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## *Palestinian Refugees Suffer Setback in Lebanon's Parliamentary Election*



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*Shatila Camp, Beirut*

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have no right to vote and that has never been a significant issue with them. As refugees they are not citizens of Lebanon and have never sought

naturalization. Rather, their focus continues to be on acquiring at least some elementary civil rights pending full return to their own country, Palestine.

Admittedly, the hostility toward all refugees in Lebanon these days predictably would shrink the pro-Palestinian Parliamentary election lobbying results of the Beirut-Washington, DC Palestine Civil Rights Campaign (PCRC) among others. Still, it had been hoped that the make-up of the new 128 seat Parliament, would increase the chances that Lebanon's Parliament would grant Palestinian refugees, after 70 years since their forced Exodus from Palestine the most basic civil rights to work and to own a home. These rights are granted to every refugee world-wide except to Palestinians in sectarianized Lebanon. The Palestine Civil Rights Campaign (PCRC) has for nearly a dozen years been working to convince Lebanon's Parliament to take 90 minutes of its time to achieve the following humanitarian initiatives and for candidates seeking a seat in Parliament to include in their electoral platform a commitment to:

- \* Amend legislation that restricts the ability of Palestinian refugees to own property, specifically Presidential Decree 11614 of 4 January 1969, as modified by law 296 of April 3, 2001. This anti-Palestinian decree prohibits people who do "not carry a citizenship issued by a recognized state" from securing legal title to real estate in Lebanon. Since most Palestinians are stateless, the decree's effect is to deny them the right to have legal title to a home outside the squalid camps.

- \* Lift any remaining restrictions on the entry of building and maintenance materials and equipment into Palestinian refugee camps.

- \* Remove restrictions on employment. Palestinian refugees, by international humanitarian law are to be given the same access to the labor market as other refugees and Lebanese nationals. With respect to employment, the Lebanese Labor Law of 1962 treats Palestinian refugees like other non-Lebanese and requires them to have a work permit. Rules for issuing work permits are subject to the principle of reciprocity, according to which Lebanon grants the right to work only to nationals of other states whose countries grant Lebanese citizens the right to work. Again, since Palestine is not yet recognized as a state, Palestinians are excluded from many jobs.

So what happened with last weekend's voting to undercut Palestinian hopes in Lebanon's 12 camps and what became of all that campaign rhetoric about human rights and "the Resistance will liberate Palestine beginning in Lebanon's camps?"

To gain the possibility of some civil rights noted above, pro-Palestinian lawmakers in Lebanon (regrettably a dying breed nowadays) needed support from a combined simple majority of half plus-one of the 128 MP seats in Parliament, i.e. 65 members.

Factors relevant to the final vote results included the following:

#### **Low voter turnout**

Just 49.2 percent of Lebanon's 3.6 million eligible voters decided to bother to vote as opposed, down from 54 percent in 2009. The most common explanation this observer heard was that standing in line for two hours or more to vote in an "election" that would very likely bring zero change was a waste of time. It has been estimated that no fewer than 35 percent of the votes cast in Lebanon's previous elections were bought and paid for and this year's unproven estimate is closer to 50%. The going price was \$ 200 per vote. It is not clear to this observer how some citizens were able to sell several votes but its true that many Lebanese have a reputation for being good at "business".

#### **Confusing new election law**

The low voter turnout can also be explained by the confusing and complicated new electoral law that required citizens to vote for whole party lists at a time of new electoral combinations. This meant, for example, that in some districts Sunnis were forced to vote for their traditional rivals such as the Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) if they wanted the Sunni candidate Saad Hariri to serve again as Prime Minister. This was because Hariri's Future Movement was linked with Aoun's FPM on the ballot.

Consequently, a relatively strong supporter of Palestinians in Lebanon, Hariri's party suffered the election's biggest blow, dropping around a third of its seats or from 33 to 21. Hezbollah-backed Sunnis did much better, mainly in Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon, securing ten of the twenty-seven Sunni-allocated seats. The results suggest that Lebanon's pro-Palestinian Sunni community is also deeply fractured and non-focused due in significant measure to perceived current feeble leadership.

A just-released (5/10/2018) breakdown by the Interior Ministry of preferential votes gained by each winning candidate, has exposed many discrepancies that have parties already insisting that there must be reform of the new electoral law and questioning the election results.

#### **Parties that have long opposed to granting Palestinians the right to work did well at the polls**

The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) which Lebanon's President Michel Aoun headed for years and which is currently politically partnered with Hezbollah, expanded its voting bloc

from 21 to 29 members. Michel Aoun is rabidly anti-Palestinian, and the FPM will not support any civil rights for Palestinians in Lebanon until there is a progressive change in leadership.

The Shia AMAL Movement, Hezbollah's Shiite ally, picked up several seats and they also oppose civil rights for Palestinians in Lebanon despite international humanitarian law precepts requiring them.

The anti-Palestinian party that gained the most Parliamentary seats than in the 2009 election is Samir Geagea's Christian party Lebanese Forces (LF) which increased its share from eight to fifteen Parliamentary seats. This is another setback for Palestinians given Geagea's long and violent anti-Palestinian history and the role of the Lebanese Forces during the 1982 Sabra-Shatila Massacre and orchestrating other anti-Palestinian violence before and since. Geagea is now positioned to run for President of Lebanon and shares the hostility toward Palestinians in Lebanon of Lebanon's current President, Michel Aoun of the FPM.

Another winner during the May 6th election is Hezbollah. While it won the same number of seats as in 2009 when it secured 13, today with its network of alliances, it arguably can secure a majority in parliament, exercising a veto power over Parliamentary decisions, and "legalizing" its weapons arsenal, one of its main goals. An important reason for Hezbollah and its ally's election victory was their more effective use of sectarian appeals. Although many Shia have criticized Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, they have become less vocal recently partly one imagines because of their perceived success of the pro-Assad coalition's recent string of victories in Syria, which resulted in fewer dead Lebanese Shia, and that Hezbollah is still viewed as the protector of the Shia.

Iran and Hezbollah, since before they entered the sectarian war in Syria were making it plain that they will not support elementary civil rights to work or to home ownership for the camp refugees. This, despite incessantly playing a false Palestinian "Resistance" card to gain support from those who do believe in the case for Palestinian civil rights.

The pro-Palestinian Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), headed by Walid Jumblatt, did manage to gain one additional seat in recent election. But unfortunately, it will help very little to gain Palestinians some civil rights. The 5/6/2018 Lebanese electoral result is a serious setback for Palestinians seeking civil rights in Lebanon.

A pro-Palestinian grassroots movement of activists, journalists and other political newcomers called "Kollouna Watani ("We are all Patriots") managed to win a seat in Parliament and claim that any presence in parliament was a landmark victory for its

campaign against patronage in an era when politics is run as a family business. Some see this as a significant political breakthrough as the number of activists in Lebanon has been dramatically rising in several areas.

In addition to the further blow to Palestinians in Lebanon gaining elementary civil rights from this year's election, not much will change here politically. Lebanon's fractured society has not been altered. It remains a divided, sectarian country where clientelism reigns and creates the political culture that has kept it from becoming a democracy in the past, currently and quite likely for the foreseeable future.

Carlos Eddé | Head of Lebanon's National Bloc Party recently explained about Lebanon, "While it has the appearance of a democracy, it is in fact a plutocratic oligarchy. Electoral lists have no political cohesion or logic and election laws are always designed to protect the ruling class. The present one has an even more hideous characteristic in that it has transformed the electoral campaign outside areas controlled by Hezbollah into a general saloon brawl among foes and allies as well."

Despite the recent election results, Palestinians in Lebanon will continue their struggle to achieve the elementary civil rights to work and to own a home. Their prospects will increase if more of their international supporters active on myriad internet blogs will focus on their plight in Lebanon and hopefully many will come to Lebanon to help organize an effective grassroots civil rights campaign.

Lebanese politicians can be persuaded to apply international humanitarian law principles, rules and standards and grant Palestinian refugees the elementary civil rights to work and to own a home. They must be approached personally with the facts from many UN and other studies demonstrating how granting these rights will grow Lebanon's economy and help unify the country.

There is much political work to be done here in Lebanon's 12 refugee camps but Lebanon's Palestinians are organizing to do it.