

Municipal elections: an overview of issues and reforms

By Ibrahim Jouhari

Municipal and local elections in Lebanon are held every six years. Elections took place in 2004, 2010, and 2016. It was only in 2022, when the municipal elections were supposed to be held in the same year as the parliamentary elections, that they were postponed twice and are scheduled to happen next month.

This year, with the election of a new president, a reformist Prime Minister, and the formation of a dynamic government, municipal elections have increased in importance. Indeed, the municipalities will play an important role in the reform plans, the restructuring of local governance, and the disbursement of aid and grants.

In Lebanon, municipalities are local administrations independent of the central administration. It enjoys financial and administrative autonomy within the scope of its work and is subject to the supervision and control of the central government. They are tasked with playing several important roles, such as contributing or assisting in the implementation of works and projects that include: building and maintaining roads, monitoring the functioning of public facilities and public and private schools, public hospitals and dispensaries, museums, public libraries, clubs, and stadiums, local public transport networks and public markets, collecting waste.¹ However, their role has been severely restricted due to several issues, mainly a lack of funding, the long period since the last election, and the general economic and financial crisis that is still engulfing Lebanon.

Meanwhile, Moukhtars are local constables tasked with processing and issuing official administrative documents, including birth, marriage, divorce, and death certificates, as well as residence and travel certificates. Mukhtars also authenticate the identities of citizens who reside within their municipal area².

Thus, the May 2025 elections will take place in four rounds. Polls will open for 12 hours each Sunday in specified governorates: Mount Lebanon on May 4, Bekaa, North Lebanon, and Akkar on May 11, Beirut and Baalbak-Hermel on May 18, and South Lebanon and Nabatiyya on May 24.³

¹ citizen guide to municipal elections, Ali Mrad, FNF, 2023

² UNDP, 2018, <https://lebanon.ec-undp-electoralassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2018/10/ec-undp-jft-lebanon-resources-publications-introduction-to-municipal-council-en.pdf>

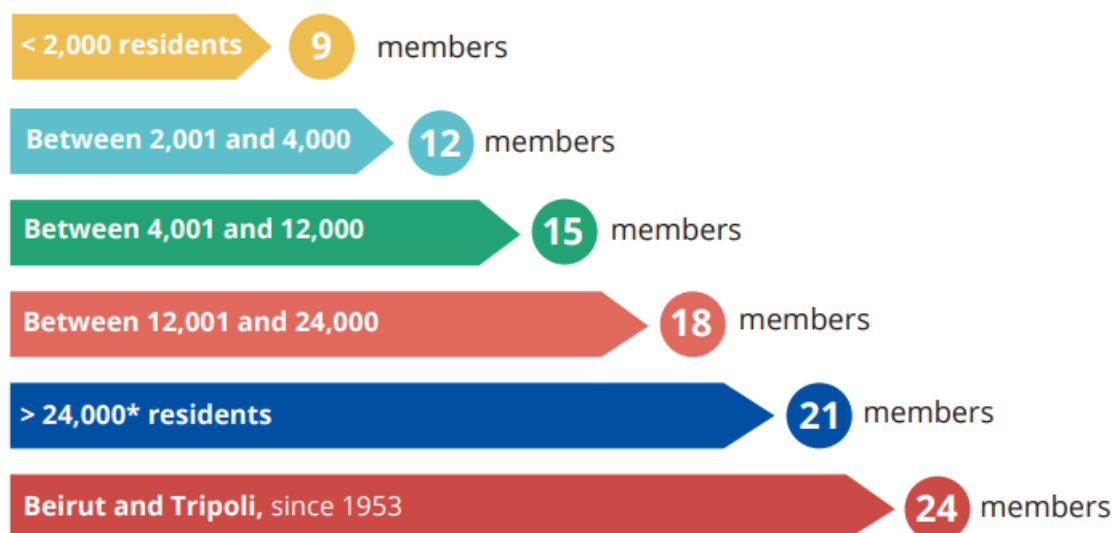
³ The south election will exceptional happen on Saturday 24th of May as the 25 is an official holiday, <https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/en/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/768003/lebanon-s-interior-ministry-announces-dates-for-20>

The municipal and local elections will be held to elect municipal councils and Moukhtars, divided among 1064 municipalities all over Lebanon, according to the updated lists of the General Directorate of Local Administrations and Councils, Ministry of Interior and Municipalities.

Indeed, the electoral framework for Lebanon's 1064 municipalities and 3018 Moukhtars combines legislative decree 118/1977 (the Municipal Act.⁴). Article 16 of the Municipal Act states that parliamentary election provisions apply to municipal elections. However, the latest electoral law 44/2017, which introduced proportional representation, exempted municipal elections from this change, referring instead to the majoritarian system of electoral law 25/2008⁵.

Thus, Municipal councils and Moukhtars are elected by simple majoritarian systems. Candidates run against each other in each city, and those who get the highest number of votes win. The number of councilors in each municipality is linked to its size according to the criteria below.

The Municipal Council comprises:



**Except for municipalities of Beirut and Tripoli*

Image courtesy of UNDP

⁴ http://www.interior.gov.lb/oldmoim/moim/PDF/Municipal_Act_Eng.pdf

⁵ Zeina Helou, Reforming Municipal Elections in Lebanon: Pathways to Democratic Local Governance, 2024, LCPS, <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/en/articles/details/4888/reforming-municipal-elections-in-lebanon-pathways-to-democratic-local-governance>

Once the municipal council members have been elected, an election is held among them to elect the Mayor and vice mayor. It is important to note that in municipal and local elections, candidates run for seats with no sectarian quotas, unlike parliamentary elections, which use a proportional system with one preferential vote in 15 local districts, further divided into Qaza in a non-uniform method.⁶

Moreover, municipal elections do not have preprinted ballots. Thus, voters scribble names on white paper or cast ballots prepared by political parties and candidates. This undermines the secrecy of the vote, as using political parties' prepared ballots allows parties to track the voting process using small variations like font type and size, the order of the names, or some hidden code that only the political parties can decipher to tally who voted for whom. Privacy is further violated because polling stations are segregated, dividing voters by confession, family, and gender.⁷ However, this segregation allows a more granular and detailed analysis of voting patterns and behavior.

Like national politics, municipal elections rarely present programmatic platforms and concrete agendas for local development. Since traditional political families usually ally themselves with national sectarian parties and candidates, the elections may mirror the national political climate in large cities.⁸ Meanwhile, in the rest of the country, municipal elections and local politics are usually a family affair. In many areas, the traditional political parties prefer to stand aside or even try to push for alliances among the candidates. This is very prevalent in the South and the Nabatieh district. Indeed, in 2016, many deals were made between Hezbollah and Amal and the largest families to split the municipal seats among them. Thus, in the 2016 municipal elections, many municipalities were won by acclamation or quasi-acclamation. It seems that the next elections will follow a similar trend, especially with the large destruction in the south that is limiting voting and local politics.

Lebanese citizens vote in their district of family origin and not in their residence, where they pay municipal taxes and are mostly affected by the municipality's work. This was a huge factor in the election outcome in Beirut, for example, which is inhabited by almost 1.5 million citizens, out of whom less than half a million can vote in the city.⁹

As previously mentioned, large areas of South Lebanon and the Bekaa have been destroyed, and their inhabitants cannot return to vote, further complicating the voting process. This issue strongly impacts the election and the balance of power. The next

⁶ Some districts did have any sub-districts like Beirut 1 and 2, and others had four like North 3

⁷ Case Analysis of Beirut Madinati, Doha Institute, https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Case_Analysis_on_Beirut_Madinati_by_Chaaban_et_al_October_2016.pdf

⁸ Christine Strassmaier & Peter Nassif, Lebanese Municipality Elections, Austria Institut für Europa und Sicherheitspolitik, 2016 <https://www.aies.at/download/2016/AIES-Fokus-2016-04.pdf>

⁹ Case Analysis of Beirut Madinati, Doha Institute, https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Case_Analysis_on_Beirut_Madinati_by_Chaaban_et_al_October_2016.pdf

section will develop it, overviewing several additional problems affecting the local election and detailing the corresponding reform proposal that would alleviate the negative impact.

1. Voting at the place of residency and the Megacenter

Lebanese citizens vote where their families originated, not where they live or were born. This practice, mandated by all electoral laws, including the current Electoral Law No. 44 of 2017, disconnects voters from the municipalities they depend on for services and where they pay taxes. According to the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), approximately 1.5 million out of 4 million registered voters do not reside in the constituencies where they cast their ballots.

This unique voting system is deeply rooted in Lebanon's consociational democracy, which relies on a fragile power-sharing arrangement between Christians and Muslims. Reforming this pattern could disrupt demographic distributions and risk exacerbating sectarian tensions, presenting significant political and social challenges.¹⁰

Meanwhile, this means that a substantial portion of Lebanese voters have to travel to their villages, sometimes a long distance from their residence, to cast their ballots. Traditional political parties exploit this rule to influence voters and "buy" voter support by providing transport and accommodation.¹¹ Moreover, citizens returning to their villages face tremendous peer and family pressure to vote for traditional sectarian parties. To solve this thorny issue, which severely hampers the effectiveness of municipalities and their representatives and, by consequence, accountability, Lebanese citizens should vote where they reside and pay taxes.

A solution called Megacenters has been proposed and implemented for the Out of Country Vote. It refers to large polling centres established in major cities (Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, Zahlé) that would allow Lebanese citizens in these areas who normally vote in remote locations to vote closer to their current residence while still having their ballots counted in their home districts. The procedure may seem complex, but the idea has been successfully implemented in the Out-of-Country Vote (OCV) during the 2018 and 2022 general elections. Votes cast by Lebanese nationals abroad were counted back in their home villages in Lebanon. Various stakeholders, such as non-establishment political

¹⁰ Ibrahim Jouhari, Accountability and Local Voting in Municipal Elections, 2025, DRI, <https://democracy-reporting.org/en/office/lebanon/publications/Accountability%20and%20Local%20Voting%20in%20Municipal%20Elections>

¹¹ All international and national electoral observation missions such as LADE, the EU, and NDI have called for the establishment of Megacentres following the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections

groups and Members of Parliament, civil society actors, and electoral observation missions, have called for voting Megacentres to be created.¹²

Furthermore, Megacentres would shield Lebanese voters from the traditional pressure exercised by family and peers and from turning to a sponsor to pay for their trip on E-day. Megacentres would also allow voters to vote expediently and freely where they live, work, and interact with other Lebanese from different sects and backgrounds.¹³

Thus, given the large destruction in South Lebanon and the inability of many of its citizens to return and vote, and for the many Lebanese living in large cities, the Megacenters would solve many of these issues and should be implemented in the Municipal election to at least alleviate part of the difficulties. Indeed, it is no longer acceptable for thousands of Lebanese to live and pay their taxes in large cities while not having a say in the municipal council election that will use these taxes for local development.

2. Sectarian parity

Municipal elections do not have a reserved sectarian quota, unlike parliamentary ones. The seats of the Lebanese parliament have a strict religious and sectarian distribution: 64 for Muslims and 64 for Christians, and then they are subdivided among the 18 different sects.

Nevertheless, it's been a strong tradition that the Beirut municipality is divided equally between Christians and Muslims, with twelve members each. Yet with more than 160,000 Muslim voters as opposed to 60,000 Christian voters in the last parliamentary elections, Christian municipal candidates would logically get fewer votes. If several lists are running close to each other, and if people cross off Christian names¹⁴ The Beirut municipal council might end up with 24 Muslim members. This would reinforce calls for dividing the Beirut Municipal council into a Christian and Muslim side, similar to Beirut legislative districts (divided into Beirut 1 with a Christian majority and Beirut 2 with a Muslim majority).

Reform MPs (most notably Marc Daou and Waddah Saddek) put forth several law drafts, proposing changing the electoral lists for the largest cities to majoritarian blocked lists, where the list that gets the highest number of votes wins all seats. Unfortunately, Speaker

¹² Ibrahim Jouhari, Game Changers: Voting Megacentres and the Future of Lebanon's Elections, 2024, DRI

¹³ Ibrahim Jouhari, Accountability and Local Voting in Municipal Elections, 2025, DRI, <https://democracy-reporting.org/en/office/lebanon/publications/Accountability%20and%20Local%20Voting%20in%20Municipal%20Elections>

¹⁴ The electoral law allows for voters to pick and choose among different lists, by crossing or adding their own names.

Berri has signaled his objection to any electoral law change, pushing for a large political alliance to ensure parity.

3. Gender quota

Political life in Lebanon is still overwhelmingly male-dominated. Indeed, there are only 8 women MPs out of 128, or just 6.35%, and in the last municipal elections, women represented only 5.6% of all municipal council members. This lack of representation diminishes local governance's legitimacy and deprives municipalities of the diverse perspectives necessary for local development.

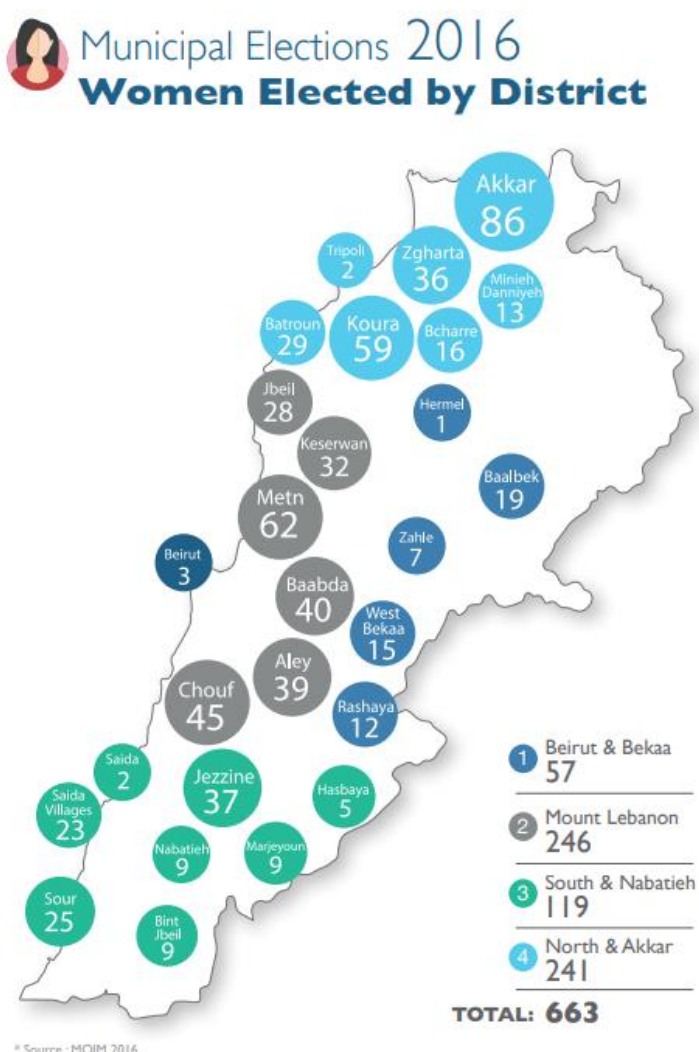


Image courtesy UNDP Lebanon 2016

Moreover, most political positions in Lebanon are still small power-sharing arrangements, where every family must be represented. Rather than fostering genuine competition over programs or visions for development, these councils become arenas for petty representation and social prestige, rather than vehicles for public service.¹⁵ This further reinforces the male dominance in local and national politics in Lebanon.

A crucial step toward rectifying this underrepresentation could be the adoption of a gender quota. The idea emerged in 2006 with the Fouad Boutros Commission, which proposed a 30% quota for women on electoral lists. Additionally, former MP Ziad Baroud in 2009, MP Sami Gemayel in 2010, and several others proposed municipal law amendments that called for such a quota.¹⁶

More recently, in 2025, a renewed push for gender quotas materialized through a draft law backed by a large coalition of civil society organizations, spearheaded by UNDP and Fifty-fifty. Various MPs have also championed its adoption, and ten have signed a draft law. The proposed gender quota law was developed as a temporary special measure to promote women's political representation and participation in municipal elections. The proposal provides a 30% reserved seats quota for municipalities with 9 and 12 members, and a 50% reserved seats quota for municipalities with 15, 18, 21, and 24 members. This will result in an estimated 40% overall women's representation in all municipalities.¹⁷

Unfortunately, these efforts have not materialized, and the quota issue is still often discussed, but no longer. Until a large coalition is built around it and pressure is deployed on the parliament speaker to put the law draft to a vote, the quota will linger in the parliament's bureaucratic limbo.

4. Disorganization and lack of municipal funding

With 1,064 municipalities, Lebanon has one of the highest numbers of municipalities relative to its surface area and population size. More than 70% of the municipalities have fewer than 4,000 registered residents, and 38% have only one municipal employee. While the number of municipalities should be reduced through mergers, the requirements for creating municipalities need revising to include criteria such as population size and average income.¹⁸

¹⁵ Andre Sleiman, Lebanon's Elusive Municipal Elections, 2025, ARI, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/lebanons-elusive-municipal-elections/>

¹⁶ Zeina Helou, Reforming Municipal Elections in Lebanon: Pathways to Democratic Local Governance, 2024, LCPS, <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/en/articles/details/4888/reforming-municipal-elections-in-lebanon-pathways-to-democratic-local-governance>

¹⁷ Gender Quota Now, UNDP, Fifty-fifty, 2025, <https://www.undp.org/lebanon/press-releases/gender-quota-now-roadmap-endorse-gender-quota-law-municipal-elections>

¹⁸ Sami Attallah, Ziad Baroud, Restructuring Subnational Governance in Lebanon, 2020, LCPS

Meanwhile, the Municipal Taxation System needs reform. Although Lebanese municipalities theoretically enjoy a wide range of powers, they struggle to utilize them due to low institutional and funding capacities. Despite being entitled to collect 16 taxes and fees, only half of the municipalities' direct revenues come from budgeted fees. For example, a straightforward reform could allow municipalities to set their own tax levels and margins.

Additionally, modernizing financial management and institutionalizing transparency are important to raise accountability and improve tax collection. E-governance and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping that tracks tax collection are essential.¹⁹

Another issue facing the municipality's budget is the arbitrary nature of the transfer of the money owed to the municipality by the Ministry of Interior. Indeed, there is a several-month and sometimes years delay between collecting the taxes earmarked for the municipalities (such as part of the telecom tax) and the disbursement of the funds. Thus, the municipalities struggle to plan their finances and use their budgets. Therefore, there is a need to regulate these transfers and task an independent body to monitor and ensure the regular and systematic transfers of these funds collected by the Ministry of Finance and Telecom to the municipality.²⁰

5. Data and leveling the playing field

Open and free access to information, especially electoral results, has been at the heart of many reform initiatives in developing countries. Indeed, Open access to information has been shown to lower corruption and increase accountability while encouraging rigorous academic and journalistic research.²¹

Unfortunately, Lebanon's Ministry of Interior publishes all information, results, data, and decisions in static formats. This severely curtails the ability of academic, NGO, and journalist MOIM to oversee these results and uncover possible fraud or errors.²²

In an effort to alleviate these issues, FNF pioneered several Data Liberation Projects (DLP) to convert and reorganize the data to make it easily accessible and then cross-link it to gender and sect to allow a deeper and richer analysis. This paper and several others would not have been possible without the DLP.

¹⁹ Andre Sleiman, Lebanon's Elusive Municipal Elections, 2025, ARI, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/lebanons-elusive-municipal-elections/>

²⁰ Sami Attallah, Ziad Baroud, Restructuring Subnational Governance in Lebanon, 2020, LCPS

²¹ https://data.europa.eu/sites/default/files/report/2014_open_data_as_a_tool_to_fight_corruption.pdf

²² Usually in scanned PDF that are very hard to convert into machine readable formats so they could be analyzed and properly archived.

Thus, it is important that the government of Lebanon, specifically the MOIM, start publishing all results and data surrounding the elections in machine-readable formats to enable full transparency and widen open access to public data. This would improve transparency and lower corruption, electoral fraud, and waste.

6. Conclusion

Despite all the previously discussed issues, adequate solutions can be rapidly implemented with the proper political will. Alternatively, even without these reforms, the elections should be held on time; Lebanon cannot afford another postponement after a three-year delay.

Indeed, these elections must happen. They will reinforce the regularity of the peaceful alternation of power, a bedrock principle of democracy, especially when the parliamentary elections are scheduled for next year. Any delay for the current municipal elections could push the parliamentary ones further away. This is even more important because next year's parliamentary elections will be critical in strengthening the reform and democratic process, which started with the elections of President Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam.

Moreover, many municipalities all over Lebanon have ceased to function properly due to a lack of funding and resignations among mayors and municipal members. Thus, it is critically important to hold the election on time to reinvigorate the municipalities of Lebanon, which will play a critical role in the country's reform, reconstruction, and renewal process!