

Lebanon at the crossroads

Contributed by Robert G Rabil
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The political rivalry between the two major political blocs reinforces the flaws of Lebanon's confessional electoral system to make the national election of June 2009 a tense moment.

Lebanon's parliamentary elections on 7 June 2009 find the country at a point where its (and especially Beirut's) confessional system both tear and temper its complex reality. The campaign has been dominated by the sharp divide between the Hizbollah-led, "March 8" pro-Iranian opposition and the pro-United States "March 14" side. At the climax, it appears that the elections may not break the political impasse between the two camps - and that no cabinet will be able to govern without the consent of the opposition. At the same time, the spectre of renewed internal conflict and regional upheaval is emerging.

The Taif accord of 1989 which brought the Lebanese civil war of 1975-90 to an end offered an imperfect compromise between democracy and sectarian peace in the shadow of Syrian hegemony. This lasted until the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Beirut in April 2005, two months after the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

The agreement gave equal parliamentary representation to Muslims and Christians, divided in turn on a proportional basis between the two sects' various denominations. The legislature was later enlarged (under Syrian pressure) from 108 to 128 seats: as a result there are sixty-four Christian representatives (thirty-four Maronite, fourteen Greek Orthodox, eight Greek Catholic, five Armenian Orthodox, one Armenian Catholic, one Evangelical, and one candidate representing various minorities, including Jews); and sixty-four Muslim representatives (twenty-seven Sunni, twenty-seven Shi'a, eight Druze, and two Alawite).

Voters were assigned to electoral districts originally drawn around Lebanon's six administrative regions, requiring candidates to appeal to a broad cross-section of religious communities in order to win office. Candidates generally run as members of a list for their district. In the 1992 and 1996 elections, Damascus gerrymandered certain districts to benefit pro-Syrian candidates. In the 2000 elections, the Taif provisions were entirely ignored, and the country was divided into fourteen electoral districts.

This division - overseen by Ghazi Kanaan, then-chief of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon - created districts that favoured pro-Syrian candidates, and brought together unconnected areas with vast demographic differences. In particular, such it joined areas containing denominations of one sect with large areas containing a single majority denomination of another sect. This practice helped dilute anti-Syrian votes, mainly from Maronites. For example, less than half of the sixty-four Christian representatives were elected from Christian-majority districts; most came from areas annexed to larger Muslim districts, essentially elected by votes of people in these areas.

The 2005 moment

The assassination of Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 sparked a cross-sectarian and anti-Syrian national movement. The demonstration by hundreds of thousands of Lebanese on 14 March 2005 symbolised a pro-western and pro-democracy "cedar revolution" that compelled Damascus to withdraw its troops from Beirut (and subsequently all of Lebanon) in April 2005.

The withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon created a political vacuum and sparked a sectarian struggle for political power. A significant number of Christians, Sunnis and Druzes rallied around the leadership of Hariri's son Saad, who sought to become the focal-point of national reconciliation and thus position his party, the Future Movement, at the centre of Lebanese politics.

At the same time, this struggle for power raised questions about which electoral law to adopt for the approaching parliamentary elections in June 2005. The electoral law of 2000 became a crucial issue. The Christians abhorred it; Sunnis, Shi'a and Druzes saw it a useful vehicle of political compromise and advance; the Future Movement thought it could be a means to win a plurality of seats in the parliament; Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, concerned about the Druze community's numerical weakness and fearing a Christian-nationalist revival, regarded it as a way to protect his leadership in Mount Lebanon.

For its part the Shi'a community sought to claim a political role commensurate with its demographic strength; its leading force, Hizbollah, perceived the law as an instrument to pursue a dual policy of co-opting other communities in the name of national unity and making the elections a referendum for its role as a resistance movement and a means of showing its political strength.

The result was the "quartet" agreement, in which four leaders - Hariri, Jumblatt, the Hizbollah leader Hussein Nasrallah, and Nabih Berri of Amal - struck an electoral alliance for the 2005 elections based on the 2000 electoral law. It did not last long - in part because it undermined Christian solidarity (symbolised by General Michel Aoun's creation of his own electoral lists) - but it fulfilled important objectives for the parties. Hariri's Future Movement received the largest bloc of seats; Hizbollah's resistance role was enshrined in a cabinet policy-statement; and Walid Jumblatt remained the kingmaker in his fiefdom. The biggest upset was Aoun's victory in parts of Mount Lebanon and the Beka'a valley over almost all established Christian candidates.

Soon, fissures between the governing March 14 alliance and the Hizbollah-led opposition deepened, creating a political impasse. Michel Aoun's Change & Reform Party signed a memorandum of understanding with Hizbollah, which eventually culminated in a political alliance that provided the Islamist party with crucial Christian political support.

Fouad Siniora's government sought to strengthen the state and implement United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1559 of 2004 which called for Hizbollah's disarmament); the opposition sought to legitimise its resistance role and reform a system frayed by corruption and clientelism. The west, especially the United States, supported Siniora's government; Iran and Syria funded, trained and equipped Hizbollah with sophisticated weapons. The strength of Hizbollah's militias equalled, if not surpassed that of the Lebanese army; Hizbollah created an effective "state within a state".

The crisis

It was against this political background that Hizbollah crossed into Israel on 12 July 2006 to kidnap and kill Israeli soldiers. Israel retaliated by waging a destructive war against Lebanon aimed at destroying Hizbollah's militia and ability to fire rockets into Israel. After thirty-three days of havoc wreaked against Lebanon's population and infrastructure, the war ended with a seven-point plan and a new UNSC agreement: Resolution 1701, which increased the number of UNIFIL troops in south Lebanon and called for the disarming and dismantling of all militias.

The semblance of national unity during the hostilities soon dissipated. A struggle for control of the state re-emerged, with the government and its allies trying to implement the resolutions and elect a new president who was not pro-Syrian. Hizbollah - whose leader Hassan Nasrallah had proclaimed a "divine" victory over Israel and demanded a national-unity government and a new electoral law - sought veto-power over government decisions.

The two camps showed no sign of compromise. A continuing wave of assassinations targeting March 14 political figures and activists emboldened the Fouad Siniora government's efforts to sanction an international tribunal that would investigate the murder of Rafiq Hariri. The opposition staged an open-ended sit-in before the Grand Serail, the premier's official residence; this sharpened the battle of wills between the two camps and their respective internal and external supporters.

The tensions sparked into civil strife on 7 May 2008, in response to two government decisions (removing the airport security-chief Wafiq Shuqair over his alleged links with Hizbollah, and making the party's communications network illegal). Nasrallah considered the decisions a declaration of war and ordered an onslaught on the capital, in which Hizbollah's seasoned fighters cut through the pro-government groups.

As the fighting expanded north toward Tripoli and east toward the Chouf mountains, Walid Jumblatt called on his supporters to lay down their arms and pressed the government to reverse its decisions in order to prevent civil war. A Qatari-led delegation mediated a national dialogue, out of which the Doha agreement was born. This yielded to almost all the March 8 opposition's demands without addressing the question of Hizbollah's arms.

A new government led by Fouad Siniora was set up, in which the opposition had effective veto-power over government decisions; the army commander Michel Suleiman was eventually agreed upon as the president; a new electoral law for the 2009 elections, based on the administrative electoral districts (qadas) adopted in its 1960 equivalent, was passed.

The 2009 moment

The Doha agreement defused a perilous crisis, but also ushered in a new phase of Lebanese politics marked by simmering sectarian tension and an exchange of accusations of sedition. Sunnis, led by Saad Hariri's Future Movement, grappled with the bitter reality of the aftershocks of their defeat in west Beirut; Hizbollah watched with suspicion the growing contacts between the March 14 forces and Washington; March 14 forces worried over Iran's interference in Lebanon and support of Hizbollah; Michel Aoun denounced attempts by other Christian parties in the March 14 coalition forces' to marginalise him. This political condition further opened Lebanon to a regional arena where the United States and its Arab allies were pitted against Iran and Syria.

The approach of the elections on 7 June 2009 intensified this already charged political atmosphere. The core polarisation between the camps remained as deep as ever; the outward unity of each camp barely concealed internal schisms and

fallouts; the new electoral law revived dormant rivalries and family-clan feuds.

The 2008 electoral law provided for twenty-six electoral districts (against fourteen under the 2000 and 2005 electoral laws). This tended to shrink cross-sectarianism among religious communities, and heightened the contest of the elections among relatively compact majority denominations within each electoral district.

There were major disagreements within the March 14 coalition, many of them around labyrinthine negotiations to forge electoral lists. In consequence, some high-profile political figures of the alliance (among them Samir Franjeh, Ghatas Khoury, Fares Boueiz and Samir Saade) found themselves excluded from the alliance's main list or relegated to less favourable electoral districts. The opposition was affected too, with Michel Aoun disputing Nabih Berri over Jezzine district's electoral list. A scrutiny of the election dynamics reveals that the new electoral law has wound itself around Lebanon's time-honoured confessional democracy.

The future

This character of Lebanon's electoral system compels opposing parties to work out political compromises, even at the expense of their ostensible programmes. Such compromise remains a staple of Lebanese politics and an incentive for coexistence among various religious communities; but the combination of sharp overall divides and bitter discourse has set the nation on a path replete with dangers. Meanwhile, Lebanon's people - beset by huge and pressing issues of economic survival - are confined by a political order that limits expression of their shared discontents.

Each camp has reified its vision of the future of Lebanon in a Manichaean fashion. Hassan Nasrallah has stated that 7 May 2008 - when Hizbollah conquered west Beirut - was a "glorious" day, and that the "resistance" is a weapon against American and Israeli designs in the region; Amin Gemayel, a former president and leader of the Phalange party, has asserted that a win for Michel Aoun would be a win for Hizbollah and Iran.

But there are serious divisions within the March 14 camp. These have been accentuated by Walid Jumblatt, who - especially following a report in Der Spiegel on 23 May 2009 which suggested Hizbollah's involvement in Rafiq Hariri's murder - has adopted a more conciliatory line towards Hizbollah. The veteran Druze leader perhaps embodies and reflects the confessional political mentality of Lebanon better than any other figure.

In this his pre-election manoeuvrings may represent both the comfort and the curse of a system that institutionalises division, constantly threatens open conflict, yet so often too pulls back from the brink. Lebanon worries, waits, and hopes for the best.

Robert G Rabil is assistant professor of middle-east politics and director of graduate studies in the political-science department at Florida Atlantic University. He is the author of *Embattled Neighbors: Syria, Israel and Lebanon* (Lynne Rienner, 2003) and *Syria, United States and the War on Terror in the Middle East* (Praeger, 2006)