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2013 Scores

Status: Partly Free
 Freedom Rating: 4.5
 Civil Liberties: 4
 Political Rights: 5

Trend Arrow ↓

Lebanon received a downward trend arrow due to deterioration in the security environment and increasing attacks and restrictions on journalists, activists, and refugees.

Overview

The conflict in neighboring Syria continued to affect developments in Lebanon in 2012, as refugees crossed into the country and supporters of the Syrian government clashed violently with rebel supporters, especially in northern Lebanon. Security chief Wissam al-Hassan was assassinated in October, likely for his role in exposing Syrian plans to destabilize Lebanon. Attacks on journalists, activists, and refugees increased, while Prime Minister Najib Miqati faced calls to resign.

Lebanon was established as a League of Nations mandate under French control in 1920. After winning independence in 1943, it maintained a precarious electoral system based on the division of power among the country's then 18 officially recognized sectarian communities. As the population's slight Christian majority waned into a minority, Muslim leaders demanded reform of the fixed 6-to-5 ratio of Christian-to-Muslim parliamentary seats and an end to exclusive Maronite Christian control of the presidency. In 1975, war erupted between a coalition of Lebanese Muslim and leftist militias aligned with Palestinian guerrilla groups, and an array of Christian militias bent on preserving the political status quo. Syrian troops entered Lebanon in 1976 to restore order; Israel launched military campaigns against Palestinian militants in Lebanon in 1978 and 1982.

In 1989, the surviving members of Lebanon's 1972 parliament convened in Taif, Saudi Arabia, and agreed to an Arab League plan that would weaken the presidency, establish equal Christian and Muslim parliamentary representation, and mandate close security cooperation with occupying Syrian troops. A new Syrian-backed government then extended its writ to most of the country, with southern Lebanon remaining under Israeli occupation until 2000. By the end of the 1990s,

Lebanon's economy was in deep recession, and growing public disaffection with the postwar establishment spurred demonstrations against Syrian domination.

In 2004, the United States joined with France and most other European governments in calling for an end to Syria's power over Lebanon. Damascus moved to defend its position by seeking a constitutional amendment to extend the tenure of President Emile Lahoud, a staunch Syrian ally. On the eve of the parliamentary vote, the UN Security Council issued a resolution calling for a presidential election, the withdrawal of all foreign forces, and the disarmament of militias. The amendment nevertheless passed, provoking an international outcry.

Encouraged by the international climate, Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and other politicians began defecting to the opposition. In February 2005, four months after resigning as prime minister, Hariri was killed along with 22 others by a car bomb. Widespread suspicions of Syrian involvement led to international pressure for an immediate Syrian withdrawal and to extensive anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut. An interim government was formed to oversee legislative elections. Syrian troops pulled out of Lebanon in April 2005. Allies of the late Hariri, consisting mainly of Sunni Muslims and certain Christian and Druze factions, named themselves the March 14 coalition, and won a plurality of seats in parliamentary elections; with support from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and others, the coalition went on to form a new government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

In July 2006, the Shiite Islamist movement Hezbollah attacked Israeli forces in a cross-border raid, sparking a six-week war that severely damaged Lebanon's infrastructure and killed some 1,500 people, most of them Lebanese civilians. After a UN-brokered ceasefire, Lebanese politicians struggled to stabilize the government. The March 8 Coalition – a largely Shiite and Christian bloc that included Hezbollah and was aligned with Syria and Iran – left the national unity government in November, demanding a reorganized cabinet in which it would hold veto power. In 2007, the army waged a four-month campaign against Fatah al-Islam, a Sunni Islamist militant group based in Nahr el-Bared, a Palestinian refugee camp, which killed some 400 people and displaced more than 30,000 others.

In May 2008, responding to a pair of government decisions they viewed as a threat, Hezbollah and its allies seized West Beirut by force, leading to battles across Lebanon that left nearly 100 people dead. A power-sharing agreement brokered by Qatar cleared the way for the delayed election of politically neutral army commander Michel Suleiman as president, the formation of a new national unity government, and the passage of a revised election law in September.

In June 2009 parliamentary elections, the March 14 and March 8 coalitions won 71 and 57 seats, respectively, and Saad Hariri – the son of Rafiq Hariri – was named prime minister. 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.

A 2010 investigation by the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) of Hezbollah members' involvement in the Hariri assassination threatened to upset the new balance of power. To avoid political and sectarian fighting, political leaders chose which candidates would run in the 2010 municipal elections, effectively deciding the outcome well in advance of the balloting.

In 2011, eleven ministers allied with Hezbollah resigned to protest the STL's indictment of Hezbollah members and Saad Hariri's refusal to end the government's cooperation with the tribunal. The Hezbollah-backed Najib Miqati became prime minister as a result, spurring protests throughout the country.

The internal conflict in Syria spilled over into Lebanon in late 2011, as Syrian forces crossed the border to capture or kill fleeing military defectors and refugees. The office of the United Nations

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that by the end of December 2012, more than 175,000 Syrian refugees were in Lebanon, including those registered and those awaiting registration. The Syrian conflict also sparked sectarian fighting in Lebanon, as a series of cross-border kidnappings and shootings between supporters and opponents of the Syrian government led to dozens of deaths, including December clashes that killed 17 in Tripoli. Journalists and activists were attacked on several occasions by both supporters of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and Syrian rebels.

In February 2012, the STL announced that suspects in the 2005 attack on Rafiq Hariri would be tried in absentia in March 2013, and the United Nations renewed the STL's mandate for three years. National Dialogue sessions on security produced the June 2012 Baabda Declaration, which committed Lebanese political groups to keeping Lebanon neutral in the face of regional conflict. Hezbollah rejected calls from the United Nations to disarm, and in October claimed to have sent an Iranian-designed unmanned surveillance vehicle over Israeli airspace. Hezbollah's opponents argued that this action violated the Baabda Declaration.

In August, Michel Samaha, a former Lebanese government minister, was arrested on charges that he had coordinated with Syrian leaders to bomb rebel targets in northern Lebanon. In October, security chief Wissam al-Hassan was killed in a car bomb explosion in Beirut that also killed several bystanders. The assassination was likely due to al-Hassan's role in uncovering the Samaha plot, and prompted calls from the March 14 Coalition for Prime Minister Miqati's resignation. President Suleiman, however, insisted that the resignation would result in a power vacuum and urged Miqati to stay on. The assassination also halted the National Dialogue talks. Just before the end of the year, the March 14 Coalition demanded that integration of Hezbollah's arms into state arsenals also be a precondition for resuming the Dialogue.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Lebanon is not an electoral democracy. 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. 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 2009 parliamentary elections were conducted under an election law stemming from the Doha Agreement, which condensed nationwide voting into a single day, introduced some curbs on campaign finance and advertising, and created smaller, more religiously homogeneous districts. Parliament approved a law in April to allow Lebanese expatriates to vote in the 2013 elections. Throughout the year, parliament debated various proposals for a new electoral law in advance of the 2013 elections, but ongoing security concerns and lack of consensus prevented parliament from passing any proposal before the end of the year.

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. Lebanon was ranked 128 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Lebanon has a long tradition of press freedom, though nearly all media outlets have ties to political groups. There are seven privately owned television stations and dozens of privately

owned radio and print outlets that reflect a range of views. Internet access is not restricted. Vaguely worded laws have been applied in isolated cases to ban critical reporting on Syria, foreign leaders, the military, the judiciary, and the presidency. In 2012, the government censored and prosecuted artists and activists for presenting material deemed "indecent" or sensitive to state security, including work expressing anti-Syrian sentiment. Violent attacks on journalists covering the Syrian conflict and its impact on Lebanon increased, and security forces shot and killed a cameraman operating near the Syrian border in April. In August 2012, journalist Rami Aysha was detained for nearly a month and was tortured in detention.

In December 2012, Lebanon's internal security forces requested that the Ministry of Telecommunications share with it all text messages sent in Lebanon over a two-month period surrounding Wissam al-Hassan's assassination, along with the log-in and password information for several online services, in a move widely criticized as an invasion of Lebanese citizens' privacy.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed in the constitution and protected in practice. However, informal religious discrimination is common. The country's political system is based on sectarian quotas, and citizens who delete their religion from their national registration seriously limit their ability to hold government positions or run for political office. Academic freedom is firmly established.

Freedom of assembly has been generally unrestricted in the past, as hundreds of thousands of Lebanese have rallied in favor of or in opposition to the government. However, there have been reports of detentions of protest organizers who call for democratic change in Syria. In the past, Lebanon's civil society was vibrant, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including human rights groups, operated openly. While this remains the case for many groups, constraints have increased in recent years. By law, the government only requires notification of an NGO's formation, but the Interior Ministry has at times transformed this into an approval process and has been known to conduct inquiries into an organization's founding members. NGOs must invite ministry representatives to votes on bylaws or boards of directors. All workers except those in government may establish unions, which have the right to strike and bargain collectively. In recent years, unions have been closely affiliated with political groupings, and labor concerns have taken a back seat to union-based political activity.

The judiciary, while ostensibly independent, is subject to heavy political influence in practice. The Judicial Council nominates judges, who are then approved by the Justice Ministry. Both government and opposition parties vet judicial appointments. International standards of criminal procedure are generally observed in the regular judiciary, but not in the military courts, which consist largely of military officers with no legal training. Though civilian oversight is guaranteed in theory, it is difficult for civilians to observe the trials in practice, and in some cases defendants have no right to appeal. The military courts are tasked with trying those accused of spying for Israel, as well as Fatah al-Islam militants, human rights workers, and individuals perceived to be inciting sectarian conflict.

The security forces' practice of arbitrary detention had declined until the last few years. While the government has made some progress toward ending torture, regulations on the issue are often not enforced, and the use of torture remains widespread in security-related cases. Prison conditions are poor.

About 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. In June 2012, Lebanese security forces killed several Palestinians during protests in refugee camps in Ain al-Hilweh and Nahr al-Bared refugee camps, including several teenage boys.

The estimated 50,000 Iraqi refugees in Lebanon and the substantial Sudanese refugee population 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. In October 2012, army and intelligence forces raided houses in Beirut hosting migrant workers from Egypt, Sudan, and Syria, beating male workers in alleged retaliation for the harassment of local women. Human rights organizations have characterized the attacks as xenophobic. The Ministry of Tourism in 2012 issued a memorandum prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race at Lebanon's private pools and beaches.

Women enjoy many of the same rights as men, but they experience some social and legal discrimination. Since personal-status matters are adjudicated by each sect's religious authorities, women are subject to discriminatory rules governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. Women hold only four parliamentary seats. In 2012, activists criticized a proposed law addressing violence against women, claiming it was insufficient. The public abuse and subsequent suicide of an Ethiopian domestic worker in Beirut in March drew attention to the exploitation and abuse perpetrated against female domestic workers. International rights groups have criticized the internal security forces' use of anal examinations of suspected gay men as a form of torture. According to the U.S. State Department's 2012 Trafficking in Persons Report, foreign workers from Africa and East Asia are often victims of forced labor, withheld wages, restricted movement, sexual exploitation, and verbal and physical abuse.

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