



Commentary

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# Lebanon Needs to Hold Municipal Elections

*The erosion of Lebanese political institutions, which has already disabled the presidency and the cabinet, now threatens hundreds of municipalities. Amid its crippling economic crisis, Lebanon can ill afford to lose one of the last vestiges of state functionality.*

**N**othing brings Lebanon's squabbling leaders together quite like a spot of cynical procrastination. 31 May was meant to be the deadline for holding the country's long-overdue municipal elections, but the politicians have missed it for the second year in a row. Instead, parliament convened in April, in its first legislative session since October, to extend the mandates of Lebanon's 1,059 municipalities and 3,080 local administrators (*makhatir*) by up to twelve months. On 30 May, the Constitutional Council dismissed three appeals against the mandate extension, citing the need to prevent Lebanon's local institutions from operating in a legal vacuum – or not at all.

Yet upholding the extension will only perpetuate, and likely accelerate, the erosion of local governance, and it will further hollow out local police forces. Municipalities and *makhatir* are among the few state institutions that still function effectively; indeed, they have become crucial for handling Lebanon's crippling socio-economic crises. Further postponing municipal elections could have serious implications for externally funded projects aimed at improving basic service delivery, including efforts to support police increasingly overwhelmed by higher crime. Outside actors, in particular donor countries, should pressure Lebanese politicians

to commit to a credible timetable for holding the polls by or before the last quarter of 2023, lest these vital service providers continue to fall apart.

## Avoiding Elections

Lebanon's establishment parties have long viewed municipal elections as a nuisance, or even a threat, an exercise better honoured in the breach. From 1967 through 1998, the political class postponed the polls repeatedly, preferring to extend the mandates of existing local councils through 21 separate acts of parliament. Municipal voting operates under different rules from the country's general elections and sometimes offers opportunities for non-establishment figures. The pool of candidates is not determined by sectarian quotas, as it is in national elections, and the much smaller voting districts sometimes allow contenders with strong grassroots credibility to challenge the establishment parties' well-oiled machines. In the last municipal elections, held in 2016, a civil society coalition running on the platform Beirut Madinati (Beirut, My City) nearly snatched the majority in the capital. It failed to do so only because its electoral potential had pushed nearly all the establishment parties to form a temporary alliance, setting aside their mutual hostility to fight off the new kid on the block.



Closed shops line a street in the Beirut central district, October 2021. CRISIS GROUP / Michelle Malaney

Because local elections can bring new politicians to the fore, opposition parties tend to view them as a promising entry point to power, especially in large cities like Beirut, Tripoli and Saida. Since 2016, a devastating economic crisis has wiped out the savings and incomes of many households, suggesting that new local elections could be a day of reckoning for the establishment. Over decades, as citizens are well aware, these figures have gutted the economy through irresponsible state spending and borrowing practices, as well as rampant corruption. Several groups originating in the 2019 protest movement – which channelled popular anger at the entire establishment for both causing and deepening the mess – are hoping to bring the reckoning about. In May 2022, a handful of “change” candidates from the movement’s ranks prevailed in national legislative elections, yet to date the parliament they belong to has been largely defunct. Several blocs, including the two leading Christian parties, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and Lebanese Forces, have refused to attend regular legislative sessions, arguing that parliament

must elect a new president before it returns to ordinary business. The “change” MPs have thus been thwarted in their efforts at change. If successful in municipal polls, new entrants would gain direct access to local levers of governance, perhaps allowing them to have far greater impact than they can through the national legislature at present.

From their side, the major parties representing the establishment said they were ready to contest the local polls, but then a critical mass of them voted for the mandate extension. Those endorsing the decision included Hezbollah and its key allies: the other large Shiite movement, Amal, and the FPM. The FPM’s support was especially significant, given that its parliamentarians were renegeing on their pledges not to attend parliamentary sessions during the presidential vacuum. Lebanon has been without a president since 1 November 2022, when Michel Aoun’s term expired; the establishment parties have been unable to find someone capable of securing enough votes in parliament to succeed him. Various other groups – including the Lebanese Forces, Kataeb and several independents

– boycotted the parliamentary session and unsuccessfully appealed to the Constitutional Council to block the extension, hoping to force elections to [proceed without further delay](#). They lack the numbers to compel the other camp to hold the municipal polls promptly, even though the mandate extension provides for the option of slating the elections for before the new deadline, 31 May 2024.

In justifying the extension, politicians cited the absence of funding, which appears to be a flimsy pretext. Despite having known since March 2022 that elections would need to be held by 31 May 2023, parliament has failed to set aside the approximately \$12 million the country would need to cover administrative costs, including the wages of judges and teachers tasked with supervising the polls. The \$12 million amount should not be that hard to find. It pales in comparison with the [hundreds of millions reportedly spent](#) by the Lebanese central bank, Banque du Liban, on slowing the national currency's inexorable decline through sporadic interventions in the foreign exchange market. While the bank has pursued this

[heavily criticised policy](#) with Lebanon's dwindling foreign currency reserves, the country has largely avoided reforms aimed at addressing the economic meltdown's root causes.

The presidential vacuum has provided politicians with another way to duck responsibility. Some parties assert that, in the absence of a president, a caretaker government cannot exercise its already narrowly circumscribed authority. The outgoing minister of interior and municipalities, whose ministry is responsible for organising local elections, claimed on 3 April that it was on track to hold them before the 31 May deadline, pending state funding. As before, parliament and the caretaker government blamed each other for having failed to allocate the required budget. Various MPs called on the [government to authorise spending](#) to hold the polls from Lebanon's [\\$1.135 billion Special Drawing Rights](#) allocation, [as it has done previously](#) to purchase essentials like fuel and wheat. Given the uncertainty about its constitutional legitimacy, the caretaker government claims that meeting this demand requires parliamentary signoff. For its part, parliament has



The Central Bank of Lebanon, October 2021. CRISIS GROUP / Michelle Malaney

*“Around 10 per cent of the municipalities have dissolved since the 2016 elections because their councils can no longer meet quorum requirements.”*

not availed itself of another option for securing the money, namely amending the budget law to allocate the necessary funds. In supporting the mandate extension, several politicians, including FPM leader and MP Gibran Bassil, brought the blame game full circle. They alleged that, despite its claims to the contrary, the interior ministry had never been ready to hold the elections on schedule, even if it had received the money it needs.

### **The Damage Done**

Extending the municipalities’ mandates by twelve months is not, on balance, a good thing: though it formally allows them to continue functioning for another year, it only erodes the institutions further, particularly in terms of staffing. Back in 2016, when incumbent local councils and administrators started their terms of office, the state calculated their salaries at a pegged rate of 1,507.50 Lebanese lira to the U.S. dollar. Since October 2019, when the depth of Lebanon’s economic crisis became apparent, the lira has been devalued by over 98 per cent, plunging to a record low rate on the parallel exchange market of 143,000 lira to the dollar in March. The resulting rampant inflation has gutted the salaries of municipal employees and elected members of local councils, who, in real terms, are receiving barely any payment for their work.

On top of slashed earnings, the prospect of indefinitely extended terms of service is causing high attrition among councils and their staff. Office holders are entering the eighth year of what was supposed to be a six-year term, with no end in sight. Some municipalities desperately need fresh elections to install new, more energetic officials. For instance, Mohamad Seoudi, mayor of Saida, Lebanon’s third-largest city, reports that two of the council’s 21 members have left the country, while another has passed away. Cajoling enough of the remaining

attendees to satisfy quorum requirements is an uphill battle, reports Seoudi, who says he himself would like to retire: “I am 84. It’s time to give a chance to fresh blood”.

For some, it has already been too long. Around 10 per cent of the municipalities have dissolved since the 2016 elections because their councils can no longer meet quorum requirements. In May, the municipality of Jdeideh – the largest in the Metn district, on Beirut’s outskirts – collapsed, [a fate shared by over 30 municipalities](#) in this densely populated area alone. Once a local council becomes defunct, the interior ministry places the municipality under the control of an unelected official: the governor or district commissioner (*qa’im maqam*). “People will need to travel to a different town to get anything done”, said a mayor. “All procedures need to go to the *qa’im maqam* [or to the governor] – not just the important ones”.

Regional officials cannot deliver local services the way functional municipalities can, in part because they must do so on top of their regular workloads. They also lack detailed knowledge of local conditions, given the sheer number of municipalities under their control; the Chouf district alone comprises 76 separate local councils. “The *qa’im maqam* is in charge of so many municipalities”, said the same mayor. “[He or she] will say that communities need to keep their municipalities going, because you can’t throw everything on [the *qa’im maqam*]”.

To make matters worse, offices of district commissioners and governors face similar financial challenges to municipalities amid the economic crisis. For instance, the *qa’im maqam* for a district in Mount Lebanon lives an hour’s drive away from her office. Due to spiralling fuel costs, she cannot afford to get to work every day. In this situation, it is only a matter of time before local governance collapses around the country.



Damaged buildings in front of Beirut's port sit in darkness. Frequent power cuts have become a way of life in Lebanon. October 2021. CRISIS GROUP / Michelle Malaney

### **An Increasingly Vital Role**

Such an eventuality could scarcely come at a worse moment. Tired of dealing with central state institutions hollowed out by corruption, international donors and members of the sprawling diaspora are increasingly directing the money they send to Lebanon to municipalities. In doing so, they reason that local councils' closer access to beneficiaries will reduce the potential for misappropriation. In recent years, international organisations have supported [various structures](#) for [instilling transparency](#) at the municipal level, with a view to building trust among overseas benefactors that their aid will have a tangible impact. The trend has not gone unnoticed by fresh political aspirants. An opposition party official linked to the Lebanese civil society movement explained: "If we can take control of the municipalities, we hope that we can inspire confidence in foreign donors by showing them that there are competent, honest people now running the municipality".

Foreign donors are also aware that municipalities have come to shoulder more

responsibility amid the economic collapse. Since the crisis began, local councils have shifted their focus from development projects to relief aid, seeking to compensate for fading central government services. Electricity is a prominent example. Since October 2019, the state-run electricity supply has crashed to a couple of hours per day, leaving many households to rely on expensive private generators – or to get by without power. Municipalities have tried to help their constituents find solutions, for instance by attracting donations to buy diesel for generators, regulating the sector to end price gouging or [coordinating projects for solar energy infrastructure](#). Other municipal projects have delivered essential drugs to people in need since the government withdrew almost all state subsidies on pharmaceuticals. These humanitarian services come on top of longstanding municipal duties such as waste management and road maintenance.

Municipalities may also need to adopt a more prominent role in tackling local conflict, as state security forces increasingly struggle to

maintain order amid the crisis. Across Lebanon, people are complaining about inadequate law enforcement, as police confront higher crime rates even as the real value of their budgets and salaries plummets. International organisations like the UN Development Programme and Spanish government agency FIIAPP continue to provide support for municipal police to help fill the vacuum, lest informal actors take their place. A technical expert working on an initiative to support the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and municipal police said, “Some ISF officers dream of leaving and resigning, but they can’t. Municipal police [sometimes] take on missions that are traditionally the [ISF’s] responsibility”. While local councils have shown interest in such initiatives, budgetary constraints loom large for them as well. The same technical expert said that, with only paltry wages to offer municipal police, local councils are facing “an unprecedented wave of resignations”: one municipality alone, Dekwaneh just east of Beirut, has lost 70 per cent of its officers.

Fewer and fewer municipalities will be able to take on the constantly expanding remit,

unless local elections take place soon. Foreign donors typically aid municipalities that have track records of efficiency; those struggling to hold council meetings are unlikely to receive much support. One program official interviewed by Crisis Group – who is leading a project to channel diaspora donations to municipal services – described a strong municipality, along with the presence of an established local NGO, as the two key criteria for selecting towns for the initiative. By contrast, the official admitted, a municipality with a defunct local council “would be straight off the list”.

### Applying Pressure

International and diaspora donors have a clear interest in preventing Lebanese municipalities from imploding along with the rest of the country’s institutions. Without local elections to usher in new politicians who can attract outside funding, municipal councils will continue to waste away, consecutive mandate renewals notwithstanding.

External powers, especially the U.S. and Europe, should press Lebanon’s politicians to



The Beirut port at sunset, October 2021. CRISIS GROUP / Michelle Malaney

commit to holding municipal elections within a plausible timeframe, perhaps three to four months. Such a move would prevent the extension of the sitting local councils and administrators from becoming the new norm, which would undermine and eventually disable these critical institutions that are keeping the country running.

Judging by the experience of previous polls, aiming for September would give officials and candidates sufficient time to prepare. In March, a party official told Crisis Group that his prominent civil society group was devoting only “30-40 per cent capacity” to the municipal elections, predicting (accurately) that parliament would postpone them beyond May. A confirmed three-to-four-month window before elections would give new contenders time to assemble teams of volunteers and make other arrangements. By contrast, a rushed election before Lebanon’s long summer break would tilt the playing field toward the establishment parties, which often

have these assets at the ready. To solidify this commitment, parliament could pass a new mandate extension that runs until the proposed election date only. This move would bear the collateral benefit of encouraging jaded incumbents not to resign, on the basis that their terms of service will end shortly.

Finally, Lebanon’s foreign partners should consider providing funding for the polls so as to eliminate the political elite’s main pretext for delaying them. The UN Development Programme has already committed around \$3 million to procure various materials, like stationery, yet the interior ministry has reportedly [requested more election funding](#) from other foreign partners. Outside donors would almost certainly find it unappealing to cover for yet another failure by Lebanon’s politicians to fulfil their democratic responsibilities. But seeing local governance fall prey to an ever-growing state erosion would clearly be worse.