

Lebanon's Presidential Crisis

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As the end of the Lebanese presidential term neared and then passed on November 23, domestic and international forces have ratcheted up their involvement in electing the country's new president. But the political focus of the presidential elections has shifted from democratic and constitutional ideals to concerns about preventing civil strife -- a potential reality if no consensus on a candidate is reached between the two major Lebanese camps, the pro-Western March 14 alliance and the Hizballah-led opposition.

Although many divisive political issues exist, the major obstacle has been Hizballah's insistence on a presidential candidate who would reject UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701, which together call for the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon (i.e., Hizballah), the end of Syrian intervention and presence in the country, and the support for an international tribunal to investigate the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Any compromise candidate who does not support these resolutions will rob the March 14 movement of its political legitimacy and pave the way for Syrian, and possible Iranian, suzerainty over Beirut.

The Battle over Candidates

Hizballah has successfully confounded Lebanese political parties and the international community by threatening a military takeover of the state and waging a shrewd and calculated political campaign to undermine the prospects of March 14 presidential nominees. Pressured especially by the French, and fearing a constitutional power vacuum, Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir reluctantly agreed to create a list of acceptable presidential nominees. (The Lebanese constitution requires the president to be a Maronite Christian, making Sfeir a possible presidential power-broker.) The list, which Sfeir prepared following a November 13 meeting with French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, included Michel Aoun, Nassib Lahoud, Michel Edde, Boutros Harb, Michel Khoury, Robert Ghanem, and Riad Salameh.

Negotiations ensued between the March 14 parliamentary bloc leader Saad Hariri and Nabih Berri, the Amal speaker of parliament who represents the opposition. Their talks immediately focused on selecting a compromise candidate, thereby eliminating Aoun for the opposition and Harb and Lahoud for the March 14 alliance. While the March 14 alliance was compelled to consider Ghanem, who has cordial relations with Syria but has demonstrated sympathy for several key March 14 issues, the opposition vetoed Ghanem and Khoury. The opposition then started to press for the candidacies of Edde and Salameh, and simultaneously requested that the chief of staff of the Lebanese Armed Forces, Gen. Michel Suleiman, be added to the list.

Salameh, the director of Lebanon's central bank, was subsequently removed because a constitutional amendment was required to approve his candidacy; a similar constitutional problem scuttled Suleiman's candidacy (although Suleiman may still be Syria's preferred candidate). As a result, only Edde remained, but he was rejected by the March 14 alliance. An octogenarian and former president of the Maronite league, Edde is known for his anti-Semitism and for his support for Syria -- best demonstrated by his infamous boast that he would "lie down before Syrian tanks to prevent them from leaving Lebanon."

To complicate matters, the dynamics of the negotiations have been affected by international considerations. For example, although the French preferred the constitutional formula of electing the president with a simple 50-percent-plus-one parliamentary majority -- something that would neutralize Hizballah and Syria -- the French instead persuaded the March 14 alliance to forego such a move because of its potential consequences. The March 14 alliance subsequently lost its leverage once it agreed to the French initiative of seeking consensus with the patriarch's list. The tacit U.S. approval of the French initiative, and Washington's reluctance to be involved, has also been construed by some members of the March 14 movement as U.S. backtracking from recognizing an elected president by a simple majority.

Consequently, Walid Jumblatt, a key member of the March 14 alliance, changed his position from demanding a no-compromise president to supporting a compromise candidate. Moved by his desire to remain the central figure in his ruling coalition, Hariri -- a Sunni Muslim -- also shifted his position, favoring the idea of a weak Maronite president to ensure his own political ascendancy. All of this has taken a toll on March 14 solidarity, which Hizballah has exploited.

An Emerging Power Vacuum

Since no agreement was reached, the November 23 parliamentary session to elect a president failed to convene. Although March 14 deputies attended the session, an opposition boycott deprived parliament of the two-thirds quorum

needed to open the session. Subsequently, Berri scheduled a new session for November 30.

This constitutional impasse has further polarized the country and disheartened the March 14 movement despite the facade of solidarity it projects. Immediately after Berri announced the new session's date, the March 14 alliance issued a statement asserting it would not undertake any action that might provoke civil strife. In sharp contrast to the opposition's audacious attempts to elect a pro-Syrian president, the March 14 movement is apparently making concessions, driven by concerns of what Hizballah would do if the majority continues to support a no-compromise candidate.

Two things continue to be central for the March 14 movement: U.S. reaffirmation of its support for the 50-percent-plus-one formula; and American recognition of the Lebanese cabinet's executive powers until a new president is elected. Before departing office last week, President Emile Lahoud asserted that the March 14-led government is unconstitutional, and authorized the Lebanese army to handle the country's unraveling security situation.

Differing Concerns

Each party in the March 14 movement is now assessing its support and power relative to the opposition, and is pondering the next steps. Decisionmaking within the movement's constituent parties are, not surprisingly, affected by their respective vulnerabilities. For instance, Jumblatt's Druze party is concerned about a potential dual attack from Hizballah and pro-Syrian Palestinians, whose headquarters are not far from his stronghold. Hariri's constituency -- Sunnis who had no significant experience in the country's civil war because they relied on the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Syria for protection -- is struggling to come up with a defensive plan. In addition, Samir Geagea's group is concerned more with potential intra-Christian fighting than with defending the Maronite heartland. Nevertheless, it is fairly confident that the Christian communities of East Beirut could withstand a potential Hizballah onslaught as they did in January 2007.

Conclusion

Lebanon faces dangerous scenarios ranging from a political vacuum to civil war. It is up to the Lebanese to choose whether their country will be part of the international community or a militia-state linked to an Iranian-Syrian axis. Nevertheless, given the high stakes of this struggle, the international community should continue its support for the March 14 alliance by helping Hariri obtain Arab cover and support, especially from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and allaying Jumblatt's fears by warning Damascus against any proxy attack on his Druze fiefdom. So far, the consequences of this deepening crisis remain to be seen.

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