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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2022 - Lebanon

Partly Free

42

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 13 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 29 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

43 / 100 Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Lebanon's political system ensures representation for its officially recognized religious communities, but limits competition and impedes the rise of cross-communal or civic parties. While residents enjoy some civil liberties and media pluralism, they also suffer from pervasive corruption and major weaknesses in the rule of law. The country's large population of noncitizens, including refugees and migrant workers, remain subject to legal constraints and societal attitudes that severely restrict their access to employment, freedom of movement, and other fundamental rights.

Key Developments in 2021

- In January, security forces clashed with demonstrators in Tripoli as they protested the extension of COVID-19-related restrictions on movement, which had exacerbated the country's ongoing economic collapse. Further protests related to the economic situation occurred later in the year.
- Prime minister-designate Saad Hariri resigned in July after failing to organize a government despite nine months of negotiations and citing differences with President Michel Aoun. A new government headed by Najib Mikati was installed in September, ending a 13-month stalemate since the last government collapsed in 2020, though ongoing disagreements prevented cabinet meetings from mid-October through the end of the year.
- In October, an armed confrontation in Beirut between supporters of the Shiite factions Hezbollah and the Amal Movement on the one hand and the Christian faction Lebanese Forces on the other left seven people dead and at least 32 others injured. The Shiite groups had been protesting a judicial investigation into the devastating August 2020 chemical explosion at the port of Beirut, for which several former officials faced charges.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

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

In 2016, after a two-year vacancy, lawmakers elected former military commander Michel Aoun as president. While the move eased the country's broader political deadlock, the parliament at the time had been operating with an expired electoral mandate for three years, undermining the democratic legitimacy of the presidential election.

For much of 2021, Lebanon’s political leaders struggled to form a government in the wake of Prime Minister Hassan Diab’s resignation in August 2020, in the wake of the chemical explosion at the port of Beirut. Prime minister-designate Saad Hariri withdrew in July after nine months of inconclusive negotiations, citing differences with the president. Aoun then asked Najib Mikati—who had served as prime minister twice before, most recently in 2011–14—to form a new government, which took office in September.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 2 / 4

Members of the 128-seat National Assembly are elected for four-year terms. The most recent elections were held in 2018, after a five-year delay; the parliament elected in 2009 had repeatedly extended its own term, citing the need for electoral reforms as well as security concerns related to the civil war in Syria.

In the 2018 elections, the Shiite militant group Hezbollah and its allies, including Christian factions linked to President Aoun, made gains overall, leaving them with a clear majority of seats. The Hezbollah-led bloc’s chief rival, Hariri’s Sunni-led Future Movement, lost more than a third of its seats, though its main Christian partners performed well, nearly doubling their representation. While the elections were conducted peacefully and were free and fair in many respects, vote buying was rampant, and the electoral framework retained a number of fundamental structural flaws associated with the sectarian political system. Turnout was less than 50 percent nationally and even lower in several contested districts.

In December 2021, the interior minister and the president signed a decree scheduling the next parliamentary elections for May 2022.

A3 0-4 pts

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

Lebanon does not have an independent electoral commission; instead, the Interior Ministry oversees elections. Parliamentary seats are divided among major sects under a constitutional formula that does not reflect their current demographic weight. While seat allocations have been adjusted through political agreements to resolve major impasses over the years, there has been no official census in Lebanon since the 1930s, prior to independence. The electoral framework is 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, and improved opportunities for diaspora voting. However, the rules for redistricting and seat allocation still favored incumbent parties. The law sharply raised registration fees for candidates as well as spending caps for campaigns, while allowing private organizations and foundations to promote coalitions and candidates, effectively increasing the advantages of wealthier groups and individuals. As under past electoral laws, members of the military and citizens who had been naturalized for less than 10 years could not participate.

The final months of 2021 featured disagreements over the timing of the next parliamentary elections and the role of diaspora voters. A parliamentary majority sought to hold the balloting in March 2022 rather than May, so as to avoid campaigning during Ramadan, but the president ultimately rejected the change. The Lebanese diaspora, which registered in large numbers, would be able to vote for all 128 seats; a leading Christian party had appealed to the Constitutional Council to limit diaspora voting to six dedicated seats, but the council did not reach consensus on the appeal, leaving the existing rule in place.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

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 3 / 4 competing parties or groupings?

Citizens are formally free to organize in different political groupings, and scores of parties compete in practice. While parties do rise and fall 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 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through 1 / 4 elections?

The elites who dominate Lebanese politics include traditional leaders, military veterans, former militia leaders, and wealthy businessmen. Under the country’s power-sharing system, none of the parties they control consistently behave as opposition groups. Consolidation of power among political elites also hampers intraparty competition.

Despite the new electoral system introduced in 2017, the political parties and alliances that prevailed before the reform have maintained their positions. They not only benefited from advantages under laws they shaped, but also used intimidation, social pressure, and propaganda to marginalize new political forces.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political 1 / sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 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. The 2018 elections featured credible allegations of corruption, widespread vote buying, and analyses pointing to the role of establishment parties’ patronage networks in mobilizing or incentivizing voters.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other 2 / relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 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 large refugee population, including residents of Palestinian refugee camps and Syrians who fled their country’s civil war, are not eligible to acquire citizenship and have no political rights.

Women formally have the same political rights as men. In practice, women remain marginalized due to religious restrictions, institutionalized inequality, hidden legal obstacles, political culture, and societal discrimination. Neither the 2017 electoral law nor informal understandings regarding power-sharing include rules to guarantee women’s participation in politics. Few women serve in the parliament as a result, though more female candidates participated in the 2018 elections than in previous contests: 111 women registered, with 86 ultimately running as candidates. Only six women were elected.

LGBT+ people have little political representation. However, more politicians have expressed support for their rights in recent years; nearly 100 parliamentary candidates in 2018 publicly called for the decriminalization of same-sex sexual relations.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies 1 / of the government? 4

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; meanwhile, the legislature generally facilitates these policies rather than serving as an independent institutional check on the government. The authority of the government is also limited in practice by the power of autonomous militant groups like Hezbollah and foreign states with interests in Lebanon.

The overdue elections of a president, parliament, parliament speaker, and prime minister between 2016 and 2019 eased the country’s years-long political deadlock. However, since Saad Hariri resigned as prime minister in late 2019, the system has been unstable. After Prime Minister Diab resigned in August 2020, he and his cabinet served only as caretakers, lacking the power in law and in practice to govern effectively. In July 2021, nine months after he was assigned to form a new government, Hariri stepped down as prime minister-designate, having failed to accomplish his task. The new prime minister-designate, Najib Mikati, successfully formed a government in September, but continued disagreement among the political factions prevented the cabinet from meeting after mid-October, and the impasse remained unresolved at year’s end.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 0 / 4

Corruption is endemic. Political and bureaucratic corruption is widespread, businesses routinely pay bribes and cultivate ties with politicians to win contracts or avoid unfavorable state actions, anticorruption laws are loosely enforced, and patronage networks generally operate unchecked. State expenditures remain irregular, with few mechanisms for effective oversight. Institutions such as the Central Inspection Bureau and Supreme Disciplinary Board are woefully underfunded and understaffed. When anticorruption institutions do take action, it tends to be selective or politicized. Chronic corruption has affected state-owned companies and utilities, contributing to poor service delivery and routine electricity blackouts. In 2021 these were exacerbated by fuel shortages linked to the broader economic crisis, and the lack of power affected vital services like the supply and treatment of drinking water.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

Political leaders and government officials often operate behind closed doors, outside of state institutions, and with little regard for formal procedures. Although civil society groups have some ability to influence pending policies or legislation, and may along with the media discuss proposals that have been made public, their influence is often contingent on participation in opaque processes. The National Assembly approved an access to information law in 2017, but it is not fully implemented, and government documents remain difficult to obtain in practice.

In the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion in August 2020, the state responded in opaque and arbitrary ways, withholding information and employing special emergency powers intermittently or selectively. The justice minister, through a nontransparent process, appointed a judge to lead an investigation of the explosion, which was caused by dangerous chemicals that had been left for years in a port warehouse. In December 2020 the judge charged Diab and three former cabinet ministers with criminal negligence; leading political figures denounced the decision, and some officials refused to cooperate with the probe. Attempts to obstruct the investigation continued during 2021. The judge was replaced in February, and political disagreement over the matter contributed to the Mikati’s government’s dysfunction late in the year, but the probe continued at year’s end.

Since 2019, the country has been suffering through one of the worst economic crises in world history, with a precipitous currency collapse underscoring concerns about transparency at the central bank and accountability for years of mismanagement that led to the crisis.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

Press freedom is constitutionally guaranteed but inconsistently upheld. While the country’s media are among the most open and diverse in the region, 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, and the artists responsible for work deemed controversial by the government or major religious groups face official interference. It is a criminal offense to criticize or defame the president or security services. Authorities sometimes use such laws to harass and detain journalists, and those detained are often forced to sign pledges to refrain from writing content viewed as defamatory by the government.

Authorities have failed to protect the media from violence or intimidation by members of political, religious, and other influential groups. Both security forces and supporters of political parties have attacked reporters covering protests, and several journalists have experienced harassment and threats of violence online.

Despite the legal and practical obstacles they face, many journalists have been able to report and comment on sensitive topics such as state corruption, elite malfeasance, and the behavior of armed factions like Hezbollah. However, the financial viability of their work has been threatened by the economic collapse. Prominent media outlets have shut down as a result of the deteriorating situation, including the *Daily Star*, Lebanon’s oldest English-language daily newspaper, which closed at the end of October 2021.

D2 0-4 pts

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. While blasphemy is a criminal offense, enforcement varies and is generally lax. Individuals may face societal pressure to express faith or allegiance to a confessional community. Leaders and members of different communities discourage proselytizing by other groups.

D3 0-4 pts

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—limit 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 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of 2 / surveillance or retribution? 4

Private discussion and public expression of personal views on political and other controversial topics have been increasingly inhibited in recent years. Repressive laws that criminalize defamation or otherwise restrict speech remain on the books, and individuals sometimes face police questioning, arrests, short detentions, or fines if they criticize the government, the military, foreign heads of state, or other powerful entities. Noncitizens, including refugees and migrant workers, have fewer legal protections and may be especially reluctant to engage in speech that could draw the attention of the security services.

Lebanese authorities often use cameras to record people in public places, and regularly monitor social media and electronic communications—including those of prominent individuals such as politicians, dissidents, and journalists. Security personnel have reportedly infiltrated the social media groups of activists and protesters in recent years.

Authorities also fail to protect people from nonstate actors, such as political parties or militant groups and their supporters, that may monitor and punish them for expressing critical opinions. Since the outbreak of mass protests against corruption and governance failures in 2019, journalists, activists, and outspoken social media users have

increasingly faced physical attacks and online threats or harassment by such powerful groups. Mariam Seifeddine, a journalist who has been critical of Hezbollah and other elements of the political elite, has reported multiple threats and physical assaults directed at her and her family members, including during 2021. In the year’s most high-profile attack, columnist and commentator Lokman Slim, also a well-known critic of Hezbollah who had reported death threats, was murdered in February. Such apparent reprisals help to deter free expression by less prominent individuals in Lebanese society.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to a multiyear escalation in threats and violence against critics of powerful political and militant groups.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 3 / 4

The authorities generally respect the right to assemble, which is protected under the constitution, and people routinely gather without permits or coordination with security services in practice. Demonstrators have been able to mount protests against government dysfunction and lack of services in recent years, but the events have often featured violence by authorities, political parties, militia groups, and civilian participants.

For example, in January 2021, security forces clashed with demonstrators in Tripoli as they protested the extension of COVID-19-related restrictions on movement, resulting in a number of injuries and the death of at least one demonstrator. Arrested participants allegedly faced abuse in custody and charges in military courts. In August, police again fought with demonstrators as they demanded accountability for the Beirut port explosion a year earlier. Supporters of various political parties also beat protesters or attacked their encampments during the year. In October, a Hezbollah-led protest demanding the removal of the judge leading the investigation of the port explosion degenerated into an armed clash between Hezbollah and the Amal Movement on the one hand and the Lebanese Forces faction on the other. The confrontation left seven people dead and at least 32 others injured. In November, protesters blocked highways and intersections in major cities to protest the government’s mismanagement of the worsening economic crisis.

E2 0-4 pts

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

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) tend to operate freely in Lebanon, though they must comply with the Law on Associations—which has been modified but not comprehensively overhauled since its enactment in 1909—and 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. NGOs sometimes face bureaucratic obstruction or intimidation by security services, depending on their line of work or particular initiatives. Groups that focus on Syria-related matters or are led and staffed by Syrian refugees are especially prone to scrutiny and interference.

E3 0-4 pts

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. 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. While noncitizen legal residents may join unions under the law, migrant workers have fewer union rights, and large numbers of refugees lack legal status or the right to work.

Many unions are linked to established political parties and serve as tools of influence for political leaders. However, activists affiliated with the 2019 protest movement have successfully challenged incumbent forces in recent elections within some unions and professional associations.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

Lebanon’s judiciary is not independent. Political leaders exercise significant influence over judicial appointments, jurisdiction, processes, and decisions, which are also affected by corruption and the undue influence of other prominent people.

Hezbollah and its political allies have repeatedly sought to replace the judge leading the investigation into the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Former officials implicated in the case secured a February 2021 court ruling that removed the first judge, Fadi Sawan, for potential bias. The same political forces accused his replacement, Tarek Bitar, of bias, boycotted government meetings over the issue, and persuaded supporters to protest against him. Defendants and suspects filed multiple legal challenges seeking Bitar’s recusal that delayed the investigation during the year, but he continued to lead it at year’s end.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Due process is subject to a number of impediments, including violations of defendants' right to counsel and extensive use of lengthy pretrial detention. 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.

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4**

Residents of southern Lebanon have lived with the risk of land-mine detonation since the 1975–90 civil war, and armed militias, terrorist groups, and criminal organizations continue to undermine security in the country. In addition to the armed clashes in October 2021 between Hezbollah and the Amal Movement on the one hand and the Lebanese Forces faction on the other, smaller-scale violence involving organized crime and powerful local clans took a number of lives. At least 25 people reportedly died in clan-related violence between January 2020 and April 2021.

In May 2021, during an escalation of violence between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli army announced that multiple rockets were launched from Lebanon toward Israel but caused no damage or casualties. Israeli forces responded by firing artillery at the sources of the rocket attacks. Also that month, a Lebanese man died after the Israeli military fired on him and a group of other young men as they tried to breach the border fence.

Prisons and detention centers are badly overcrowded and poorly equipped, and the use of torture by law enforcement, military, and state security personnel continues despite the passage of antitorture legislation and the creation of institutional mechanisms to halt the practice.

F4 0-4 pts**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 groups have engaged in discriminatory behavior toward one another in practice, and people who do not belong to a recognized community have difficulty obtaining official documents, government jobs, and other services.

Women face discrimination in wages, benefits, and societal standards and practices, and are barred from certain types of employment.

LGBT+ people face both official and societal discrimination and harassment. A criminal code provision barring same-sex sexual relations remains in force, and people who violate this law risk a one-year prison sentence.

More than 1.5 million Syrians resided in Lebanon as of 2021. Of that number, some 841,000 were officially registered as refugees by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; the government has barred the agency from registering new Syrian refugees since 2015. Syrian refugees have faced arbitrary arrests and other forms of harassment, and most live in poverty due in part to limitations on their employment options. The government has also enforced housing regulations to compel Syrian refugees to destroy their informal camps, threatening to use the military against those who did not comply. Syrians have sometimes been deported despite the risk of mistreatment by Syrian authorities.

About 479,000 Palestinian refugees are registered in Lebanon, though fewer than 200,000 actually live there. Many reside in 12 designated refugee camps and are restricted from 39 professions, contributing to widespread poverty, unemployment, and underemployment. In 2019, Lebanese authorities issued new regulations requiring foreigners to possess work permits, further restricting Palestinians' access to the labor market.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights**G1 0-4 pts****Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, 1 / 4**

Citizens enjoy constitutional and legal rights to freedom of movement. With few formal restrictions, they are able to travel within Lebanon. Nevertheless, citizens find it extremely difficult to transfer official places of residence for voting purposes. They also face de facto sectarian boundaries and militia checkpoints in some areas.

Noncitizens are subject to much harsher restrictions on movement. Many Palestinians classified as refugees live in designated camps, and access to those areas is controlled and often constrained by Lebanese security services. Many Syrian refugees live in informal camps or smaller settlements, and are subject to curfews and other obstacles to movement.

Migrant workers face severe restrictions on movement under a sponsorship system that revokes their residency rights if they are dismissed by their designated employers. Employers often confiscate migrant workers' passports, further reducing their autonomy.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without 2 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 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 0-4 pts

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

Because the religious codes and courts of each confessional community determine personal status law in Lebanon, people’s rights regarding marriage, divorce, and child custody depend on their affiliation, though women are typically at a disadvantage compared with men. Partners seeking to enter an interfaith marriage often travel abroad, as Lebanon recognizes civil marriages performed elsewhere. Women cannot pass Lebanese citizenship to non-Lebanese spouses or children of non-Lebanese fathers.

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, was repealed in 2017. However, the change did not affect a similar article related to sex with a minor, and spousal rape is still not a criminal offense.

Same-sex marriage remains illegal in Lebanon. However, transgender people have some legal precedent allowing them to live publicly based on their gender identity; a 2016 Court of Appeals ruling allowed a transgender man to legally change his gender in the civil registry and supported the plaintiff’s desire to seek gender confirmation surgery.

G4 0-4 pts

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

Citizens’ communal affiliation can either enhance or restrict their 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, layered on top of communally enabled corruption, in the public and private sectors.

All residents of Lebanon have faced hardship amid the economic crisis that emerged in 2019, featuring rampant inflation, currency devaluation, import shortages, and a sharp rise in poverty rates. However, noncitizens, such as refugees and migrant workers, are subject to particular disadvantages and have long been especially vulnerable to exploitative working conditions and sex trafficking. The authorities do not effectively enforce laws against child labor, which is common among Syrian refugees, rural Lebanese, and segments of the urban poor.

Household workers and migrant workers who operate under the sponsorship system routinely suffer from economic exploitation. Employers are favored in legal cases involving migrant workers, discouraging the latter from reporting denial of wages as well as physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. Beginning in 2020, as the economy collapsed, some employers abandoned their non-Lebanese employees near their home countries’ embassies, often without fulfilling their contractual obligation to provide for the workers’ return flights.

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