reforms included in the September 2008 electoral law could serve as positive steps toward more systemic reform over the long term. Coupled with other developments, the reforms signal important improvements over previous elections. The 2008 reforms include the following:

- **Establishment of the Supervisory Committee on the Electoral Campaign (SCEC).**

While the SCEC falls short of a full-blown independent electoral commission, it sets an important precedent as an intermediary body that could serve as a precursor to an independent commission. It is responsible for ensuring the implementation of Chapters 5 and 6 of the electoral law, which stipulate campaign finance and media regulations. The SCEC is subsumed under the interior ministry, depriving it of full autonomy, and its mandate focuses only on the campaign period, not the actual election. Despite these limitations, the SCEC's establishment is credited with initiating a new culture surrounding elections in Lebanon that seeks to achieve a degree of accountability and transparency.

- **Campaign finance regulations**

Newly enacted campaign finance and media regulations, although diluted by significant loopholes, set a key precedent in Lebanese electoral politics by mandating

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certain limits and behavioral expectations. The campaign finance regulations require candidates to pay all campaign-related expenses from a specifically dedicated electoral campaign account. The account is not subject to Lebanon's banking secrecy laws, allowing the SCEC to monitor deposits and withdrawals. Expenditure caps have been established based on the numbers of voters per district. While the cap is fairly high, candidates will be required to submit reports of all expenditures; in-kind donations to campaigns will be applied toward the cap as well. Candidates are obliged to hire a financial controller who is charged with tracking and reporting all expenses to the SCEC. However, the SCEC's ability to enforce the regulations is questionable.

- **Media regulations**

Media regulations seek to ensure the candidates' fair and equal access to all media outlets. The SCEC has established a Media Monitoring Center charged with both qualitative and quantitative media monitoring to be cross-referenced against candidate campaign expenditures. In its first report, the SCEC identified 293 media violations. While numerous questions remain concerning the enforcement of these regulations, the measures nonetheless establish an important precedent regarding media usage in electoral campaigns.

- **Reformist interior minister**

The interior minister, Ziyad Baroud, who will oversee the elections, is a well-respected reform advocate from Lebanese civil society. Remarkably, given Lebanon's contentious politics, he is viewed favorably, as a neutral and fair interlocutor, by actors across the political spectrum. His impartial administration of the elections promises to lend a greater degree of legitimacy to the vote.

- **Domestic and international observers**

For the first time in Lebanese history, the elections will be observed by both domestic and international organizations. The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections

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(LADE), a local non-governmental organization, will spearhead domestic monitoring efforts with 3,000 observers who will be mobilized across the country. Internationally, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the European Union, and the Carter Center will be among the organizations fielding observers. All observation efforts feature long-term observers, many of whom have been in the field for the past several weeks. Taken together, these efforts should instill a degree of accountability and transparency to the electoral process.

The sum of these admittedly minor reforms could equal something greater than their respective parts—namely, the launch of a new political culture in Lebanon that promotes reform and reconciliation and that seeks to move the country beyond a feudal political system that thrives on sectarianism and corruption. The small changes adopted appear to have energized reform advocates who are already planning for the 2010 municipal elections when a new electoral law will need to be passed. Parliament has already passed an important electoral reform lowering the voting age to 18 in advance of the municipal elections. Additional reforms, including a measure allowing Lebanese expatriates to vote from abroad, are being considered. Other key measures that were voted down for the September 2008 law, such as the preprinted ballot reform, could also be rejuvenated in preparation for the 2010 election.

Beyond these specific electoral reform measures, a new atmosphere appears to have taken root. The measures passed for the current election have imparted a degree of transparency and accountability, even if their impact is limited. The establishment of a campaign supervisory commission and the inclusion of finance and media regulations set an important precedent that establishes the importance of electoral reforms. This qualitative shift should not be underestimated. Ideally, the 2008 law will begin to change the culture of elections in Lebanon and pave the way for greater reforms before the 2010 vote.

Critical Challenges

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Several critical challenges underscore that Lebanon's elections fall short of international standards. The vote might be faithfully administered according to the law, but to what extent is the election process truly democratic? Significant electoral fraud occurs "upstream" in the days and weeks before the election with vote auctioning, intimidation, and other practices. Ultimately, results are determined by feudal political bosses with no accountability. Several issues undermine the election's legitimacy including: the absence of preprinted ballots, potential difficulties in adjudicating voting disputes, and the dearth of genuine electoral competition in most districts.

No preprinted ballots. The failure to institute preprinted ballots—a universal feature of functioning democracies—stands as the most significant deficit in Lebanon's nascent electoral reforms. Roundly defeated in parliament by status quo forces from both sides of the political aisle, preprinted ballot reform would have set Lebanon on a path toward significant reform by undermining its generations-old system of backroom dealing and vote-buying. Instead, in a system that is perhaps unique to Lebanon, voters are not obliged to use preprinted ballots. Rather, they cast their votes in one of three ways: write their votes on a blank ballot in the voting booth; complete a ballot at home and bring it to the polls, or use a ballot that is already completed and handed to the voter by party agents at the polls. The absence of preprinted ballots allows for last-minute horse-trading and vote auctioning as candidates are added or dropped from slates. Under this system, numerous methods exist to confirm how people voted, violating all notions of ballot secrecy. Ballots handed out by party agents are identifiable by the order of candidates' names, font size, even paper size or color, allowing political bosses to verify whether clans or families have delivered their promised votes.

Potential difficulties adjudicating voting disputes. The ability to dispute election results is a key element in any democratic election process. According to Lebanese law, the Constitutional Council (comprised of ten members—five appointed by parliament and five appointed by the Council of Ministers) is charged with accrediting the entire process as well as adjudicating voting disputes. The parliament selected its five members in December 2008, while the Council of Ministers finally appointed its allotted five members last week. The creation of the Constitutional Council—albeit in the eleventh hour before

elections—is a critical positive step toward guaranteeing the legitimacy of the election results. However, some predict that the Council could still be ineffective and potentially deadlocked due to the composition of its members which represent different political and sectarian interests.

Lack of genuine electoral competition. As noted previously, by virtue of the bargains struck among political bosses in Lebanon's sectarian system, the outcome in a majority of parliamentary races appears to have been predetermined. As a result, it is estimated that only 15 to 20 percent of the parliamentary seats will be decided by competitive races on Election Day. The sectarian elite mobilize their constituents to vote along sectarian lines, not issue-based platforms. Voters are not given choices; they are ordered to vote in a particular way, with negative repercussions if they do not follow through. In the current election, only Christian-dominated districts will witness genuine electoral competition. With such a small number of genuinely competitive races, it is difficult to classify the election as a truly democratic process.

Voting in ancestral villages. Another peculiar feature of the Lebanese electoral system is that voters register and vote in their ancestral villages rather than their place of residence. In addition, married women vote in their husband's ancestral village. As a result, the connection between voter and elected official is often weak, undercutting elected officials' accountability to their constituents. (This lack of accountability is even more pronounced in municipal elections where ancestral village voting also applies.) Moreover, voters often must travel long distances to vote in areas where they may no longer feel comfortable or secure due to confessional and/or demographic shifts.

Prevalence of intimidation. Political actors across the spectrum have raised concerns about voter intimidation during the weeks prior to and on Election Day. Intimidation tactics range from hard stares and implicit threats to explicit threats and outright violence. In many instances, intimidation can be subtle and difficult to observe and report. For example, a voter who is intimidated may simply opt to stay home and not vote. Intimidation can occur in homogenous districts that are dominated by one particular bloc, e.g., Shiite areas in Beirut's southern suburbs or southern Lebanon. For example,

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Hezbollah and Amal supporters reportedly have burned the cars of independent (i.e., non-Hezbollah) candidates and their partisans in the south. Similarly, intra-Christian tensions contribute to harassment and intimidation in predominantly Christian districts. Intimidation also occurs in mixed districts that may be dominated by one particular sect. Christian candidates allied with the March 14th coalition, for example, have reported difficulties campaigning in areas dominated by other sects (e.g., Shiites) or ethnicities (e.g., Armenian).

Security concerns. Given Lebanon's long-standing history of civil violence, security concerns are a persistent problem. Small-scale skirmishes have already started to occur. While widespread violence is not predicted, simmering sectarian tensions could erupt unexpectedly, particularly in Sunni-Shiite mixed areas. Intra-sectarian violence is also possible, especially in Christian districts where competition remains fierce. Hostilities inside the Palestinian refugee camps could also spillover, threatening broader Lebanese stability. Many analysts have warned of growing radicalization in the camps (particularly Ain al-Helweh in southern Lebanon) erupting into major violence. Shiite interlocutors raised concerns that such instability could prevent passage to southern Lebanon from Beirut, where an estimated 40 percent of the south's electorate resides. Finally, concerns about external interference, particularly from Syria, persist. The evident Syrian-Saudi rapprochement appears to have tamped down violence and reduced tensions. However, this détente is fragile and could break down, possibly leading to a marked increase in tensions.

Logistical concerns. Holding elections in a single day rather than on consecutive weekends is one of the newly enacted reforms; however, it entails major logistical challenges. Mobilizing an estimated 30,000 security forces (both army and police) will require significant management and coordination efforts by the defense and interior ministries. Security forces will provide protection at the polls as well as along key traffic routes. The Internal Security Forces (ISF) will be stationed at the polls, while the army will be deployed at polling station perimeters. Widespread popular mistrust of the ISF (considered by some to be a pro-Hariri, predominantly Sunni militia) complicates the mission and underscores the importance of the army's role. Moreover, training and

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deploying 3,000 domestic monitors across the country to the 5,187 polling stations will also demand significant planning. Finally, major traffic and road congestion are anticipated in the few days before the election as people travel to their ancestral villages to vote. Taken together, these issues have raised concerns that voter turnout may diminish, potentially undermining the legitimacy of election results.

Massive money flows. The 2009 vote has been touted as the most expensive election on a per-capita basis in Lebanon's history. While the 2008 electoral law includes campaign finance regulations, the relatively high campaign expenditure ceiling, combined with extensive loopholes, suggests the law will have little impact on stemming the flow of cash. It is estimated that hundreds of millions of dollars from wealthy Lebanese as well as external patrons, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, has been pouring into the country. The massive inflow of dollars will increase opportunities for vote-buying and other forms of corruption.

IF NOT AN EXISTENTIAL BATTLE, WHAT IS AT STAKE?

While important, the election will not be earthshaking, despite media attempts to portray the vote in more dramatic terms. No decisive victor is expected. Instead, one side will win by only a slim majority, most likely leading to the creation of a consensus government with elements from both sides. Hezbollah, the militant Shia movement, currently holds fourteen seats in parliament, and it is running fewer candidates in the current election, ensuring that it will have fewer seats in the next parliament, regardless of the outcome of the election.

The formation of a new government will be the next critical step following the parliamentary elections. For its part, the March 14th coalition has insisted that, if it wins, it will govern alone, and if it loses, it will not participate in the government. However, such tough rhetoric is more likely pre-election bluster rather than an accurate portrayal of the March 14th bloc's post-election strategy. March 14th leaders have said they would not give the March 8th opposition a blocking veto in the cabinet, but this scenario would return Lebanon to the unstable status quo ante, which resulted in political paralysis and violence.

Even if the Hezbollah-led opposition prevails in the election, the government's composition ideally will not differ substantially from the current national unity government. Indeed, the March 8th bloc has reiterated its desire to govern as part of a national unity government, promising a blocking veto to the March 14th coalition if it joins the cabinet. Even without March 14th representation, a March 8th government will be cross-sectarian, including significant Christian representation. (Comparisons to the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections in which Hamas won a commanding parliamentary majority are inaccurate.) As such, the June 7th parliamentary elections will *not* represent an existential battle for Lebanon's "soul" as some have suggested.

Nonetheless, concerns about Hezbollah's role in the elections are valid. Its status as an armed militia—perhaps more powerful than the Lebanese army—that many have termed "a state within the state" raises numerous issues. Participation in an election by parties with militias beyond the control of the central government runs counter to the principle of free, democratic elections. Hezbollah hardly resembles a liberal-minded force for change, and the inherent contradiction of an armed militia competing in free, transparent elections is obvious. Moreover, the existence of a state within a state has clear implications for a range of requirements for genuine elections, among them freedom of movement and assembly, dissemination of campaign materials, and security at polling places.

Yet, Hezbollah, with its deeply entrenched grassroots support, is the most credible representative of Lebanon's Shia community. Its supporters view it as both clean—devoid of corruption—and competent, providing key social services in the absence of an effective Lebanese state. Ideally, its participation in the election could help it to evolve over time into a fully vested political player in the Lebanese arena. While this evolution is far from assured, the alternative—an ostracized, armed militia with no stake in the political process—would be worse.

When evaluating Lebanon's election, the critical question to consider will be: To what extent do the elections feed into a meaningful reform process? If it is run smoothly and the Lebanese people consider the results legitimate, Lebanon's parliamentary election could

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serve as important indicator that Lebanon is on a path toward greater reform and stability. Indeed, the election's real significance is that, if successful, it could lay the groundwork for future reforms. Already, an important cultural shift—embodied by the reforms promoted in the 2008 electoral law—may be taking root. Elements of transparency and accountability, however nascent, are now part of the electoral system. If the election is well-managed and its results respected, it could stand as the first step along a path of lasting peace and stability in Lebanon.

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MONA YACOUBIAN is a Special Advisor to the Muslim World Initiative at the U.S. Institute of Peace. She also directs the Institute's Lebanon Working Group which seeks to better understand the complex dynamics underlying Lebanon's political system as well as to develop proposals, ideas, and policy recommendations designed to prevent conflict within Lebanon and across its borders. Ms. Yacoubian's work for the Institute also includes research and writing on Syria, as well as on the broader topics of democratization in the Middle East and the spread of Islamist militancy. Ms. Yacoubian received her Masters Degree from Harvard University and a Bachelor's Degree from Duke University. She also had a Fulbright Scholarship in Syria.

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