

Lebanon's 2018 Elections

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Related Author

- [Carla E. Humud](#)
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Carla E. Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs (chumud@crs.loc.gov, 7-7314)

On May 6, 2018, Lebanon held its first legislative elections in nine years. The results showed that parties allied with Hezbollah increased their share of seats from roughly 44% to 53%. However, as in past Lebanese governments, rival parliamentary blocs will likely need to reach consensus in order to secure the passage of major policy initiatives.

The 128 seats in Lebanon's parliament, known formally as the Chamber of Deputies, are divided evenly between Christians and Muslims. This reflects Lebanon's broader political system in which power is divided among the country's various religious groups or "confessions." In what is referred to as Lebanon's confessional system, the presidency is reserved for a Maronite Christian, the prime minister post for a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament for a Shi'a Muslim. Confessional allotments (in varying proportions) also extend to the division of seats in electoral districts.

The May 2018 parliamentary elections were the first since 2009 and the first held under Lebanon's new electoral law, passed in 2017. The new law established a hybrid system of proportional representation, in a departure from the country's previous winner-take-all system. Under the new law, Lebanese cast two votes: one for a fixed electoral list in their district and a second for their preferred candidate within that list. The tabulation of these two votes, along with the assignment of electoral seats to specific sects, in some cases [resulted](#) in candidates not attaining a seat despite receiving more votes than a rival. In light of this, Lebanese officials are calling for the new electoral law to be amended.

Division of Electoral Districts by Confessional Group

Lebanese electoral law has traditionally allocated each seat within an electoral district to a specific religious community. The allocation of seats by sect is shaped by demographic and political considerations, which are at times controversial. Lebanon officially recognizes 18 religious sects (4 Muslim, 12 Christian, the Druze sect, and Judaism), not all of which are represented in every district. For example, the district of Jbeil/Keserouan has eight electoral seats, of which seven are reserved for Maronite Christians, and one for a Shi'a. The neighboring district of Baalbeck/Hermel has 10 electoral seats: 6 for Shi'a, 2 for Sunnis, and 1 each for Maronite and Catholic Christians. The 2017 electoral law reduced the number of electoral districts from 26 to 15. In doing so, it also realigned the number of seats assigned to each district, as well as the sectarian distribution of those seats.

Election Results

The political coalition known as March 8, which includes Hezbollah, the Shi'a Amal Movement, the Maronite Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), and allied parties, won 68 seats according to [Lebanese vote tallies](#). This is enough to secure a simple majority (65 out of 128 seats) in parliament, but falls short of the two-thirds majority needed to push through major initiatives such as a revision to the constitution. Hezbollah itself did not gain any additional seats.

The rival March 14 coalition (which includes the Sunni Future Movement, the Maronite Lebanese Forces, and allied MPs) lost 10 seats. Prime Minister Hariri's Future Movement absorbed the largest loss (roughly a third of its seats) but remains the largest Sunni bloc in parliament. The Lebanese Forces party was among the largest winners, increasing its share of seats from 8 to 14.

March 8 continues to hold enough seats to prevent the establishment of a two-thirds quorum, which in practice has been required for votes on certain issues such as the election of a president (a task that in Lebanon falls to parliament). Beginning in 2014, March 8 MPs repeatedly boycotted legislative sessions, preventing the body from reaching quorum. As a result, the office of the presidency stood vacant for over two years until Hariri's Future Movement agreed to back FPM leader Michel Aoun for the post.

Many observers and [Lebanese political leaders](#) contend that the alliances that previously defined March 8 and March 14 have [evolved](#) since the formation of the two coalitions in 2005, with some arguing that the coalitions—particularly March 14—are [weakened](#) or [defunct](#). However, the broad contours of March 8 and March 14 may still impact government formation.

Table 1. Election Results

Political Party	Primary Sectarian Affiliation	Outgoing Parliament		2018 Election
		Current Seats	Loss/Gain	# of Seats Won
"March 8" Coalition				
Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)	Maronite Christian	19	+3	19
pro-FPM Christians				3
Amal Movement	Shi'a Muslim	13	+2	15
Hezbollah	Shi'a Muslim	13	-	13
Marada	Maronite Christian	3	-	3
Tashnaq (ARF)	ethnic Armenian	2	+1	3

Ba'th Party	Secular/Arab nationalist	2	-1	1
Syrian Social Nationalist Party	Secular/Syrian nationalist	2	-	2
Lebanese Democratic Party	Secular/Druze	2	-1	1
Al Ahabash	Sunni Muslim	-	+1	1
Tadamun Party	Maronite Christian	1	-1	-
	Sunni Muslim	-	+4	4
pro-March 8 Christians	Christian	-	+2	2
pro-March 8 Shi'a	Shi'a Muslim	-	+1	1
TOTAL		57		68

"March 14" Coalition

Future Movement	Sunni Muslim	33	-12	19
pro-Future Christian				1
pro-Future Sunni				1
Lebanese Forces (LF)	Christian	8	+6	13
pro-LF Christians				1
Phalange (Kataeb)	Christian	5	-2	3
Hanshaq Party	ethnic Armenian	2	-2	-
Ramgavar Party	ethnic Armenian	1	-1	-

Democratic Left Movement	Secular	1	-1	-
Jama'a Islamiya	Sunni Muslim	1	-1	-
National Liberation Party	Christian	1	-1	-
pro-March 14 Christians	Christian		+3	3
pro-March 14 Shi'a	Shi'a Muslim		+1	1
TOTAL		52		42

Other

Progressive Socialist Party	Druze	11	-2	9
Sabaa/Kilna Watani	civil society coalition	-	+1	1
Azm Movement	Sunni Muslim	1	+3	4
Glory Movement	Sunni Muslim	2	-2	-
Independent Sunnis	Sunni Muslim	-	+1	1
Independent Christians	Christian	-	+3	3
Vacant		3		
Unknown affiliation		2		

Source: For political affiliation/characterization of candidates, see "Official election results—How Lebanon's Next Parliament will look," *Daily Star*, May 8, 2018.

Notes: Results are organized by affiliation to the March 8 or March 14 political coalitions to facilitate comparison with the 2009 legislative elections. Coalition totals are based on *Daily Star* vote tallies (see source note). The affiliation of some deputies with March 8 or March 14 may be disputed, which could result in variances in coalition totals. Some deputies' affiliation with a particular bloc or coalition has changed since the 2009 legislative elections. Some analysts contend that March 8 and March 14 are no longer the primary political divisions inside Lebanon.

Government Formation

The conclusion of legislative elections clears the way for the formation of a new government, in the shape of a new Cabinet. Known formally as the Council of Ministers, the Cabinet is comprised of 30 ministerial posts, currently distributed among 10 parties. At the end of May, the newly elected parliament is to convene to elect a Shi'a speaker (Amal MP Nabih Berri has served as speaker since 1992 and is expected to be reelected). Following consultations with parliamentary blocs, President Aoun is to name a new Sunni prime minister (or potentially reappoint current Prime Minister Hariri). The premier-designate is to hold consultations with political blocs to form a Cabinet, and present those ministers to the president for his approval.

The process of government formation can be lengthy—in some cases lasting months—as parties compete for key ministerial posts. In the past, the opposition has sought a blocking one-third plus one of Cabinet seats (11 out of 30), in order to obtain a de-facto veto over cabinet decisions that require a two-thirds majority. Given the March 8 coalition's gains in parliament, it is likely that the coalition will also secure a majority of cabinet seats. Lebanon's outgoing cabinet, formed in December 2016, also has a March 8 majority.

Issues for Congress

Members may consider whether and to what extent the election results should impact U.S. policy towards Lebanon. Some Members contend that the United States should limit its engagement with a government in which Hezbollah is a member. Others have argued that U.S. interests in Lebanon—including weakening Hezbollah—are most effectively accomplished by bolstering Lebanese state institutions and serving as a counterweight to Iranian influence there.

Consistent with prior annual appropriations legislation, Section 7041(e) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, states that U.S. funding for the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) may not be made available if either body is controlled by a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization. Hezbollah has held one-two seats in each of the six Lebanese governments formed since July 2005. Since 2006, the United States has provided [nearly \\$1.7 billion](#) in training and equipment to the LAF and over \$160 million to the ISF.