LEBANON WITH NO PRESIDENT AND TWO MILLION SYRIAN REFUGEES

Since 25 May, Lebanon has been without a President. With the two parliamentary blocs – ‘March 14’ and ‘March 8’ – unable to reach an agreement, there could be no quorum for electing a successor to the outgoing President Michel Suleiman. It is not the first time that this small Middle Eastern republic has experienced a presidential vacuum. In 2007, the assembly deputies were unwilling to accept a compromise candidate to succeed the former Head of State, General Emile Lahoud. An international conference in Doha eventually led to the commander-in-chief being voted in as a last resort, despite constitutional impediments. Once again, an international decision, taken mainly from Saudi Arabia and Iran, will be needed to help the country’s feuding factions – Sunnis and Shiites, and their divided Maronite Christian allies – to choose a new Head of State for the republic.

Another general, the commander-in-chief or even General Aoun may be elected to the post. The latter, a prominent Maronite politician, has been tireless in his aspirations for the presidency, which, according to an unwritten ‘national pact,’ is always assumed by a member of this highly influential and ancient Christian community. It is not easy to draw a clear picture of a country like Lebanon, thanks to its great variety of lifestyles, distinctive nature and the intricate way in which foreign powers interfere in its affairs. For over half a century, its territory has served as an arena for the conflicts of the Middle East, and now, in particularly, the ferocious war being waged in Syria.

Reform of the Electoral Law (2012)

Beyond the political response embodied by the rapid succession of premiers, the King attempted to provide an institutional response by setting up a National Dialogue Committee and a Royal Committee to revise the Constitution. Contrary to the successive administrations of Prime Ministers Marouf al-Bakhit and Awn al-Khasawneh, that of Fayez al-Tarawneh succeeded in reforming the electoral law in July 2012.

The electoral system was modified, going from a single, non-transferable vote to a mixed single-vote and party-list proportional representation system, giving each voter one vote based on electoral districts and another based on national party lists. But opposition parties consider these amendments insufficient because on the whole, the system of tribal, clientelist voting loyal to the regime is maintained. The King seems to have shot his bolt with Jordan’s 16th parliamentary legislature: in October 2012, he dissolved Parliament and entrusted Abdullah Ensour to form a new government with a view to holding early legislative elections in January 2013.

The January 2013 Legislative Elections

The results of the January 2013 legislative elections, despite the IAF’s boycott, reveals the impact – however limited – of the changes in the electoral law: the number of Palestinian-Jordanian and opposition representatives rose slightly – partially the result of the greater weight granted by the new election system to the party vote based on national party lists. Since December 2012, King Abdullah II has published various discussion papers on his vision for democratic reforms. It was in his second paper, published in January 2013, that he presented the new system for designating the Prime Minister, which would henceforth be done by him in consultation with Parliament. It is in this new framework that Abdullah Ensour was reappointed Prime Minister, heading the new government emerging from the elections after a narrowly-passed motion of confidence in April 2013 before it experienced a cabinet reshuffle four months later.