

Lebanon's Chamber of Deputies



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Consociational power-sharing, or consociational democracy, is the prevalent governing system in Lebanon. In 1943, the country gained its independence from France, and with the foundation of the National Pact (*al-Mithaq al-Watani*) followed by the fifteen-year-long civil war (1975–1990) and then reaching the well-known Ta'if Agreement, in 1989, which put a halt to the war – consociationalism became the dominant political arrangement of the Lebanese state. In addition, the country is home to eighteen recognized ethno-religious groups. This diversity is a key feature in the state's branches but more importantly within Lebanon's legislature.

Political System

Before the Lebanese Civil War broke out in April 1975, tensions were already rising among different social and political groups in Lebanon. Against a background of escalating sectarianism, the culmination of these insecurities came to a strife with violence erupting mainly between Muslim and Maronite Christian fractions. During this time, the Arab League also facilitated the promotion of Syria's involvement in Lebanon. In 1976, Syrian troops entered the country through an understanding of encouraging stability and security in Lebanon. This attempt ushered an era of which conflicting interests were established under a quasi-Syrian hegemony.

This was later heavily criticized and opposed by the local Lebanese population until the eventual withdrawal of Syrian military troops in 2005.

The Ta'if Agreement, which was brokered in Saudi Arabia under the auspices of Riyadh and the Arab League and under the influence of Syria, became the central template of Lebanon's political system as it stands today. It emphasized the nature of Lebanon's ethno-religious mosaic while underscoring that "common coexistence" is the crucial foundation for peace and stability in the country and among its diverse population. It also consolidated that Lebanon is a democratic parliamentary republic while safeguarding that all sects and religious associations must be protected without discrimination and be adequately represented.

Notably, the agreement modified the 55:45 Christian-Muslim ratio of parliamentary seats to an equal 50:50 and increased the number of seats which presently stands at 128 Members of Parliament (MPs). Described as an "association of confessional communities", the political system in Lebanon adopted this characterization whereby public offices, specifically in parliament, are contingent on the country's multi-faith population. This power-sharing dynamic was thought to be the most appropriate to Lebanon as the country is prone to both inter-and-intra conflicts; and, by safeguarding the rights of the many ethno-religious groups which the country has, consociationalism appeared to be the most fitting political arrangement.

Electoral System

Lebanon's Chamber of Deputies (*Majlis al-Nuwwab*) is the country's legislative branch whose members are directly elected by the population for a four-year mandate. Article No. 22 of the Lebanese constitution as well as under the Political Reforms section of the Ta'if Agreement, included the composition of a Senate, yet this point eventually never transpired, and the Lebanese parliament remained unicameral in its structure. The Head of the Chamber of Deputies is elected from the legislature's members and remains for the same term.

Nevertheless, a point of contention in Lebanon's complicated system has been its electoral law. The deep-rooted cleavages in the country coupled with its consociational model are some of the main hindrances in settling on an appropriate electoral system that would be representative of the population and its ethno-religious affiliations. It is, however, worth noting that the last official

census that Lebanon has had was in 1932, and its results indicated a slight majority towards Maronite Christians. Still, the population fundamentally shifted since then and with the ongoing streams of emigration from, and to, the country – the constellation of religious groups in Lebanon fluctuated over the past decades. In this vein, the President of Lebanon must always be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies a Shi'a Muslim, and the Deputy Speaker a Greek Orthodox Christian.

Currently, Lebanon's legislature is elected based on a new parliamentary electoral law which was ratified in 2017. The law is loosely based on a hybrid system of proportionality which also permits preferential voting. The new electoral law, No. 44, which was a departure from its 2008 predecessor, Law No. 25, included several changes but was criticized as it still allowed salient issues pertaining to gerrymandering. However, some of the observable differences of the new electoral law were the modification from a majoritarian to a proportional system, voting operations, and mandatory pre-printed ballots. The new law was then amended to include an 'out-of-country' voting provision of which Lebanese expats would be allowed to vote from abroad in accordance with their constituencies at home. The latter point is essential to the country's history and demographic nature as there are approximately millions of the Lebanese diaspora based outside of the country.

Proportion of Women Representatives

A significantly small proportion of the Lebanese legislature is composed of women MPs. Although the country has made some minor progress regarding women in terms of labor force inclusion and socio-economic status in the last few years; still, the political participation of women is insufficient at best. The latest parliamentary elections, which took place in May 2022, saw the highest share of women representatives with a total number of eight women MPs out of the 128 allocated seats. The elections only saw a slight increase from its prior 2018 elections where there were only 6 women MPs in total. Thus, the current representation of women at the Lebanese legislature still needs fundamental improvement in terms of gender-equality and aiding women to be part of public office. Figure 1 shows the percentage of women and men MPs in Lebanon’s parliament over the years.

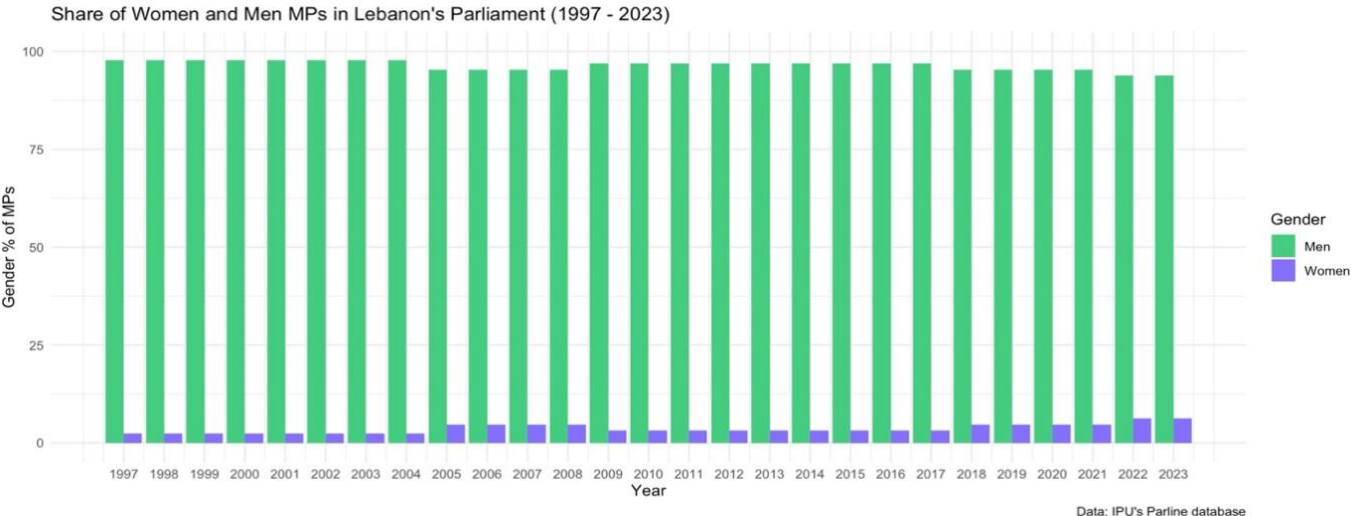


Figure 1: The current percentage of women MPs in the Lebanese parliament is 6.25.

Main Powers and Procedures

As described, Lebanon’s consociational model guarantees a pre-defined representation between Muslim and Christian groups at the parliament. Indeed, the structure in the Lebanese legislature is constructed to ensure that sects, pertaining to either of the two religions, have somewhat of an equal footing of representation. Nevertheless, as the literature shows, this form of political arrangement is often more concerned with the maintenance of (descriptive) representation as a function of avoiding breakdowns, or conflicts, rather than being committed to the tasks that the legislature is required to do.

As per the Lebanese constitution, Article No. 16, the legislative power is fully vested in a single body which is the Chamber of Deputies. Article No. 49, for example, warrants that the President of the Lebanese Republic is to be voted by the parliament through two rounds. In the first round, a two-thirds majority is required and is voted in a secret ballot. Once quorum is reached, the second round includes voting in through a simple majority which includes 65 deputies. Moreover, the parliament is also required to conduct consultations with the designated Prime Minister through the process of forming a government after the parliamentary elections.

Like the ubiquitous functions of elected legislatures, the Lebanese Chamber of Deputies is expected to impose a system of checks-and-balances on the executive and to uphold the interests of population at large. Yet, the consociational arrangement of Lebanon's system and against the grievances precipitated mainly through sectarianism and elite-capture in the country, the legislature's functions have been scrutinized. Beside the issue of 'accurate' representation, either descriptive or substantive, the Chamber of Deputies is in dire need of political reforms to hold sway over the power of sectarian elites who harbor a system of patronage and control several resources of the state.

Ongoing debates specific to Lebanon's Parliament

The tenure of the Lebanese legislature, and equally, its MPs, have been nothing short of debate. For example, since the parliamentary elections of 2009 up until 2018, the Chamber of Deputies repeatedly (self)-extended its term under different pretexts citing the security situation in neighboring Syria and the political deadlock in agreeing on a suitable electoral law. The extension was considered unconstitutional by many and as a result, largescale protests took to the street to express their dismay against the parliamentary extension and to demand that the elections take place at their scheduled timing. Moreover, on October 17th, 2019, one of the largest protests in Lebanon's history erupted as a response to the increased taxes proposed by the government. These protests were also in parallel to the ongoing financial calamity and economic mismanagement that the country is witnessing.

Another significant debate surrounding Lebanon's legislature is its ability to leverage the consociational model to its own benefit regardless of the population's benefit. The model is set up to conserve the interests of "confessional elites" and their power in the system without accountability nor censure. This political arrangement is deeply entrenched to a point that any changes introduced to the system itself would lead to pronounced instabilities pertaining to both the economic development of the country as well as its delicate security situation. The violent precedent of the Civil War, and its ramifications, has been argued in favor to the consociational formula as it tries to balance the interests of the multifaceted faith-groups in the country. However, and as Lebanon is undergoing one its worst crises in modern history, this political arrangement needs to be meaningfully reevaluated while keeping the population's best interests at its core.

Further Readings on Lebanon's Chamber of Deputies and Consociational Democracy

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