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THE POLITICAL FUTURE OF THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY IN A FRACTURED LEBANON

Yeghia Tashjian

IFI Associate Fellow

POLICY BRIEF

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INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICAL FUTURE OF THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY IN A FRACTURED LEBANON

Armenians in Lebanon are a deeply institutionalized and politicized community. Given its transnational nature, the community is affected by international, regional, and local developments. For this reason, the political parties and the community leadership analyze local events and position themselves in the Lebanese political space based on local, regional, and sometimes pan-Armenian calculations or interests. Hence the community, like other transnational ethnoreligious groups, absorbs from its surroundings and reacts accordingly to preserve itself from security threats.

This policy brief will explore the events that shaped the political background of the Armenian community from the early 20th century and analyze the outcome of the May 2022 general elections and its socio-political impact on the community. It will show that during the last two general elections, the main competition within the community was no longer between the traditional political parties. It is rather between the institutionally backed “communitarians” and those “outside” the traditional community-backed institutions, such as independents and civil society-backed candidates. Moreover, during the last decade, and mainly due to financial reasons, the community is shrinking as the Armenian middle class started repatriating to Armenia. This has created a social gap in the Lebanese-Armenian community, which was clearly underlined in the outcome of the May 2022 elections. Finally, the paper will critically assess the decrease in the number of votes gained by Armenian political parties compared to the slight increase in the number of Armenian votes gained by independent Armenian or non-Armenian candidates when comparing the 2022 and 2018 election results. The policy brief will also raise a few recommendations regarding new strategies and the need to adopt a vision for the future of the community amid the wave of uncertainties surrounding Lebanon.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE LEBANESE-ARMENIAN COMMUNITY

Armenian political parties were already established in Lebanon, years before the creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920. One of the founders of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF, known in Lebanon as the Tashnag Party) Simon Zavarian, along with other Armenian scholars and students had already founded a student association at the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut) in 1904. Later, with the influx of Armenian refugees escaping the Genocide in the Armenian Highlands, Hunchagian (Social Democratic Hunchagian Party - SDHP) and Ramgavar (Armenian Liberal Democratic Party - ALDP) leaders and activists established branches. The relationship between these parties was not always harmonious, as there were deep ideological, local, and regional differences. The ARF had close relations with the French Mandate and later affiliated with the Phalanges and President Camille Chamoun. Internationally, it opposed Soviet Armenia and lost hope in returning to the homeland, encouraging Armenians to apply for Lebanese citizenship instead. At the same time, the party implanted the vision of an imaginary spiritual Armenia, a homeland occupied by the Turks and Soviets. This homeland later turned into an ideology that was identified as “Free, Independent and United Armenia,” which was used as a tool to mobilize the community, reshape its identity, produce a new kind of nationalism, and prevent assimilation. Meanwhile, the SDHP and ALDP, allied with the Soviet Union, leftists, and Arab nationalist movements.

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In July 1958, Lebanon witnessed its first political crisis, and the Armenian Apostolic Church in Lebanon was divided along political lines. Several factors on the local, regional, and international levels shaped the inter-Armenian communal clashes, with more than 200 assassinations occurring.¹ As the Lebanese crisis ended in October 1958, Armenians continued the “political cleansing” until December, when state authorities threatened to intervene in Armenian neighborhoods between East Beirut and Bourj Hammoud.² It was during this time – from the wounds of the inter-Armenian church and communal conflict – that a third Armenian force was

Armenian political parties have engaged in a neo-classical realist policy after the Taef-agreement. This was very well articulated in 2005, 2008 and the years that followed.

created to bridge the two opposing factions and seek a peaceful solution to the crisis.³ However, the movement failed in its mission as it lacked popular support.

It wasn't until the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide in 1965, under the leadership of the Catholicosate of the Holy See of Cilicia, that Armenian political parties formed a committee and came together to commemorate the Genocide. Indirectly, this committee played a reconciliation role and with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975,

it absorbed inter-communal rivalries and helped Armenians distance themselves from the civil war and adopt a stance of “positive neutrality.” The policy was welcomed by the Lebanese Muslim community, who saw the Armenians as a bridge between them and other Christian sects. Nevertheless, some Maronite elites, who were hoping to form a pan-Christian front, felt betrayed by the Armenians. According to Vera Yacoubian, the policy of positive neutrality meant “not to be with any party that endorsed its political objectives by force; on the contrary, to be with all the political parties that promoted dialogue and gathered around a united Lebanon.”⁴ In other words, the community did not adopt “passive neutrality” and disengaged itself from the conflict, but actively engaged in dialogue and mediation efforts without taking sides with conflicting parties.⁵ This was clearly reflected in the mid-1980s, when the Armenian parliamentary bloc initiated a reform plan – based on the decentralization of the government, upholding of workers' rights, and encouraging women's participation in all public spheres – with the hopes of bringing an end to the civil war. The bloc believed that granting more power to the administrative and municipal authorities would make government projects more successful and effective.⁶

For the community leaders, preserving this neutrality was not an easy task. The parties, through their decades-old networking channels with different local and regional actors, had to de-escalate some tensions in Armenian neighborhoods and create “self-defense units” to guarantee the safety

¹ Yeghia Tashjian, “The Origin, success and failure of the Lebanese-Armenian “Third Force” during the intra-communal cold war (1956-1960)”, Armenians of Lebanon (II) Proceedings of the Conference (14-16 May 2014), Haigazian University Press, Beirut 2017, p. 182, the online version; New Eastern Politics, <https://www.neweasternpolitics.com/the-origin-success-and-failure-of-the-lebanese-armenian-third-force-during-the-intra-communal-cold-war-1956-1960-by-yeghia-tashjian/>, last accessed 11/9/2022.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Vera Yacoubian, “Armenian Power-Sharing and Peacebuilding in Lebanon” unpublished Ph.D. thesis, RUHR University of Bochum, Germany.

⁵ Yeghia Tashjian, “Communitarianism and Crisis Response; the Model of Lebanese-Armenians”, *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/libanon/single-title/-/content/model-of-lebanese-armenians>, last accessed 10/9/2022.

⁶ Interview with Mrs. Vera Yacoubian, 25/9/2020.

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of Armenian neighborhoods. Finally, Armenian political parties and religious and social organizations started collecting donations and organized fundraising events abroad to help disadvantaged Armenian families in Lebanon. This created a strong crisis response mechanism, which was later replicated in more recent crises.

Furthermore, the war was costly for the community, as many emigrated and West Beirut was almost emptied of its Armenian population. The Lebanese civil war pushed the Armenian community to rediscover its identity in a “sectorial fertile land,” and build a “nation within a state.” The community built its own schools, courts, cultural and sports centers, medical institutions, and banks. For this reason, Lebanon was called the heart of the Armenian Diaspora. Meanwhile, the post-Taef Lebanese confessional system and socio-communal structure were organized in a way to reinforce conflict in a system that promotes sectarian/communal identity. This further deepened Armenian communitarianism; that is, the belief that a person’s social identity is molded by community relationships, with less importance placed on individuality and where a strong commitment and amount of responsibility towards the community were prioritized.

After the Taef Agreement, a new generation of leaders took over Armenian parties. The generation that witnessed the horrors of the war and the success of the communal policy realized that ideology was no longer a basis to measure or build alliances. Rather, it was flexibility and balance of power that were essential to secure community interest. It was the 1958 crisis and civil war that now shaped the political memory of the parties and, despite their political differences, occasionally organized meetings to discuss Lebanese domestic challenges and insisted on communal unity in the face of threats against the Lebanese state or the community.

THE FIGHT FOR THE COMMUNITY’S SURVIVAL

The most recent economic and financial crisis and the 2020 Beirut Port blast melted the Armenian middle class and shrunk the size of the community, directly affecting the effectiveness of its institutions. This factor was clearly reflected in the results of the parliamentary elections on May 15, 2022, and the distribution of Armenian votes.

According to Joanne Randa Nucho, Armenian political parties have been involved in larger inter-confessional alliances and factions within the Lebanese political world for decades.⁷ A community once exceeding 200,000, Lebanese Armenians were always visible and vocal players in Lebanese politics and were represented by strong and active leaders whose main objective was securing Armenians’ safety and security. Nonetheless, after the end of the civil war and the emigration of thousands of Armenians, their political influence waned when compared to the 1960s and early 1970s.

Armenians in Lebanon are the only community shrinking in number, given that many are emigrating and the community’s death rate exceeds its birth rate. As many Armenians have emigrated their names have not been omitted from the registered voters’ lists upon their death. This is one of the reasons that the number of potential voters on the registered list is much higher than the actual number of voters. Emigration is also very high among the youth and the middle class. Meanwhile, the new generation abroad is not being encouraged to apply for Lebanese

⁷ Joanne Randa Nucho, “Becoming Armenian in Lebanon”, *Middle East Research and Information Project*, Summer 2013, <https://merip.org/2013/06/becoming-armenian-in-lebanon/>, last accessed 10/9/2022.

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citizenship. Instead, many Lebanese Armenians abroad, mainly in the US and Canada, are now encouraging their children to obtain Armenian citizenship rather than Lebanese.

Nevertheless, the community and its institutions are still active in both safeguarding the political rights of Armenians, as well as addressing the minimum social, educational, and economic needs of the community.⁸ These institutions, led by the churches or parties, were influential in fundraising and addressing the needs of the Lebanese-Armenians in times of crisis. For example, the initiatives of the ARF-led Armenian parliamentary bloc implemented several social and educational projects for Armenians such as granting scholarships for university students, covering marriage expenses in church and giving financial aid to families with more than three children. The party also initiated the “COVID Crisis Committee,” which raised money for Armenian families in need and provided them with ration packs, medical assistance, and free COVID-related hospitalization for all. Following the Beirut Port blast, hundreds of youth and volunteers from the political parties and scouts went on the streets in East Beirut and Bourj Hammoud to help injured families, shelter them and renovate their houses. With the support of Lebanese Armenian philanthropies, the Diaspora, and the Republic of Armenia, all Armenian houses, shops, and educational and religious institutions were compensated and renovated. Between October 2019 and mid-August 2020, more than USD 4 million were fundraised locally and internationally to address the needs of the community.⁹ These activities later became a tool to attract community members and mobilize them during the parliamentary elections, but it did not prevent the wave of emigration.

Armenians in Lebanon witnessed three waves of emigration. The first wave took place during the civil war (1975-1990), mainly for security reasons when the community lost almost half of its size. The second wave (1991-2018) was after the civil war and as Armenia gained its independence. During this time, the community also witnessed an influx of Syrian Armenians to Lebanon who integrated into local community institutions, providing additional “oxygen” to the community. Moreover, many Lebanese Armenians bought property and opened businesses in Armenia, creating a trade bridge between both countries. The third wave started after the 2019 financial meltdown and accelerated with the Beirut Port blast. It is worth mentioning that the Beirut Port blast completely devastated the Armenian industrial sector and constituted an additional push for the middle class to emigrate.

THE ROAD TOWARDS THE ELECTIONS

During the weeks preceding the 2022 elections, much media attention was given to the Armenian “swing vote,” as the one sect that could determine which political faction would dominate in key electoral districts. However, since 1992 the percentage of Armenian voters has been around 24% of registered voters. Hence, why the decrease in the number of votes?

The election results were crucial, mainly for the ARF as the main political player in the community, to have a fair representation in parliament, arguing that this new parliament would set the foundations for a post-crisis Lebanon. Hence, and as previously experienced during the civil war,

⁸ Yeghia Tashjian, “Communitarianism and Crisis Response; the Model of Lebanese-Armenians”, *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/libanon/single-title/-/content/model-of-lebanese-armenians>, last accessed 10/9/2022.

⁹ Ibid.

the main motto of Armenian political parties during electoral rallies was “only institutions represent the rights of the community.” The other non-party institution-backed candidates were accused of being “outsiders” and “opportunists.”

As such, the ARF announced four candidates, SDHP announced one, and ALDP which had internal divisions (one faction supported the candidates of Armenian political parties and the other supported civil-society candidate

Paula Yacoubian).¹⁰ However, in addition to the Armenian candidates backed by the traditional political parties, there were dozens of Armenian independent candidates backed by non-Armenian political organizations and civil society opposition groups. Competition was fierce mainly in the North Metn and Beirut I electoral districts.

As the results were released, on the Armenian community level, ARF preserved its three seats, losing one seat in Beirut I and gaining a seat in Zahle.¹¹ While Jihad Pakradouni, backed by the Lebanese Forces Party, gained a seat in Beirut I, civil society-backed Paula Yacoubian and independent Jean Talouzian preserved their seats in Beirut I.

Nevertheless, the voting share of Armenian political parties has not dramatically improved. According to Dr. Ara Sanjian, the overall number of preferential votes received by candidates nominated by Armenian parties in 2022 was down compared to the 2018 elections.¹² The overall turnout in the three constituencies where seats are allocated to Armenians was down by 3%, but the total number of votes received by candidates nominated by Armenian political parties was down by a sharp 24%; from 17,693 preferential votes in 2018 to 13,567 preferential votes in 2022.¹³ Dr. Sanjian believes that the widely believed rumors that some of these Armenian independent candidates or their non-Armenian financial backers had also joined the tradition of seeking votes by offering material favors or through outright vote buying through their proxies to have been behind the lower numbers.¹⁴

What do these numbers mean? According to Mohammad Chamseddine, the number of Armenian voters in 2022 was around 21,000.¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that not all the remaining Armenian votes went toward independent Armenian candidates, as non-Armenian candidates took a share as well. This trend was new to the community. On the other hand, for the sake of comparison, by

Elections are not about the past but rather the future. The attendees of the rallies are neither historians nor interested in history lessons, but are citizens concerned with their future and wellbeing.

¹⁰ In total, six Armenian seats are allocated to the community (Five Armenian Apostolic/Orthodox and one Catholic) as follows: one seat in Zahle, one in Northern Metn, and four in Beirut I electoral districts where Armenians are mainly concentrated. There is also the Evangelical seat located in Beirut II electoral district where non-Armenian and Armenian Evangelicals compete. The ARF candidates were: ARF Central Committee representative Hagop Pakradouni in Northern Metn, Hagop Terzian, Alexander Matossian and Serouj Melkonian in Beirut I, and George Bouchikian in Zahle. SDHP had only one candidate: Aram Malian in Beirut I.

¹¹ The MPs were Hagop Pakradouni (Northern Metn), Hagop Terzian (Beirut I), and George Bouchikian (Zahle).

¹² Interview with Dr. Ara Sanjian, Director of the Armenian Research Center and Associate Professor in history at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, September 18, 2022

¹³ “Election Results: Data and Statistics,” *L’Orient Today*, May 17, 2022, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1299854/election-results-data-and-statistics.html>, last accessed 10/9/2022.

¹⁴ Interview with Dr. Ara Sanjian, Director of the Armenian Research Center and Associate Professor in history at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, September 18, 2022.

¹⁵ Interview with Mohammad Chamseddine, policy and research specialist at Information International, June 21, 2022.

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counting the sectarian preferential votes for the three ARF elected MPs and candidates, we discover that 70-90% of their voters were Armenians. Meanwhile, Armenian MPs and candidates who were supported by non-Armenian political parties or civil society opposition groups gathered less than 10-20% of Armenian votes and were elected mainly by non-Armenian voters. In this context, it is also worth mentioning that non-Armenian candidates have also attracted a large number of Armenian voters (clear in the North Metn and Beirut I electoral districts). This trend has been on the rise in recent years, due to either vote buying, political affiliations or youth frustration from community affairs.

With the ongoing political and economic trajectory in the country, the community will continue facing many challenges. Certain policies must be adopted on a community level to improve the situation, as well as adopt programs to attract the youth and engage them in community work and political activism.

FUTURE QUESTIONS AND POLICIES

So far, the analysis in this paper has shown that the potential for mobilizing Armenian voters in favor of Armenian traditional political parties is decreasing. Even though the parties and their sister organizations are doing enormous humanitarian work (COVID-19 crisis response, renovating properties damaged by the Beirut Port blast, providing monthly assistance to needy families, etc.), there remains a gap between the leadership and the young generation. Traditional political parties must try to narrow this gap by incorporating the youth in the junior-level decision-making process, so that they feel their voices and demands are not suppressed nor isolated but rather heard and appreciated. These institutions will prosper as young people will bring their creative and progressive initiatives with the established ideas of traditional institutions. This may be a challenging task, since traditional institutions always clash with reform and modernization. However, reforms can be the best cure to avoid a future vacuum or institutional crisis and facilitate power transition.

According to Dr. Ara Sanjian, the task of coopting the current young generation into the fold of Armenian traditional party and community structures is crucial for these parties to remain significant in Lebanese political and Armenian community life. Historically, the Armenian community school network has provided the basis for the inculcation of an Armenian national ideology among its students; and parties have usually recruited their members from among those who attended these schools. Today, Armenian parents who intend to live in Lebanon and do not think of emigration have increasingly preferred to send their children to elite non-Armenian and mainly Catholic and Protestant missionary schools. In such schools, Armenian children are increasingly being influenced by Lebanese political parties – at this stage, primarily the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces – and cease to look at the Armenian parties as their *marja'iyyah* (main political authority or political point of reference). Convincing Armenian graduates of these schools to abandon their expectations tied to Lebanese upper-middle class ideals and “retreat” back to a “narrower” Armenian agenda will require a lot of creative energy from community leaders today.¹⁶

Generally, the young generation has always been rebellious and has been the first to jump on waves of change. Unlike its older counterpart, the young Armenian generation has not witnessed

¹⁶ Interview with Dr. Ara Sanjian, Director of the Armenian Research Center and Associate Professor in history at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, September 18, 2022.

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the horrors of the Lebanese civil war and has not seen the sacrifices of the youth of Armenian political parties while defending Armenian neighborhoods and properties (churches, schools, shops, and houses). Therefore, mentioning the sacrifices of the older generation during electoral rallies or campaigns for political gains is not useful, as these memories have lost the sense of mobilization among the youth they once had. This is a common mistake as Armenian political parties fall into the “trap of history.” Elections are not about the past but rather the future. The attendees of the rallies are neither historians nor interested in history lessons but are citizens concerned with their future and well-being.

With the wave of globalization worldwide, there is a renewed attack against everything associated with institutions and traditionalism. For this reason, political parties, religious institutions, and often any bureaucratic association, have been a target of such criticism. How do we deal with such criticism? Following the experiences in Iraq, Syria and other countries in the region, Armenian political parties in Lebanon and generally in the Middle East, have developed a certain immunity against modernization, turning towards conservatism, and avoiding taking extreme political positions by not addressing public demands. Instead, these parties have secluded themselves in communitarianism and community activism. This trend has not been welcomed by the majority of the youth, whose demands have gone beyond communitarianism. Now that the youth have individual demands – a reflection of the basic rights of a citizen such as public health care, access to clean water, electricity, environmental rights, employment, and security etc. – political parties must balance between community activism and public demands. For this reason, balancing between communitarianism and public life is essential, in addition to being transparent about party activities, strategies and objectives that will directly affect the community. Hence being a conservative and “low profile” may not be quite effective in the long run.

Who represents the community? Interestingly, during the past two parliamentary elections, Armenian political parties (mainly the ARF) constantly called for partisan unity and asked those who would not vote for the ARF to at least vote for other Armenian political parties. The idea was that only Armenian political parties can represent the interest of the community, as individual candidates supported by non-Armenian political parties lacked communal legitimacy. Hence, electoral competition within the Armenian community is no longer between different traditional political parties alone. It has rather also encompassed competition between the parties and individuals, whether independent or supported by non-Armenian political parties who have never been associated with community life. Ironically, during the electoral campaigns, partisan candidates rarely mentioned the enormous humanitarian, educational and social work that the political parties have done and are still doing to address the needs of the people in Armenian neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the number of independent Armenian candidates is growing and their voting share from the community is still low, with a slight increase recorded in the last four years. Moreover, non-Armenian candidates in Beirut I and North Metn have also gained votes from Armenians. Of course, vote-buying has played its role but many have voted with free will. The concern of these Armenians must be addressed. Is this because many young Armenians need to see a change outside the traditional community institutions? Are they tired of the same faces representing the community? Do they no longer feel concerned by partisan electoral slogans that fail to mobilize them? How can the traditional institutions coopt Armenians who are graduating from non-Armenian schools? These are questions that need to be addressed, studied, and analyzed.

Armenian political parties have engaged in a neo-classical realist policy after the Taef-agreement. This was very well articulated in 2005, 2008 and the years that followed. In 2005, prior to the Syrian withdrawal, Armenian political parties were divided between the two opposing camps at

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the time, March 8 and March 14. However, they always had a “low profile” taking into consideration the political interest of Armenians living in the Middle East and Western countries. This was clearly highlighted in the Lebanese policy of the ARF, where despite its close relations with Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement, the party also maintained good relations with Western diplomats and rival political parties.

When it comes to Lebanon’s presidential elections and the preferred candidate of the ARF, MP Hagop Pakradouni stated that the ARF has not decided who will be the party’s candidate yet. This also highlights the flexibility and independence the party has, despite being part of the Free Patriotic Movement’s “Strong Lebanon” parliamentary bloc.¹⁷ This policy of flexibility and low profile has been successful in preserving the rights of the community in public institutions so far.

Lebanon in 2023 is not the same as it was in 2018. Similarly to other communities, the Armenian community continues to suffer from a severe brain drain, many young professionals are leaving and the ones staying are suffering from unemployment and increasing financial burdens. The crisis has hit the poor as well as the middle class, while pressures are not only financial but increasingly physical and psychological. New active young faces are needed in the community to keep the Lebanese-Armenian society strong. To attract the youth, especially those who are detached from community life, cultural alongside sports programs or summer camps can be organized to bring the youth together. This will give them the chance to discuss and debate ways to reform and strengthen community institutions, assess the current socio-economic situation, and incorporate “new blood” into community work. Current MPs can also learn from the experiences of professionals and draft laws and regulations that address public needs. A certain mechanism can also be adapted to push fresh graduates as interns and work with MPs to learn how to frame laws and regulations and engage in political and economic policy drafting.

¹⁷ «ՀՅ Դաշնակցութիւնը իր Կեցուածքներուն Մէջ Առանձնայատուկ Է, Եւ Կարելի ՉԷ «Մարտահրաւերի Նախագահ» Ունենալ» Շէշտեց Յ. Բազրատունի (ARF is unique in its positions, and we cannot have a President of challenge, stated Hagop Pakradouni), *Aztag*, September 24, 2022, <https://www.aztagdaily.com/archives/559003>, last accessed 25/9/2022.



Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International
Affairs American University of Beirut P.O. Box 11-0236
Riad El-Solh / Beirut 1107 2020 Lebanon



961-1-350000 ext. 4150



+961-1-737627



ifi.comms@aub.edu.lb



www.aub.edu.lb/ifi



Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and
International Affairs



aub.ifi



@ifi_aub



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