

## Rai pledges to unite Christians in Lebanon during tenure

Contributed by Elias Sakr, The Daily Star, Beirut  
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BEIRUT: Maronite Patriarch Beshara Rai said Thursday the patriarchate has drawn up a plan to unite Christian factions based on his policy of "love and partnership," which he said would be the slogan of his tenure as the head of the church.

The election of Rai, who is known for his academic credentials and experience, comes at critical time in Lebanese politics and particularly for the divided Christian community.

Rai, who was elected patriarch earlier this week, is widely believed to enjoy the backing of the Vatican in a bid to modernize and institutionalize the Maronite Church.

"There is a plan to unite Christians, a plan whose foundations were laid during the electoral rounds of the synod of Maronite bishops. The plan addresses the church and people's needs as well as internal unity and the needs of Christians in Lebanon, the Middle East and the diaspora," Rai said in a radio interview.

The new patriarch added that state officials should assume the responsibility of managing everyday politics, while stressing they would be held accountable for "principles rather than details."

Well-wishers continued to flock to Bkirki with Future parliamentary bloc leader and former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, and Marada Movement leader Suleiman Franjeh among Thursday's high-profile visitors. Rai said his talks with politicians this week were positive and in Lebanon's best interests.

"Contacts with politicians will take place away from the media, and follow-up on issues will happen through certain figures," Rai said.

Franjeh, who like his ally Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, had tense relations with Rai's predecessor, Cardinal Nasrallah Butros Sfeir, said he hoped the election of Rai would lay the foundations for a new page of cooperation with Bkirki.

Franjeh, Aoun and their Christian allies in the March 8 coalition had criticized Sfeir for being too involved in politics and biased toward March 14 Christian parties.

Franjeh said Bkirki was faced with several challenges related to the Christian presence in the Middle East.

"We hope not to always enter into disagreement with Bkirki. We could agree on some issues and disagree on others. We have our positions and Bkirki has its principles and we respect them under all circumstances," Franjeh said.

"In religion, we follow Bkirki but in politics we might disagree," he added.

Franjeh said Bkirki could unite Christian political leaders on the personal level but "in politics, opinions could differ or converge."

"A friendship exists with Patriarch Rai and will continue as the basis of this relation. There is a difference in age with Patriarch Sfeir, who when we worked in politics was patriarch whereas Rai was still a bishop and I believe the relation [with Rai] would be better," Franjeh said.

Sfeir was a staunch critic of Syrian intervention in Lebanese affairs and Hezbollah's weapons. The Council of Maronite Bishops issued a call for the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2000.

Touching on the patriarchate's relation with Damascus, Franjeh said "if Bkirki's relations with Syria benefit Christians then it should exist, otherwise, we are against it."

Unlike Sfeir, who during his 25-year-tenure never visited Syria, Rai is expected to take part in a pastoral visit to Aleppo, the burial site of the Maronite Church founder St. Maroun.

But Rai said Wednesday that a pastoral visit should be differentiated from a political one, reiterating Bkirki's commitment to Lebanon's sovereignty and independence.

Siniora said he was confident that Rai would follow the footsteps of his predecessor Sfeir in defense of Lebanon's sovereignty and independence.

Among Bkirki's other visitors were Sidon MP Bahia Hariri and First Lady Wafaa Sleiman, who offered their congratulations to the new patriarch. A delegation of Hezbollah figures is scheduled to visit the patriarchate Friday.

As of Saturday Rai will stop receiving well-wishers so he can dedicate his time to prayers before officially assuming his post March 25, after which Bkirki will reopen its doors to the public.