

Understanding Municipal Elections in Lebanon

About the author

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Municipal elections in Lebanon are a cornerstone of local governance and democratic engagement, playing a vital role in shaping the administration of cities and towns. Beyond their immediate impact on local governance, these elections act as a reflection of the country's political landscape, highlighting issues such as governance, representation, and the intersection of local and national politics.

The upcoming municipal elections, scheduled for the month of May 2025, follow three consecutive postponements and take place in a context of cautious optimism. This optimism stems from the recent election of a president and the formation of a new cabinet, developments that come in the aftermath of a devastating war with Israel. While these events have ignited hopes for political renewal, such hope remains tentative and dependent on concrete progress. Against this backdrop, the municipal elections hold particular importance, presenting an opportunity to evaluate governance structures and their alignment with Lebanon's evolving political landscape.

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The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation whose civic education program aims at promoting freedom and liberty, peace and justice. Through its work, KAS strengthens democratic values, good governance and the rule of law while providing civil society support as well as research and analysis. The KAS Lebanon Office engages with topics of political, social and economic relevance including political reforms and participation, transparency and accountability, reconciliation, conflict transformation, and combating the root causes of flight and migration that do not only concern Lebanon but also neighboring Syria and the Middle East more broadly. A continuous political dialogue and cultural exchange between Lebanon, the region, and Europe is encouraged to find common ways and solutions to such challenging questions and to contribute to greater regional peace and prosperity.

History and Frequency of Municipal Elections

Despite their importance, irregularity in conducting municipal elections has been a defining feature of Lebanon's political history, underscoring systemic challenges in governance and institutional organization.

This pattern is not a recent phenomenon nor solely attributable to wartime disruptions. Since gaining independence, Lebanon has held only six municipal elections, beginning in 1952—nine years after independence—and continuing sporadically. Elections occurred in 1952 and 1963 but were repeatedly postponed until 1998, when a civil coalition successfully resisted further delays ([Abu-Rish, 2016](#)).

From 1998 onward, municipal elections were conducted regularly, marking a period of relative stability in local governance. However, this consistency was disrupted in 2022, when elections were postponed due to their overlap with legislative elections. Further delays in 2023 and 2024 were driven by political deadlock and the presidential, reflecting the broader instability that continues to challenge Lebanon's electoral processes ([El-Helou, 2024](#)).

Role of Municipalities in Lebanon

According to the Municipal Act, Lebanon's municipalities are the smallest administrative units and serve as the backbone of decentralized governance. They operate with financial and administrative autonomy under the oversight of the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM). This autonomy is rooted in their legal personality, which enables them to address local needs through elected councils.

Municipalities embody the principles of administrative decentralization, allowing them to make decisions independently while remaining subject to oversight by central authorities. This structure ensures that municipalities can cater to the specific needs of their communities, fostering localized governance and development ([Municipal Act](#)).

The responsibilities of municipalities are diverse and impactful. They play a crucial role in infrastructure development, waste management, and the provision of public utilities such as water and electricity. Beyond these essential services, municipalities contribute significantly to urban planning and public health. They regulate registered institutions, preserve the environment, and control health hazards, ensuring the well-being of their communities. Their ability to adapt to local challenges makes them indispensable in addressing the unique needs of Lebanon's varied regions.

Municipalities have demonstrated resilience in times of crisis, stepping in as frontline responders when national institutions falter. During Lebanon's 2015 garbage crisis, municipalities tried to implement localized waste management solutions to address the failure of national strategies. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, municipalities played a pivotal role in emergency response efforts, enforcing lockdown measures, distributing aid, and organizing public health initiatives. Municipalities in Lebanon also played a crucial role during the Syrian refugee crisis, with some hosting refugee populations that significantly exceeded their local population, highlighting their importance in managing resources and coordinating humanitarian efforts under immense strain.

However, the actions of municipalities, including in times of crises, are frequently limited by inadequate state oversight, which can result in ineffective or even harmful outcomes. For example, while the Municipality of Beirut eventually intervened to preserve the Barakat Building as a heritage site, the subsequent contentious management of its transformation into a memory museum highlights the complexities of municipal governance ([Abu-Rish, 2016](#)).

Similarly, during the influx of Syrian refugees, many municipalities received international aid directly, bypassing the central government, with the aim of improving efficiency. This autonomy, however, facilitated the implementation of discriminatory measures in some municipalities, such as curfews, that violated refugee rights.

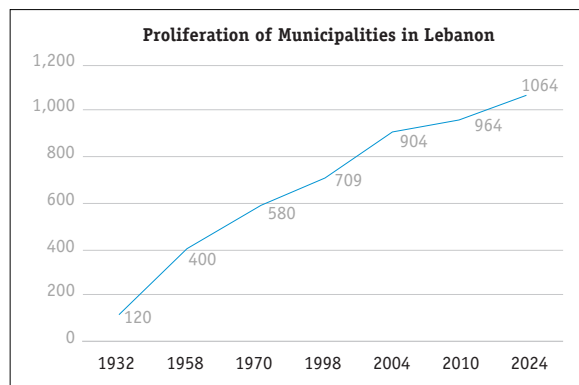
The 2015 garbage crisis further illustrates these limitations. While activists advocated for the return of waste management responsibilities to municipalities, some municipalities cooperated with the central government to establish makeshift dumpsites that posed serious environmental and health risks. As Abu-Rish argues, municipalities often reflect the broader political challenges and inefficiencies of the Lebanese state, which limits their capacity to address crises effectively.

Fragmented Governance and Fiscal Dependency

Municipalities in Lebanon confront a wide array of challenges that undermine their governance and ability to deliver essential services. Financial instability is among the most pressing issues, intensified by Lebanon's economic crisis and currency depreciation. The reliance on the Independent Municipal Fund and delayed government allocations

often leaves municipalities operating on minimal resources. According to a report by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the government's reluctance to fulfill its financial obligations has deepened this crisis.

Administrative capacity poses another critical hurdle, particularly for smaller municipalities that frequently lack the expertise and infrastructure needed to effectively manage projects or respond to crises. The number of municipalities in Lebanon has grown from 120 in 1932 to over 1,060 in 2024, creating a density that far exceeds similar countries like Jordan and Tunisia, resulting in fragmented governance and overlapping responsibilities.



Legislative amendments have made the establishment of municipalities relatively easy, often driven by localized demands rather than strategic planning. For example, Article 45 of Law No. 665 (1997) eliminated the initial requirements for population size and revenue capacity under Decree-Law No. 11 (1954) (Nahnoo, 2018). This eased the creation of new municipalities, often driven by localized demands rather than strategic planning, and diluted governance effectiveness. Notably, 34 municipalities were added following the 2016 elections, amplifying these inefficiencies (Monthly Magazine, April 2024).

The proliferation of municipalities in Lebanon is not only a factor of legislative facilitation, but also a driver of clientelism. The ease of establishing municipalities has reinforced patronage networks, allowing political actors to secure influence and maintain control over resources. Consequently, the expansion of municipalities has both fueled and been fueled by clientelism, undermining governance efficiency and equitable resource distribution. Smaller municipalities, which constitute the majority of the municipalities across the country (70%) consist of councils serving populations of fewer than 4,000 and often face severe financial constraints (LCPS, 2015), making them more dependent on political alliances to access funding and services.

In addition, many of these municipalities opt not to collect taxes, relying instead on central government grants—a practice that further weakens local governance and fosters political loyalty rather than autonomy (Harb & Atallah, 2014). A recent report by Information International shows that 50% of municipalities received less than 250 million LBP (equivalent to 2,800 USD) from the Independent Municipal Fund in 2022, reflecting widespread financial stress. The current allocation system, which is based on population size, collected fees, and equal distribution for smaller municipalities, does little to address structural inefficiencies (Monthly Magazine, April 2025).

Furthermore, municipal finance is tightly regulated by the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), which reviews municipal expenses prior to their execution, rather than post-facto. This approach contrasts with the practice in most other countries, where financial reviews are conducted after expenses have occurred, allowing municipalities greater flexibility in decision-making and resource allocation. The pre-approval requirement often restricts municipal operational efficiency, delaying essential projects and limiting their ability to respond swiftly to local needs. Such centralized oversight undermines the autonomy of municipalities, further complicating their ability to fulfill their administrative and developmental mandates effectively (UNHabitat, 2022).

Unions of Municipalities

Municipal unions in Lebanon, established through government decrees, are collaborative entities designed to manage public projects of shared utility among member municipalities. Their councils consist of the heads of the municipalities within the union, and their mandates align with the expiration of the municipalities they represent. While unions approve budgets and oversee communal lands, their financial resources primarily come from the Independent Municipal Fund, as fees collected directly from municipalities are minimal. This reliance on central funding often limits their operational capacity (Monthly Magazine, June 2015).

Since the establishment of the first union in 1977, the number of municipal unions has grown to 53, encompassing 627 of Lebanon's 1,013 municipalities (as of 2015), leaving 386 unaffiliated. Funding allocations have faced criticism for their reliance on population-based distributions, which can create disparities. For example, in 2013,

MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS PRACTICAL POINTS

- Eligible voters: Lebanese individuals aged 21 and above
- Registration: Lebanon follows a passive registration system where all individuals reaching the age of 21 before March 30 are automatically registered.
- Candidate nomination process: Lebanese citizens aged 25 or older with full civil rights can run for municipal council or moukhtar positions. Candidates must run in their hometowns, while women have the additional option of running in their husband's hometown. Applications are accepted after the interior ministry begins registration, with a deadline of 10 days before the election in each area. Elections take place in different areas on four successive Sundays.
- Names of candidates in each village are available in the district's Qaemaqam and local government offices.

ELECTION DAY PROCEDURES AND CHALLENGES

- Voters must go to their assigned voting centers and stations in their areas of origin. These assignments are based on their registry numbers and villages and can be accessed on the official elections website: <https://elections.gov.lb/> a few days prior to election day.
- Voters are required to bring their IDs or valid passports and must be registered on the voting lists. Voting hours are 7:00 am to 7:00 pm.
- Common challenges include potential overcrowding at voting stations, particularly in larger cities, as well as necessary accommodations for voters with disabilities.
- Vote count takes place at the voting station.

Al-Fayhaa Municipal Union received the highest population-based allocation, while other unions benefited from allocations based on the number of member municipalities. Despite their potential to coordinate development projects, municipal unions often struggle with limited resources and overlapping responsibilities with individual municipalities, leading to inefficiencies in governance and service delivery (Monthly Magazine, June 2015).

In principle, municipalities and unions serve distinct yet interconnected roles. Municipalities focus on localized service delivery and infrastructure development, while unions address broader challenges and implement large-scale projects that exceed the capacity of individual municipalities. However, overlaps in responsibilities can lead to inefficiencies, particularly when roles are not clearly defined. Unions may duplicate efforts already undertaken by municipalities, resulting in resource mismanagement. On the other hand, unions can complement municipal work by providing technical expertise, fostering inter-municipal cooperation, and securing funding for broader initiatives. Strengthening coordination and clarifying mandates between municipalities and unions is essential to enhance governance and optimize resource use (Nahnoo, 2018).

Electoral Framework and Organization

Municipal elections in Lebanon are governed by Decree-Law No. 118 of 1977, which outlines local administration processes, complemented by amendments such as Law 665/1997. Despite this, Lebanon lacks a comprehensive legal framework specifically tailored to municipal elections, resulting in inconsistencies and gaps that complicate election administration and undermine democratic standards (El-Helou, 2024).

Municipal elections operate under the majoritarian system established by electoral law 25/2008, and exempt from the proportional representation system introduced in electoral law 44/2017. This majoritarian approach has been criticized for marginalizing smaller parties and minority groups. Oversight mechanisms for municipal elections are notably absent. Unlike parliamentary elections, municipal elections are not monitored by the Supervisory Commission for Elections (SCE), creating gaps in transparency and accountability. Unchecked campaign spending and media practices further compromise fairness (El-Helou, 2024).

While municipal elections are not subject to confessional quotas, confessional dynamics often influence outcomes. For example, Beirut's municipal council has historically maintained informal parity between Muslim and Christian representation, reflecting broader political considerations rather than legal mandates. Recent political shifts, including the suspension of the Future Movement's activities and fragmentation of Sunni leadership, have disrupted this balance, raising concerns about representation.

The 2016 municipal elections in Tripoli further underscore these challenges. In that election, Christians and Alawis were notably absent from the municipal council, sparking valid concerns about inclusivity and representation in a city known for its diverse demographic composition. This lack of representation highlights the limitations of Lebanon's municipal electoral framework, which, while not explicitly confessional, often mirrors the sectarian dynamics of the broader political system (Sleiman, 2025).

Reform efforts have gained momentum, focusing on modernizing outdated laws to establish clearer regulations for candidacy withdrawals, campaign financing, and media practices. Advocates have also called for proportional representation to replace the majoritarian system, ensuring fairer representation for smaller parties and minority groups. Gender parity measures, such as quotas for female candidates, aim to promote inclusivity and empower women in local governance.

There have also been attempts to introduce monitoring mechanisms, but they often overlook the logistical challenges posed by the sheer number of municipalities and candidates. With over 1,000 municipalities and thousands of candidates, implementing standard procedures for monitoring campaign activities becomes technically unfeasible. This scale of participation complicates efforts to ensure compliance with electoral laws and maintain fairness across all municipalities (El-Helou, 2024).

While these initiatives hold promise, their implementation has faced significant challenges, including political resistance and administrative hurdles. Nonetheless, reforming the municipal electoral framework remains critical to addressing Lebanon's governance challenges and ensuring that local elections contribute meaningfully to the country's democratic and developmental goals.

The Role of *Moukhtars* in Local Governance

Moukhtars are elected neighborhood- or village-level representatives, playing an evolving role in governance. Their responsibilities include issuing civil documents, mediating disputes, and serving as intermediaries between citizens, municipalities, and the state. Originating from Ottoman administrative reforms in 1861, the *moukhtar* institution remains integral to Lebanon's governance system, bridging gaps within its hybrid political order—a framework marked by fragmented authority and competing structures of governance. (Stel, 2015)

Despite criticisms of redundancy, the physical and social presence of *moukhtars* in their communities underpins their authority. They remain deeply embedded in local networks, mediating disputes and maintaining social coherence, especially in underdeveloped or politically fragmented areas. *Moukhtars* also extend their influence beyond citizens to non-citizen communities, such as Palestinian and Syrian refugees, where they mediate between state institutions and vulnerable populations (Stel, 2015). Their proximity to local dynamics and independence from central government dysfunction allow them to retain a degree of credibility and legitimacy.

However, the necessity of maintaining the *moukhtar* institution has been questioned due to overlaps in responsibilities with municipalities, such as civil documentation and community mediation. These redundancies can create administrative confusion and inefficiencies in resource allocation. Reform proposals suggest transferring the responsibilities of *moukhtars* to municipalities, which are equipped with broader frameworks and resources for governance. This shift could streamline local governance, reduce duplication, and enhance service delivery, aligning with broader decentralization efforts aimed at empowering municipalities (Stel, 2015).

Conclusion

Municipal elections in Lebanon are more than just local votes—they are a reflection of the nation's broader governance challenges. Their repeated postponement due to political and administrative obstacles has highlighted entrenched weaknesses that disrupt democratic processes and strain public confidence. Scheduled for May 2025 after three consecutive delays, these elections are seen as an important moment to evaluate how governance structures align with Lebanon's evolving political realities. They come at a time when the country

faces persistent institutional instability, making these elections critical in shaping the local and national political landscape.

A key concern in Lebanon's municipal elections is ensuring equitable representation across its diverse communities. Cities like Beirut and Tripoli face apprehensions over potential imbalances in representation between Christians and Muslims, reflecting broader sectarian dynamics. Preserving political diversity within cities and villages remains a pressing issue, as the majoritarian electoral system often marginalizes smaller parties and minority groups. Adding to these challenges is the persistent underrepresentation of women in municipal councils, exacerbated by the absence of temporary measures such as gender quotas. With these elections once again conducted without reforms to encourage broader participation, there is a risk of reinforcing existing inequalities.

While municipalities in Lebanon have demonstrated their importance to community resilience—particularly during crises like the Syrian refugee influx and the COVID-19 pandemic—their effectiveness continues to be undermined by administrative constraints, financial scarcity, political interference, and fragmented governance. The proliferation of municipalities, coupled with the lack of proper regulations for unions of municipalities, has led to overlapping responsibilities and left the majority of municipalities with insufficient resources and expertise to address challenges effectively.

Proposals for reform, including proportional representation for large municipalities, enhanced transparency, and administrative decentralization, aim to tackle these systemic issues. However, political resistance and logistical obstacles remain significant barriers. The upcoming elections offer an opportunity to strengthen municipalities and rebuild trust in democratic processes, but whether they will lead to meaningful change or perpetuate the status quo remains uncertain.

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LCPS

About the Primer

A Primer is a short introductory text that provides background information on social, political, and economic issues or concepts relevant to governance and public policy.

About LCPS

Founded in 1989, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies is an independently managed, non-partisan, non-profit, non-governmental think tank whose mission is to produce and advocate for policies that improve governance in Lebanon and the Arab region. LCPS's current research agenda focuses on: enhancing governance, informing the process of economic growth and sustainable development, promoting inclusive and effective social policies, and informing the development of policies for a sustainable environment. Four themes cut across the above areas of focus, including gender, youth, conflict resolution, and technology.

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