

Jumblatt to leave March 14 alliance

Contributed by Mitchell Prothero, Foreign Correspondent, thenational.ae
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Sectarian tension drove a wedge between the Lebanese prime minister-elect Saad Hariri, left, and the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, right.

BEIRUT // Walid Jumblatt, the Lebanese Druze leader, announced that he would be dropping out of the majority March 14 movement, shocking Lebanon's political establishment and rocking an alliance he described as marred by mistakes.

"Our alliance with March 14 forces was driven by necessity and must not continue," Mr Jumblatt said, promising "to rethink a new formation that would provide a way out of bias and prevent being pulled toward the [political] Right".

"March 14" is a nickname often used to describe the coalition of Sunni, Druze and some Christian parties that coalesced into an alliance against Syrian interference in Lebanon in the wake of the murder of the former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. After the coalition's success against a Hizbollah-led group of pro-Syrian parties in elections in June, Hariri's son, Saad, was named prime minister-designate and has been working to form a cabinet.

But despite the success in the elections, the taint of sectarian campaigning by some parties in March 14 upset several political figures, including Mr Jumblatt who became visibly uncomfortable and began moderating much of his anti-Syrian and Hizbollah rhetoric even before the polling began.

"The 2009 parliamentary elections resulted in sectarian alliances that should be eliminated," he told his PSP followers. He described the campaign's tactics and said they "rejected the opposition on sectarian, tribal and political levels".

Mr Jumblatt confirmed the statements to The National, describing them as part of a reconfiguring of the PSP's positions from the March 14 position of regional pro-Americanism and back towards the party's history as a pan-Arab socialist movement committed to reducing outside interference and political resistance to Israeli and American policies in the region.

In the process, he underscored, once again, his reputation for being one of the most ideologically flexible political leaders in Lebanon.

Mr Jumblatt has long been famed for his willingness to tack positions according to prevailing winds, and had been expressing discomfort with many of his allies in March 14, particularly the hard-right Christian parties that he once battled throughout Lebanon's civil war, and with US foreign policy seemingly shifting to engage Syria and Iran rather than isolate them, Mr Jumblatt's renunciation of his allies came as little surprise to many.

"Everybody saw this coming," according to Elias Muhanna, who edits the popular Lebanese political blog QifaNabki.com. "The writing was on the wall practically the day after the Doha agreement was signed. Jumblatt clearly senses that the old bipolar configuration has exhausted itself, politically, or at least that his pole no longer has the foreign support that it used to, so he's cutting himself loose."

As part of his effort to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the Arab world's secular left, Mr Jumblatt admitted to having made a mistake in closely aligning with the previous US administration as a buttress against Syria. Despite his history as a vocal opponent of Israel and a critic of US policies in the region, Mr Jumblatt set aside those differences and made public appearances with Bush administration officials who were so called "neoconservative"; supporters of Israel and the prime architects of the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The meetings with the Bush administration were a "black point in the party's white history".

He also added that it is "not PSP policy to meet with those who have spread chaos in the Middle East, however, our priority [at the time] was the Special Tribunal for Lebanon". The tribunal is tasked with investigating the killing of Hariri and 20 others in February, 2005, an assassination widely blamed on Syria, although now Mr Jumblatt has backed off his previous, repeated, claims that Syria had committed the murder to protect its hold on Lebanon.

He also commented on Lebanese-Syrian relations, emphasising the necessity of having good relations now that Syria's occupation and control over Lebanon has ended.

“In the future, I intend to fix my relationship with Damascus in my own way,” he told supporters. “Looking back, I think I committed the sin of voicing too many anti-Syrian slogans.”

Mr Jumblatt said he was no longer sure that Syria killed Hariri and described the Special Tribunal for Lebanon as “a synonym for nightmare”, following a report in the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel that said tribunal investigators suspected Hizbollah of the Hariri assassination. Mr Jumblatt also aired suspicions that the tribunal leaked the information to the media to increase internal strife in Lebanon.

Abu Abd al Masri, a community organiser for Mr Hariri's Future Movement in the Sunni neighbourhood of Tariq Jdiddeh said the move was unsurprising and that his allies would miss Mr Jumblatt. “You have to know Walid Jumblatt,” he said. “In the civil war-era, he would change sides every week to benefit himself and the Druze. It's tough to lose someone like him from March 14 because he is so smart and charismatic.”

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