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2014 Scores

Status: Partly Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 4.5

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 4

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 5

Trend Arrow: ↓

Lebanon received a downward trend arrow due to political paralysis stemming from the Syrian conflict that prevented the passage of a new electoral law and led to the postponement of national elections until late 2014.

OVERVIEW

The Syrian conflict continued to spill over into Lebanon in 2013, as sectarian elements associated with both of the main Lebanese political coalitions, March 8 and March 14, became involved in the fighting in Syria. Faced with political deadlock and concerns about increased violence, the country's leaders failed to form a new government after the incumbent prime minister resigned in March, postponed parliamentary elections until late 2014, and adopted similar stopgap measures regarding key security and judicial appointments.

The number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon passed the one million mark in September 2013, according to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The influx of largely Sunni Muslim refugees added friction to the country's confessional divisions, with verbal and physical attacks persisting amid occasionally xenophobic and racist rhetoric by some politicians. The Syrians' arrival also placed an additional fiscal burden on the government and strained the country's already overextended infrastructure and basic services.

Militant activity linked to the war in Syria included a series of cross-border kidnappings and shootings between supporters and opponents of the Syrian government, which caused dozens of deaths. A low-intensity conflict in the city of Tripoli, ongoing since at least June 2011, continued during 2013, killing roughly 50 people. The fighting centered on a long-standing rivalry between an Alawite community in the Jabal Mohsen neighborhood, seen as being aligned with the Alawite-led government of Syria, and a Sunni community in the Bab al-Tebbaneh neighborhood, which is sympathetic to the Syrian rebel movement.

Two bombings in July and August 2013 struck the southern suburbs of Beirut in what was widely seen as retaliation for the Lebanese Shiite militant group Hezbollah's open involvement in the Syrian war on the government's side. The first attack injured 53 people, and the second attack killed 27 and injured 338. A previously unknown Sunni militant group claimed responsibility for the second bombing. Two other bombs were simultaneously triggered on a Friday after the noon prayer in front of two mosques in Tripoli in August. A total of 47 people were killed and several hundred wounded in those attacks, which were attributed to the Syrian government. Two Sunni sheikhs from the city – said to be close to the Syrian regime – were arrested and charged, in addition to a Syrian army officer who was charged in absentia. A double suicide bombing aimed at the Iranian embassy killed at least 22 people in November, and in December a senior Hezbollah commander and a Sunni politician were assassinated in separate attacks in Beirut.

Also during 2013, radical Sunni preacher Ahmad al-Assir in April called on his followers to join the fighting in Syria, and clashes broke out for two days in the southern city of Sidon in June between his supporters and the Lebanese army. Al-Assir fled and went into hiding. More than 40 people were killed in the fighting. One of the men killed in these clashes, Nader Bayoumi, allegedly died under torture in custody of the Lebanese army and intelligence.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 16 / 40 (-1)

A. Electoral Process: 4 / 12 (-1)

The president is selected every six years by the 128-member National Assembly, which in turn is elected for four-year terms. The president and parliament nominate the prime minister, who, along with the president, chooses the cabinet, subject to parliamentary approval. The unwritten National Pact of 1943 stipulates that the president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the National Assembly a Shiite Muslim. Parliamentary seats are divided among major sects under a constitutional formula that does not reflect their current demographic weight. Shiites comprise at least a third of the population, but they are allotted only 21 percent of parliamentary seats, for example. The sectarian political balance has been periodically reaffirmed and occasionally modified by foreign-brokered agreements like the 1989 Taif Accords and the 2008 Doha Agreement.

The last parliamentary elections were held in June 2009. Although they 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. The March 14 and March 8 coalitions won 71 and 57 seats, respectively, and Saad Hariri – the son of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, who was assassinated in 2005 – was named prime minister. The government collapsed in 2011 when Hezbollah-allied ministers resigned in protest of Hariri's cooperation with a special UN tribunal investigating the 2005 assassination, and a new cabinet headed by Hezbollah-backed prime minister Najib Miqati took office.

Miqati resigned in March 2013 after the pro-Hezbollah camp refused to extend the term of Ashraf Rifi as director general of the Internal Security Forces beyond April 1. The disagreement reflected rising political tensions linked to the Syrian civil war. President Michel Suleiman nominated Tammam Salam as a consensus candidate for prime minister, but he was unable to form a government for the remainder of the year, leaving Miqati in office in a caretaker capacity.

Parliamentary elections were due in June 2013, but disagreement between the different factions over the electoral law led the parliament to extend its own term, delaying elections until November 2014 in a move that some civil society activists protested as unconstitutional. Suleiman and others brought the matter before the Constitutional Council, but members boycotted its

sessions, thwarting a quorum four times. The term extension consequently became legal by default.

Suleiman's presidential term was set to expire in May 2014, feeding discussion on the need to extend his term in office as well, to prevent a void in the executive branch. If such a measure were implemented, Suleiman would be the third consecutive president whose term had to be extended since the end of the civil war in 1989. Many politicians were reportedly concerned about the dangers of moving forward with either legislative or presidential elections as long as the Syrian conflict continued.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 9 / 16

Two major factions have dominated Lebanese politics since 2005: the March 8 coalition, of which Shiite Hezbollah is the most powerful member and which is seen as aligned with the Syrian regime; and the March 14 bloc, which is headed by Sunni Muslims, generally supportive of the Syrian opposition, and associated with Saudi Arabia, Europe, and the United States. Christian factions are divided between the two blocs.

These divisions blurred during the 2013 debate over the electoral law, with most major Christian parties endorsing a proposal that would replace the existing system of 26 multimember constituencies – in which seats are allotted by sect but candidates seek votes from all residents of the district – with a single nationwide constituency in which members of a given sect could vote only for representatives from that sect, and seats would be distributed by party-list proportional representation. Critics said the measure would entrench the sectarian political system more deeply and give a large majority to Hezbollah and its allies. The president, Miqati, Druze political leader Walid Jumblatt, and core members of the March 14 coalition expressed their strong opposition. Parliament speaker Nabih Berri of the largely Shiite Amal Movement floated a hybrid bill that mixed the current electoral law and the controversial new proposal, but he withdrew it in May after strong opposition from Hariri's Future Movement. No new electoral legislation had been passed by year's end.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 16

Sectarian and political 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. The authority of the government is also limited in practice by the power of autonomous militant groups, such as Hezbollah. For much of 2013, the government ruled in a caretaker capacity, and the parliament exceeded its electoral mandate. Moreover, the Internal Security Forces director was replaced by a deputy on a temporary basis after he reached retirement age in April, and the term of military chief Jean Qahwaji, who would reach retirement age in September, was extended by two years in July.

The sectarian political system and the powerful role of foreign patrons effectively limit the accountability of elected officials to the public at large. Political and bureaucratic corruption is widespread, businesses routinely pay bribes and cultivate ties with politicians to win contracts, and anticorruption laws are loosely enforced. More than 60 percent of respondents said corruption in Lebanon had "increased a lot" in the past two years, according to Transparency International's 2013 Global Corruption Barometer. Lebanon was ranked 127 out of 177 countries and territories assessed in the organization's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 32 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 11 / 16

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are guaranteed by law, and the media are considered more open than in many other countries in the region. However, nearly all media

outlets have ties to sectarian leaders or groups, and consequently practice self-censorship and maintain a specific, often partisan, editorial line.

In addition, the law stipulates that the president and religious leaders cannot be insulted. A supporter of Christian politician Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement was arrested in June 2013 for insulting the president on the Twitter microblogging service, but was later freed on bail. The case was ongoing at year's end.

Censorship of artistic work is still prevalent, especially when the work involves politics, religion, sex, or Israel. Authorities banned the screening of a French film depicting homosexuality and a local short film about temporary marriage among Shiites at the October 2013 Beirut International Film Festival. However, authorities have in general become more cautious about arbitrary censorship, especially after activists in 2012 launched the Virtual Censorship Museum, an online database of censorship actions in Lebanon since the 1940s.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed in the constitution and protected in practice. However, informal religious discrimination is common. In a widely publicized case in July 2013, a Sunni man who eloped with a young Druze woman was later castrated by her family. Citizens' religious affiliation is automatically included in their official documents, unless they request its removal. Every religious group manages its own family and personal status laws, and has its own religious courts to adjudicate such matters. Proselytizing, while not punishable by law, is strongly discouraged by religious leaders and communities, sometimes with the threat of violence. Blasphemy is a criminal offense that carries up to one year in prison. Strife between religious groups has persisted to some extent since the 1975-90 civil war, and such differences – particularly between Sunnis and Shiites – have again been exacerbated by the civil war in neighboring Syria.

Academic freedom is generally unimpaired.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 7 / 16

The constitution guarantees freedoms of assembly and association, and the government generally respects these rights, though police have cracked down in the past on demonstrations against the government or the Syrian regime.

Civil society organizations have long operated openly in Lebanon, with some constraints. All nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must be registered with the Lebanese Interior Ministry. The ministry may force the NGO to undergo an approval process and investigate its founders, and representatives of the ministry must be invited to observe voting on bylaws and boards of directors.

Trade unions are often tightly linked to political organizations, and in recent years they have been subordinate to their political partners. The Palestinian population of Lebanon, estimated at about 400,000, is not permitted to participate in trade unions. In February and March, public-sector workers and teachers held large demonstrations calling on the government to pass legislation that would raise salaries. The protest actions temporarily paralyzed government bodies and public schools.

F. Rule of Law: 5 / 16

Political forces hold sway over an officially independent judiciary. The Supreme Judicial Council is composed of ten judges, eight of whom are nominated by the president and the cabinet. Other judges are nominated by the Judicial Council, approved by the Justice Ministry, and vetted by opposition and government parties. The delay in forming a new government during 2013 prevented the appointment of 46 new judges who had finished their internships at the Institute of Judiciary Studies.

While the regular judiciary generally follows international standards of criminal procedure, these standards are not followed in the military courts, which have been tasked with cases against Islamist militants, human rights activists, and alleged Israeli spies. In 2013, military judges issued warrants related to the crackdown on Ahmad al-Assir in Sidon and handled charges against a former city council member from Baalbek who was accused of spying for Israel. The use of torture remains widespread among Lebanese security forces despite a formal ban, and human rights groups continue to report arbitrary arrests and poor prison conditions.

The roughly 400,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon are denied citizenship rights and face employment and property restrictions. A 2010 law allowed them access to social security benefits, end-of-service compensation, and the right to bring complaints before labor courts, but closed off access to skilled professions and did not remove restrictions on property ownership.

Iraqi and Sudanese refugees in Lebanon do not enjoy official refugee status and thus face arbitrary detention, deportation, harassment, and abuse. In 2012, security forces detained a number of Syrian refugees and threatened to return them to Syria, and a number of kidnappings stemming from the Syrian conflict went uninvestigated.

Lebanon grants Syrian refugees who enter the country legally a free six-month residency permit with a possible six-month extension, and provides subsidized and sometimes free access to public education and healthcare. Female refugees have reported being sexually harassed by employers and landlords.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people face both official and societal discrimination and harassment. NGOs work to uphold their human rights, however, and social acceptance of the LGBT community is more common in urban and cosmopolitan areas, particularly in Beirut.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 9 / 16

Women are granted equal rights in the constitution, but they are disadvantaged under the sectarian personal status laws on issues such as divorce, inheritance, and child custody. NGOs have been lobbying for a change in some of these laws; in October 2013, women demonstrated in front of the main Shiite religious authority and called for revisions of its child custody law.

Under a 1925 law, women cannot pass their nationality to non-Lebanese husbands and children, and a draft law proposed by reformers was rejected in January 2013. Women's NGOs protested in September when they learned that over 100 people had been granted citizenship under a decree that was not made public in the official gazette. The naturalized citizens included clerics, Jordanian royals, and the relatives of politicians, leading to a public outcry and accusations of discrimination and favoritism.

In the aftermath of a high-profile case in which a woman was allegedly beaten to death by her husband, and a media campaign by the NGO KAFA, the parliament advanced a long-stalled bill to address domestic violence in July 2013. However, the measure was modified with input from some religious authorities, and among other flaws it failed to identify spousal rape as a crime. The bill had yet to win final passage at year's end.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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