

Lebanese Factions Reach Agreement on Unity Government

Contributed by NADA RAAD and FARNAZ FASSIHI, WSJ
Sunday, 13 July 2008

Hezbollah's Ability To Block Decisions Adds Uncertainty

BEIRUT, Lebanon -- After six weeks of wrangling, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora succeeded on Friday in forming a national-unity government in which the Hezbollah-led opposition has the power to block decisions.

The announcement of the new team was made in a decree signed by both the prime minister and President Michel Suleiman, who came to power in a deal brokered by Qatar after an 18-month political standoff between the government and the Hezbollah-led opposition.

The crisis escalated into violent clashes in May when Iranian-backed Hezbollah gunmen took control of the capital and effectively forced the pro-Western government into negotiations. The breakthrough is seen as a positive sign that Lebanon could regain some stability, but it is unclear how Hezbollah's newfound powers will translate.

For starters, its veto power presents a challenge to any efforts to disarm the Shiite party's military wing. "The opposition got what it wanted," said Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze party and a close ally of the U.S. "We can't disarm Hezbollah by force. It will happen only if they want to do it."

In the new cabinet, the Hezbollah-led opposition is granted 11 positions out of the 30-member cabinet, one-third plus one it needs to block decisions. President Suleiman is granted three seats, including two main portfolios: the Defense and the Interior ministries. The U.S.-backed alliance gained 16 seats.

"This national-unity government is a government for all of Lebanon and is tasked with restoring confidence in the nation, which fortifies coexistence, the Lebanese people's faith in one another, justice and love," Mr. Siniora said on Friday after the announcement of his new team.

Observers here expect that Mr. Siniora's 30-member cabinet, which represents the rival political players here, will disagree on several issues. But, Mr. Siniora was determined on Friday to establish harmony among members of his newly formed team. "Dialogue within cabinet is important and essential in light of all the different points of view....Lebanon will not adopt the language of the street and resorting to violence again," Mr. Siniora said.

The government was announced only after lengthy discussions over distribution of the ministerial portfolios. The last knot was solved after the parliamentary majority team accepted the nomination of Hezbollah candidate Ali Qanso, who is the former head of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. The majority team had rejected Mr. Qanso's presence in the cabinet because of his Syrian involvement, but they eventually gave in. Observers here believe that part of the difficulty in reaching an agreement over the ministerial portfolios was that this cabinet is set to govern until parliamentary election in 2009. Its main task will be creating a new electoral law that would be implemented during those elections.

"The local political players wanted to make sure they are in a strong stand in this cabinet lineup in order to show their strength prior to the next parliamentary elections in 2009," said Nawaf Kabbara, a professor of political sciences at Balamand University.

The government's announcement on Friday also came as Syrian President Bashar Assad is prepared to visit France to participate in the Paris summit of European and Mediterranean leaders this weekend. Local media reports published in Beirut said that a meeting is expected on Saturday in Paris between French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Lebanon's President Suleiman and Mr. Assad.

Write to Farnaz Fassihi at farnaz.fassihi@wsj.com <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121578394019945849.html>