

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	696
Land:	Libanon
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2021 Lebanon
Udgivet:	3. marts 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	12. april 2021

Document #2048589

Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Lebanon

PARTLY FREE

43

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 13 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 30 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

44 / 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 2020

- In August, more than 200 people died and thousands were injured in a massive chemical explosion in the port of Beirut that devastated much of the capital. The official response was characterized by a lack of transparency, and key politicians refused to cooperate with a judicial investigation into possible criminal negligence.
- Prime Minister Hassan Diab resigned after the explosion, but the official designated to replace him withdrew in September after failing to form a government, and former prime minister Saad Hariri was nominated instead. Hariri had yet to organize a new cabinet at year's end, and Diab remained in place as a caretaker prime minister.
- A lockdown imposed early in the year was fairly successful in containing the COVID-19 pandemic, but cases began to rise in the late summer and fall after restrictions were eased, and attempts to regain control were hampered by the effects of the Beirut blast and the country's worsening economic and governance problems. By year's end, 1,443 deaths had been reported by the World Health Organization.

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.

In January 2020, Hassan Diab—a former education minister and a vice president at the American University of Beirut—was sworn in as prime minister along with a new cabinet. He succeeded Saad Hariri, who had resigned in October 2019 following widespread anticorruption protests. Diab’s government collapsed in August 2020 after the devastating chemical explosion in Beirut, and he announced his resignation. Mustapha Adib, Lebanon’s ambassador to Germany, was nominated to replace Diab, but he withdrew in September after failing to form a technocratic government. Hariri returned as the new prime minister-designate, though he had yet to organize a government at year’s end, and Diab remained in office in a caretaker capacity.

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 five-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.

A3 0-4 pts

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

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. 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 favor 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 advantages accorded to wealthier groups and individuals. As under past electoral laws, members of the military and citizens who have been naturalized for less than 10 years cannot participate in elections.

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 / competing parties or groupings? 4

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 / elections? 4

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, as well as 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 Palestinian refugee camp residents 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 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 elections of a president, parliament, parliament speaker, and prime minister between 2016 and 2019 eased the country's years-long political deadlock. However, since then prime minister Saad Hariri resigned in late 2019, the system has been unstable; the Diab government was seen as unable and unwilling to set its own agenda or pursue its own policies without approval or acquiescence from the elites who backed it. After Diab resigned in August 2020, he and his cabinet served only as caretakers through the end of the year, lacking the power in law and in practice to govern effectively.

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.

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 obstructing both policy input and accountability efforts. Different security services seemed to work at cross-purposes and without communicating clearly to the public, and special powers associated with emergency declarations were employed 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 the judge charged Diab and three former cabinet ministers with criminal negligence, but leading political figures denounced the decision, and some officials refused to cooperate with the probe.

Separately in 2020, an ongoing collapse of the country's currency reverberated through the financial system and the broader economy, underscoring concerns about transparency at the central bank and accountability for years of mismanagement that led to the crisis.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 due to the government's opaque and disjointed responses to a series of national crises in recent years, including a currency collapse and a massive explosion in Beirut's port complex that devastated much of the capital.

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. Supporters of political parties attacked reporters covering protests in January and February 2020, and several journalists experienced harassment online throughout the year—with partisans often threatening to kill or otherwise harm them. Journalists were also assaulted by security personnel and demonstrators during protests that followed the Beirut port explosion in August. A photographer who was reportedly among the first to arrive at the scene of the blast was assassinated in December, stirring speculation about possible motives for the killing.

Despite the legal and practical obstacles they faced, many journalists in 2020 were able to report and comment on sensitive topics such as state corruption, elite malfeasance, and the behavior of armed factions like Hezbollah.

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 surveillance or retribution? 4

Private discussion and public expression of personal views are somewhat uninhibited. Lebanese citizens routinely engage in debates about political and other controversial topics, both online and offline. However, 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 of prominent individuals such as politicians, dissidents, and journalists. 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.

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, including in 2020. While most participants have remained peaceful, smaller groups have occasionally engaged in violence.

Authorities, political parties, militia groups, and individuals have sometimes responded to peaceful demonstrations with violence. For example, riot police used force to disperse protesters in downtown Beirut in January 2020, as cabinet formation was underway, and after the Beirut port explosion in August. Supporters of various political parties also beat protesters or attacked their encampments during the year.

Organizers of other types of gatherings—such as LGBT+ pride events, concerts featuring LGBT+ performers, or public discussions with authors and activists who hold certain positions on the Syrian civil war—may also face threats from hostile nonstate groups and lack effective protection from the government.

E2 0-4 pts

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

NGOs tend to operate freely in Lebanon, though they must comply with the Law on Associations, which has not been thoroughly updated since 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, 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. 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.

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.

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

Armed militias, terrorist groups, and criminal organizations continue to undermine security in Lebanon. Residents in southern Lebanon have lived with the risk of land-mine detonation since the 1975–90 civil war. Hundreds of thousands of mines were deployed during the war by multiple groups, including the Israeli military and Lebanese militias. The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has worked to remove these mines since 2006, along with the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), a UK-based NGO.

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.

In 2020, the incumbent interior minister admitted in a television interview that he had killed two people during the civil war and that Aoun, the current president, had protected him from repercussions; he did not clarify the circumstances of the killings. The admission coincided with abuses by security services under the interior minister’s control during the year. In August, for instance, security personnel assaulted and harassed citizens for insulting the president or engaging in protests after the Beirut port explosion.

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. In 2018, an appeals court ruled that private same-sex intercourse between consenting adults was not illegal, though the decision was not binding beyond the case in question, and the criminal code provision barring same-sex sexual relations remains in force. LGBT+ people who violate this law risk a one-year prison sentence.

More than a million Syrians reside in Lebanon. Of that number, some 865,000 were officially registered as refugees as of the end of 2020 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 477,000 Palestinian refugees resided in Lebanon as of mid-2020. Some 45 percent of those already residing in Lebanon prior to the Syrian civil war live 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 / employment, or education? 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. In 2020, many municipalities introduced special COVID-19-related curfews and restrictions that applied only to Syrian refugees.

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.

In 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.

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

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.

Noncitizens, such as refugees and migrant workers, enjoy even less opportunity and are 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. In 2020, as the Lebanese 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.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on political
rights and civil liberties in 2020

Country:

Lebanon

Source:

[Freedom House](#)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

3 March 2021

Document ID:

2048589

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