

Maronite patriarch says Lebanon facing existential threat

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BEIRUT - The Maronite Patriarch said on Saturday his country faced a threat to its existence, appearing to take sides against Hezbollah and its allies on the eve of an election whose outcome will be decided by the Christian vote.

The influential Cardinal Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, who has already warned of "mistakes" were the Islamist group and its allies to win the election, spoke of "a threat to the Lebanese entity and its Arab identity". His remarks were reported by the National News Agency.

Sfeir, 89, has a stormy relationship with Hezbollah's main Christian ally, Michel Aoun, who currently heads the largest Christian bloc in Lebanon's 128-seat parliament. Seats in the chamber are divided according to sectarian quotas.

How Aoun and his Christian rivals fare in the parliamentary election on Sunday will decide whether the U.S.-backed "March 14" alliance, led by Sunni politician Saad al-Hariri, retains its majority or loses to the Shi'ite Hezbollah, backed by Iran and Syria, and its allies.

Many politicians expect the election to result in a coalition government, regardless of the outcome. Sfeir has previously echoed March 14 calls for a state monopoly on weapons -- a challenge to the heavily armed Hezbollah.

He also has a record of opposition to Syrian influence in Lebanon, which is central to the agenda of "March 14". The alliance won the 2005 parliamentary election after the assassination of former prime minister Rafik al-Hariri, Saad's father.

"We must be alert to the schemes being plotted for us and thwart the intense efforts which, if they succeed, will change the face of our country," Sfeir said.

The warning comes to the backdrop of fears expressed by many Christians in Lebanon that if the Syrian-Iranian backed Hezbollah opposition wins the election it would increase the influence of both those countries in Lebanon, thus marginalizing the role of the Christians.

According to observers the election race on Sunday will be tense inside the Christian camp, between followers of Aoun, and others who belong to the western-backed ruling majority.

Meanwhile the Lebanese daily al Nahar quoted Saturday US Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Jeffery Feltman as saying, that 'it would be naive for some to think that the outcome of the Lebanese parliamentary election won't affect US policy in Lebanon.'

Feltman said: 'The election's outcome will naturally affect the world's stance towards the new Lebanese government and the manner in which the United States and Congress deal with Lebanon.'

The US official indirectly criticized Christian leader Michel Aoun, who is a member of the Hezbollah-led opposition, and said: 'One of your politicians is proposing that Christians shouldn't depend on the United States. I hope the Lebanese had accurately listened to the president's (Barack Obama) speech that specifically pointed to the widest Christian religious minority in Lebanon, the Maronites.'

Feltman added that Obama's speech received wide regional and international support, hoping that the Lebanese would take seriously 'and be part of the president's proposed partnership that was welcomed by the world.'

The militant group Hezbollah, which is regarded by the United States as a terrorist organization, said in a statement published Saturday that Obama's speech in Cairo represented 'a clear copy of strictly contradictory US policy.'

In February, al-Masira magazine quoted the patriarch as saying victory for the pro-Syria alliance would lead to "mistakes ... with a historic impact on the nation's fate".

Hezbollah's Christian opponents also include Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces party and the Phalange party led by former president Amin Gemayel. Both have attacked Aoun for the alliance he struck with Hezbollah three years ago and his rapprochement

with neighbouring Syria.

The United States, which lists Hezbollah as a terrorist group, has said it will review aid to Lebanon depending on the shape of the next government and its policies.

Hezbollah, the most powerful single group in the country, holds one portfolio in the current 30-seat national unity cabinet and has repeatedly called for the formation of another broad unity government after the election.

Some 50,000 members of the security forces will deploy on Sunday, paying extra attention to closely contested districts.

Lebanon was pushed to the brink of civil war last year by a power struggle between the alliances, fuelled by rivalry between regional states -- in particular Syria, which supports Hezbollah, and Saudi Arabia, which backs Hariri.

But it has enjoyed months of calm in the run-up to the elections, thanks in part to a detente in relations between Damascus and Riyadh. - Agencies