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Freedom Status: Partly Free

Aggregate Score: 43 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 5.0 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 6 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 4 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 6,200,000

Capital: Beirut

GDP/capita: \$8,452

Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

Net Freedom Status: Partly Free

OVERVIEW

Lebanon's troubled political system ensures representation for its many sectarian communities, but suppresses competition within each community and impedes the rise of cross-sectarian or secularist parties. It effectively elevates communities over individuals and communal leaders over state institutions. Residents enjoy some civil liberties and media pluralism, but the rule of law is undermined by political interference and partisan militias, and the country has struggled to cope with an influx of Syrian and other refugees who make up more than a quarter of its population.

Ratings Change:

Lebanon's political rights rating declined from 5 to 6 due to the further extension of the incumbent parliament's mandate, which originally expired in 2013, and a new electoral law that appeared to reinforce the sectarian political system and protect the position of established parties.

Key Developments in 2017:

- In June, the parliament adopted a new electoral law and scheduled legislative elections for May 2018, allowing citizens to vote for new national representatives for the first time in nine years.
- In parallel operations in July and August, government forces and the powerful Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah expelled the Syria-based Sunni jihadist groups Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham from the Lebanon-Syria border area, improving security in the country's northeast.
- Prime Minister Saad Hariri unexpectedly announced his resignation while visiting Saudi Arabia in November, evidently under Saudi government pressure, but after diplomatic talks involving France and other powers, he returned to Lebanon and rescinded his resignation in December.

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 11 / 40 (-3)

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 3 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The president, who is elected for six-year terms by the parliament, appoints the prime minister after consulting with the parliament. The president and prime minister choose the cabinet of ministers, which holds most formal executive power. According to long-standing de facto agreements on sectarian power-sharing, the president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the National Assembly must be a Shiite Muslim.

The presidency remained vacant for two years due to a lack of political consensus on a successor to Michel Suleiman, whose term expired in 2014. In October 2016, lawmakers finally elected former military commander Michel Aoun as president, and Aoun nominated Saad Hariri as prime minister in November. The parliament approved Hariri's unity cabinet, which included representatives of most major factions, in late December 2016. While these steps ended the long deadlock over Lebanon's executive leadership, they were carried out by a parliament whose electoral mandate had expired in 2013, critically undermining their democratic legitimacy.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The last elections for the 128-member National Assembly were held in June 2009. The Sunni-led March 14 coalition won 71 seats, while the rival March 8 coalition, backed by the Shiite militant group Hezbollah, took 57 seats. Although the elections were conducted peacefully and judged to be free and fair in some respects, vote buying was reported to be rampant, and the electoral framework retained a number of fundamental structural flaws linked to the country's sectarian political system.

New elections were due in June 2013, but disagreement over electoral reforms led the parliament to extend its own term until late 2014. Citing security concerns associated with the Syrian conflict, lawmakers in 2014 extended their mandate again, this time until June 2017. That month, the

parliament adopted a new electoral law and scheduled elections for May 2018, extending its own term yet again until the new legislature could be seated.

Separately, relatively successful and peaceful municipal council elections were held across the country in May 2016, marking the first subnational elections since 2010. More than 30,000 candidates participated in contests in 1,015 municipalities, though turnout was generally low.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 2 / 4

Elections in Lebanon are overseen by the Interior Ministry rather than an independent electoral commission. Parliamentary seats are divided among major sects under a constitutional formula that does not reflect their current demographic weight. No official census has been conducted since the 1930s. The electoral framework is generally inclusive and supports pluralism, but it is the product of bargaining among established leaders and tends to entrench the existing sectarian and communalist political system.

The 2017 electoral law introduced proportional representation and preferential voting within a smaller number of enlarged multimember districts, and improved opportunities for diaspora voting. However, the districts were still drawn along communal lines, with each featuring a strong confessional majority, and the mechanisms for seat allocation seemed to favor incumbent forces. The law sharply raised registration fees for candidates as well as spending caps for campaigns, and allowed private organizations and foundations to promote coalitions and candidates, which could hand an advantage to wealthy groups and individuals. As under past electoral laws, members of the security forces and citizens who have been naturalized for less than 10 years cannot participate in elections.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 7 / 16 (-2)

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 3 / 4

Citizens are free to organize in different political groupings, and the system features a variety of competing parties in practice. While parties do rise and fall to some extent based on their performance and voters' preferences, most of Lebanon's political parties are vehicles for an established set of communal leaders who benefit from patronage networks, greater access to financing, and other advantages of incumbency.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 1 / 4 (-2)

A handful of political parties have dominated Lebanese politics since 2005, and under the country's prevailing power-sharing system, none of them could accurately be described as opposition groups. The incumbent parties collaborated to formulate the 2017 election law, which gives them a number of advantages in the 2018 parliamentary elections and makes it more difficult for smaller parties and independents to compete.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 1 due to established parties' agreement on an election law that appeared to reinforce the sectarian political system and further extended the incumbent parliament's expired mandate until 2018.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 1 / 4

A variety of forces that are not democratically accountable – including entrenched patronage networks, religious institutions, armed nonstate actors such as Hezbollah, and competing foreign powers – use a combination of financial incentives and intimidation to exert influence on Lebanese voters and political figures. In 2017, Prime Minister Hariri's resignation under Saudi pressure – and his subsequent retraction of that decision after an intervention by France and other powers – highlighted the extent to which foreign governments are willing and able to interfere in Lebanese politics.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

Lebanon officially recognizes 18 religious communities, and the political system ensures that nearly all of these groups are represented, though not according to their actual shares of the population. Individuals who are not or do not wish to be affiliated with the recognized groups are effectively excluded. Moreover, the country's unusually large refugee population, including decades-old Palestinian communities, are not eligible to acquire citizenship and have no political rights.

Women have the same formal political rights as men, but they are marginalized in practice due to societal discrimination. Only four women held seats in the parliament elected in 2009, and all were relatives of previous members, reflecting a tendency of prominent families to head the established sectarian parties. The 2017 electoral law contained no provisions designed to increase women's participation as voters or candidates.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 1 / 12 (-1)

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

Sectarian and partisan divisions, exacerbated by foreign interference and more recently the Syrian civil war, have frequently prevented Lebanese governments from forming and operating effectively and independently after elections. When the government is able to develop policies, they tend to be the result of negotiation among the country's dominant political figures, regardless of formal titles and positions; the legislature generally implements these policies rather than serving as an independent institutional check on the government. The National Assembly's lack of an electoral mandate has further undermined the government's legitimacy in recent years. The authority of the government is also limited in practice by the power of autonomous militant groups like Hezbollah.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4 (-1)

Political and bureaucratic corruption is widespread, businesses routinely pay bribes and cultivate ties with politicians to win contracts or avoid unfavorable state actions, and anticorruption laws are loosely enforced. In October 2017, the parliament approved its first annual state budget since 2005, but it rejected calls to conduct an audit of extrabudgetary spending from the preceding years before approving the new funds. State expenditures remain irregular, with few benchmarks or parameters for effective oversight.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to the lack of basic safeguards against endemic political corruption, including the parliament's failure to require an audit of extrabudgetary spending before it passed a long-overdue state budget in 2017.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

There is no freedom of information law, and government documents are difficult to obtain in practice. Officials often negotiate behind closed doors, outside of state institutions, and with little regard for formal procedures. There are few practical opportunities for civil society groups to influence pending policies or legislation, though they and the media are able to discuss proposals that have been made public.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 32 / 60 (+2)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 12 / 16 (+1)

D1. Are there free and independent media? 3 / 4 (+1)

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are guaranteed by law. The country's media are among the most open and diverse in the region, though nearly all outlets depend on the patronage of political parties, wealthy individuals, or foreign powers, and consequently practice some degree of self-censorship. Books, movies, plays, and other artistic works are subject to censorship, especially when the content involves politics, religion, sex, or Israel.

It is a criminal offense to criticize or defame the president or Lebanese security forces, and an audiovisual media law bans broadcasts that seek to harm the state or its foreign relations or incite sectarian violence, among other broadly worded provisions. These and similar laws have been used to intimidate and prosecute journalists who disseminate criticism of the government or powerful nonstate actors. Some defamation cases against journalists were reported in 2017, though any fines were relatively small, and no journalists were behind bars at year's end.

Journalists and media outlets occasionally face physical violence, but such incidents have grown less frequent and severe in recent years. A partisan mob attacked the offices of the television station Al-Jadeed in February 2017, damaging the building's exterior, and journalists were reportedly assaulted by police while covering protests over the U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 due to journalists' greater demonstrated ability to cover sensitive political topics without fear of detention or physical reprisals in comparison with previous years.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 4

The constitution protects freedom of conscience, and the state does not typically interfere with the practice or expression of religious faith or nonbelief. Blasphemy is a criminal offense, though enforcement varies and has become relatively lax in recent years. Individuals may face societal pressure to express faith or allegiance to a confessional community. Leaders and members of different communities discourage proselytizing by rival or outside groups.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 3 / 4

Academic freedom is generally unimpaired. Individuals are mostly free to select subjects for research and disseminate their findings. However, various laws and customary standards – including restrictions on defamation, blasphemy, and work or opinions related to Israel – deter open debate on certain issues. The state does not engage in extensive political indoctrination through education, though religious and other nonstate entities do seek to reinforce communal identities and perspectives.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 3 / 4

Private discussion and expression of personal views are largely uninhibited, but the authorities monitor social media and other communications, and individuals sometimes face arrests, short detentions, or fines if they criticize the government, the military, foreign heads of state, or other powerful entities. Nonstate actors who feel that they have been harmed by critical speech may seek retribution through defamation suits or, more rarely, violence and intimidation.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 8 / 12 (+1)

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 3 / 4 (+1)

The authorities generally respect the right to assemble, which is protected under the constitution, and demonstrators have been able to mount protests against government dysfunction and lack of services in recent years. While protests over a garbage crisis in 2015 led to mass arrests and police violence that caused hundreds of injuries, assemblies since then have been more peaceful. In 2017, demonstrations were organized on issues including tax hikes, the extension of the parliament's mandate, and the U.S. decision to move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem in December. Police or soldiers were accused of using excessive and indiscriminate force on some occasions, particularly in response to protester violence at the Jerusalem demonstrations, but no deaths, grievous injuries, or large-scale arrests were reported.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 due to protesters' greater ability in recent years to demonstrate on various topics without risking serious injury or punishment.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 3 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for the most part operate freely in Lebanon, though they must comply with the Law on Associations, which has not been thoroughly updated since 1909, as well as other applicable laws relating to labor, finance, and immigration. NGOs must also register with the Interior Ministry, which may oblige them to undergo an approval process and can investigate a group's founders, officers, and staff.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4

Individuals may establish, join, and leave trade unions and other professional organizations. However, the Labor Ministry has broad authority over the formation of unions, union elections, and the administrative dissolution of unions. The state regulates collective bargaining and strikes, and many unions are linked to political parties and serve as tools of influence for political leaders. Public employees, agricultural workers, and household workers are not protected by the labor code and have no legal right to organize, though they have formed unrecognized representative organizations in practice.

F. RULE OF LAW: 5 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

Lebanon's judiciary is not independent. Court processes and decisions are affected by corruption and undue influence from political parties. Political leaders also exercise significant influence over judicial appointments.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4 (-1)

Due process is subject to a number of impediments, including violations of defendants' right to counsel and extensive use of lengthy pretrial detention. Some 57 percent of inmates were awaiting trial as of mid-2017, up from 55 percent a year earlier. Due process guarantees are particularly inadequate in the country's exceptional courts, including the military courts, whose judges do not require a background in law and are authorized to try civilians and juveniles in security-related cases. In practice, military courts have asserted jurisdiction over cases involving human rights activists and protesters in addition to those focused on alleged spies and militants. At the same time, they have failed to hold military personnel accountable for abuses. The armed forces detained some 350 Syrian men during June 2017 raids in the Aarsal area, and four died in custody amid reports of torture and other ill-treatment, but a closed military investigation concluded that the men had died of chronic ailments.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to a lack of due process in the resolution of legal cases, particularly those handled by military courts, which have broad authority to try civilians and do not hold security forces accountable for abuses.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4 (+1)

Prisons and detention centers are badly overcrowded and poorly equipped, and the use of torture by law enforcement, military, and state security personnel remains a problem. A new law that took effect in October 2017 added the offense of torture to the criminal code and barred the use of evidence extracted under torture. However, it failed to criminalize other forms of ill-treatment, imposed a statute of limitations, and confined the definition of torture to specific situations related to investigations and trials. Independent experts also found that the law's prescribed penalties were insufficient.

Security in Lebanon continued to be undermined by the presence of a variety of armed militias and terrorist groups in 2017, but the authorities made some progress during the year. In July and August, government forces and Hezbollah conducted parallel operations that expelled the Syria-based jihadist groups Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham from an area along the country's northeastern border, where they had maintained a presence for a number of years.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to the expulsion of militant groups that had operated along the Syrian border and a new law that marked a step forward in the criminalization of torture.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

The country's legal system is meant to protect members of recognized confessional communities against mistreatment by the state, but mutually hostile groups have engaged in discriminatory behavior toward one another in practice, and those who do not belong to a recognized community have difficulty obtaining official documents, government jobs, and other services.

Despite some legal protections, women are barred from certain types of employment and face discrimination in wages and social benefits. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people face both official and societal discrimination and harassment. The penal code prescribes up to one year in prison for "sexual intercourse against nature," though this is rarely enforced. NGOs work to uphold the human rights of LGBT people, and social acceptance is more common in urban and cosmopolitan areas, particularly in Beirut.

There were roughly 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon as of 2017, of whom about one-third were not registered with the UN refugee agency; the government had instructed the agency to suspend registrations in 2015. Syrian refugees have faced arbitrary arrests and other forms of harassment from both security forces and Lebanese civilians. A large majority live in poverty, partly due to limitations on refugees' employment options.

About 450,000 Palestinian refugees were registered in Lebanon, though fewer than 300,000 were believed to reside in the country in 2017. They also face restrictions on economic activity, contributing to widespread poverty.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 7 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 2 / 4

Citizens enjoy constitutional and legal rights to freedom of movement, though it is extremely difficult to transfer one's official place of residence for voting purposes. Other impediments to internal movement include de facto sectarian boundaries or militia checkpoints in some areas and curfews on Syrian refugees in many municipalities. Migrant workers can lose their legal residency if they are dismissed by or leave their registered employer. Restrictive social customs in some communities allow men to control female relatives' movements and employment outside the home.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

Lebanese law protects citizens' rights to own property and operate private businesses, but powerful groups and individuals sometimes engage in land-grabbing and other infringements without consequence, and business activity is impaired by bureaucratic obstacles and corruption.

Refugees, including longtime Palestinian residents, have few property rights. Women have weaker property rights than men under the religious codes that govern inheritance and other personal status issues in Lebanon, and they often face family pressure to transfer property to male relatives.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 2 / 4

Because the religious codes and courts of each confessional community determine personal status law in Lebanon, an individual's rights regarding marriage, divorce, and child custody depend on his or her affiliation, though women are typically at a disadvantage to men. Women cannot pass Lebanese citizenship to foreign husbands or children.

In August 2017, the parliament repealed Article 522 of the penal code, which allowed rapists to evade criminal prosecution if they subsequently married their victims for a period of at least three years. However, the change did not affect a similar article related to sex with a minor, and spousal rape is still not a criminal offense.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Communal affiliation can either enhance or restrict an individual's economic opportunities in a given area, company, or public-sector entity, depending on which group is in a dominant position. Individuals must also contend with political patronage and clientelism in the public and private sectors.

Refugees and migrant workers are especially vulnerable to exploitative working conditions and sex trafficking. The authorities do not effectively enforce laws against child labor, which is increasingly common among Syrian refugees.

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