

Lebanon's Stubborn Resistance to Change

Oussama Safa

Political Analyst

Former Director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, Beirut

Amidst the winds of change rapidly sweeping from the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean down to the Arabian Sea, Lebanon is plunging into political immobility following a government crisis that unseated incumbent Prime Minister Saad Hariri and left the country with yet another void in its executive branch of government. The recent standoff between two deeply divided political camps is but an illustration of Lebanon's perpetual and recurrent crisis in political governance. It is also the culmination of six years of tumultuous political upheaval between the opposition, led by the deposed Prime Minister, and the new majority, led by the pro-Iranian Hezbollah.

The seeds of the ongoing crisis were sewn on February 14 2005, when Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was killed by a massive car bomb on Beirut's seafront. Though unsubstantiated, accusations concerning the assassination were made against Syria, whose forces had been stationed in Lebanon since 1976. Syrian heavy-handedness in Lebanon had put the late Hariri at odds with the country's policies in Lebanon. Events culminated in a colossal demonstration on March 14 2005 demanding that Syrian forces leave Lebanon and that an international investigation be opened into the assassination. Pro-Syrian demonstrators had previously taken to the streets on March 8 to pledge their allegiance and show their gratitude for Syria's support of Hezbollah. The assassinated Prime Minister's son, Saad Hariri, assumed leadership of the anti-Syrian movement, backed by a constellation of political factions. Dubbed later as the Cedar Revolution for independence and sovereignty, the 14 March demonstrations hastened the departure of all Syrian forces from

Lebanon six weeks later, although for many it turned out to be a disappointing uprising that left unfinished business. It was later revealed that the March 14 leaders, themselves wily politicians and the movers and shakers of Lebanon's sectarian political system, overlooked major political reforms and focused on preserving their hold on power. Subsequently, the legislative elections held in June 2005, following what was arguably one of the largest demonstrations in Lebanon's modern history, brought cosmetic changes to the composition of the first parliament after thirty years of Syrian hegemony over Lebanon. With the country divided between two camps – March 8 and March 14 – essentially led by Shiites and Sunnis respectively, five years of instability ensued, characterised by the assassination of anti-Syrian political and media figures, a war with Israel and dangerous sectarian clashes reminiscent of Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war. The period stretching from 2005-2011 has also witnessed successful Arab mediation of internal conflicts led by Qatar, a series of UN Security Council Resolutions and the founding of a hybrid international tribunal to try the assassins of Rafiq Hariri.

A History of Political Malaise

Lebanon's chronic political ills have weighed heavily on the governance system's ability to keep pace with the rapid changes taking place around it. This has translated into an irrecoverable fragility that stands in the way of the country's attempts to reform itself and reinvent its political system. Culturally and economically, Lebanon remains a gateway for Europe to the Arab East. The country boasts a modern system of education, a strong and vibrant banking system, and an unparalleled – though not flawless – financial, medical and tourist service infrastructure. The coun-

try's multilingual, pluralistic society and historically friendly culture render Lebanon a top destination for businesses seeking to establish a presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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Dating back to the latter part of the 19th century, the make-up of the country, which was known as and limited to Mount Lebanon and Beirut, included competing minorities, most notably Maronite Christians, Sunnis, Shiites and Druze among many others. The gathering of opposing sectarian minorities, each seeking protection from a foreign power at the time and proclaiming a distinct narrative of its own, led Lebanon's melting pot to become a cause of ongoing instability and periodic confrontation. With heavy interference from the Ottoman Empire, France and to a lesser degree Britain, Lebanon unwillingly became a proxy battleground for foreign powers, a role that has continued under different guises to this today.

The creation of Greater Lebanon in 1926 was accompanied by a constitution that apportioned power-sharing to the various sects according to their size in the population. A post-independence gentleman's agreement known as the National Pact was established in 1943 by Lebanon's political elite, which specified that the President of the Republic be Maronite, the speaker of parliament, Shiite and the Prime Minister, Sunni. Lebanon's system of governance effectively became consensus-based between the leaders of its major sects – a recipe for continued bickering and conflict and hence for a constant need of foreign intervention. The creators of the National Pact undoubtedly knew the dangers of relying on consensus for governing between vying minorities who often sought foreign support and encouragement to win their position. Lebanon's strength, it was argued, was derived from its weakness. Clearly this formula did not withstand the test of time as periodic communal wars, backed by outside powers, punctuated Lebanon's modern history during the second half of the twentieth century.

Lebanon's longest civil war from 1975-1990 ended with a creative power-sharing accord that was never fully implemented, aimed at giving the country a serious chance to build a modern democratic state. Known as the Taif Agreement, it stopped short of becoming a peace-building blueprint for Lebanon and opened the way for warlords to become the new political elite. Governance became a matter of deal-making between sectarian leaders, most of whom were driven by the desire to consolidate their newly-gained positions and ensure self-preservation. Syrian forces were stationed in Lebanon to guarantee that the Taif Agreements be selectively implemented to serve their design to maintain tutelage over the post-war political system. Hence, subsequent electoral laws and gerrymandering were tailored to serve pro-Syrian politicians and ensure that they retain power. A blanket amnesty law was issued in 1990 and stymied any serious effort to conduct meaningful reconciliation between the country's various communities, who had been engaged in fratricide for a decade and a half. The unspoken atrocities, thousands of internally displaced families and 17,000 people left missing after the war remain unresolved issues to this day. A post-war drive for economic recovery was characterised primarily by massive spending on reconstruction projects and on modernising Beirut's infrastructure, with very little spent on development and education in peripheral areas. In fact, post-war rebuilding funds were carefully apportioned between sectarian leaders to serve the latter's interests with no transparency or accountability required. Consequently, Lebanon's debts, resulting from gigantic borrowing to finance reconstruction and satisfy power-hungry elites, spiralled out of control reaching 52 billion dollars in 2011.

The post-war years also saw an exponential increase in the military power of the pro-Iranian, exclusively Shiite Hezbollah, which until 2000 led a successful armed resistance against Israeli occupation of South Lebanon. Hezbollah benefited from a close Syrian-Iranian collaboration over Lebanon to build its military shrewdness and security apparatus at the expense of the regular armed forces. Hence, in no time, Hezbollah became the strongest military force in Lebanon and has remained as such to this day. Following the liberation of South Lebanon, and particularly after the Syrian pullout from Lebanon, Iran's influence increased thanks to Hezbollah's armed presence. This was a factor that did not sit well with other communities, particularly the Sunnis.

Post-Syrian Regime

Between 1990-2004, Syrian presence in Lebanon had calibrated relations between the country's political leaders, who by 2004 had formed a deeply entrenched elite with a wide web of sectarian interests behind them. Syrian officers became de facto arbitrators of the frequent conflicts between the governing elite and ensured that Lebanon's dysfunctional post-Taif system worked reasonably well. Syria's hasty exit from Lebanon exposed the fragility of the country's consensus and the contradictions between the foreign allegiances of its leaders. The armed Hezbollah quickly became the target of choice by non-Shiite communities who essentially saw the Shiites as the only armed sect remaining, and therefore with an unfair advantage over other communities. In the late sixties and early seventies, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) began waging cross-border attacks against Israel from South Lebanon it was the Sunnis accused of seeking an unfair advantage, since the PLO was predominantly composed of Sunni fighters. Today in Lebanon, armed resistance led by one community is once more at the heart of communal conflict .

Political differences were further aggravated when Hezbollah sparked a war between Israel and Lebanon in July 2006, which took the lives of 1,200 innocent civilians and left the country's infrastructure in devastation. The war ended with Hezbollah feeling triumphant and seeking to impose its writ on the political system. A severe political crisis ensued that paralysed the country and included Shiite ministers walking out from government, a parliament closure by the pro-Hezbollah Shiite Speaker and an 18-month-long sit-in in the heart of Beirut's business district that dealt a debilitating blow to the economy. The standoff ended with Qatar-led mediation in Doha following a brief armed takeover of Sunni west Beirut by Hezbollah fighters, thereby confirming the former's fears of bullying tactics by the armed Shiites. Once more, outside intervention was needed to resolve Lebanon's conflicting political issues. While a consensus system is supposedly self-equipped with conflict resolution mechanisms and negotiation processes, the Lebanese governance system relies on an unspoken arrangement which apportions political influence and economic dividends among a closed circle of sectarian and communal leaders. Instead of being a source of richness, with emphasis placed on the commonalities that exist between its

various sects, Lebanon's pluralist system often displays its differences and contradictions while ignoring what binds its society together.

In 2006, the UN Security Council approved the statutes of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon following leaked reports of a Syrian hand in the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri. Shortly after, leaked accounts of the investigation connecting Hezbollah to the assassination began to appear in certain international news outlets. While no official accounts of the investigation have been revealed, and consequently no evidence has been published, rumoured accusations that Hezbollah was responsible for Hariri's murder have exacerbated already high tensions between Lebanon's Shiite and Sunni communities. Hezbollah accuses the Sunni-led March 14 camp of facilitating foreign conspiracies to weaken the Party of God by supporting what it perceives as a politicised tribunal. The March 14 coalition, on the other hand, sees Hezbollah's insistence on retaining its weapons as serving Syrian-Iranian ambitions to wrest control over Lebanon. This is but an illustration of the political fault lines that maintain a grip over Lebanon's fragile governance system and subsequently prevent it from reforming itself.

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The Doha Agreement, sponsored by the Qatari mediated intervention, produced a consensus to elect a President of the Republic following an eight-month vacancy, left when President Emile Lahoud's mandate came to an end. The agreement also included consensus over the adoption of a 50-year-old electoral law ensuring that incumbent communal leaders retain their seats in parliament. Furthermore, March 8 were given the unprecedented blocking third veto power in the new government formed after the presidential elections, creating yet another cause for political logjam and dysfunction, since it gave the opposition the upper hand in blocking any serious

decisions taken by the government that were not to its liking.

The futility of institutions and the impossibility of the rule of law were never more flagrantly displayed than in the 2009 legislative elections. The result of these elections afforded March 14 a clear majority of 70 out of 128 parliament members, which in a normal democracy would have allowed them a comfortable lead to govern and form a cabinet. Instead, the requisites of consensus with the Hezbollah-led opposition voided the elections of any meaning when the cabinet was formed with the blocking third in the hands of the opposition. As the debate over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon intensified and talk began of impending indictments against Hezbollah operatives, the latter demanded that Lebanon annul its cooperation with the international court. They also demanded the end of all forms of collaboration with the tribunal on the grounds that the investigation had been misled by false witnesses and that the court is a pro-Israeli tool out to get the Party of God. When Prime Minister Hariri refused to back down from supporting the tribunal, Hezbollah brought down the government by using the blocking third veto, sending Lebanon once again into a government crisis.

Lebanon's Future in an Unstable Region

Proponents of the domino theory wonder whether Lebanon will catch the uprising fever that is gripping countries in the Middle East and North Africa. While it would be inaccurate to observe the region through a single prism equating the problems of every country, many states in the region share griev-

ances against repression, lack of freedom and poverty. Oddly, Lebanon stands out with an incongruent set of socio-political issues that constitute enough reason to revolt, but are not entirely shared with its neighbours. Lebanon has no single political figure to bring down to open up the way for the building of a democratic system; nor do the Lebanese suffer the oppression of a stifling security apparatus. A newly formed group of a few thousand activists have started a campaign of marches to "bring down the sectarian system." While the movement has been steadily growing until the time of writing, unless it identifies specific and drastic changes there is little chance it will succeed. Lebanon's sectarian culture has over a hundred years of history and is protected by deeply entrenched elites who have no qualms about using violence as a means to an end.

Following the collapse of the Hariri government, March 8 – with the help of Hezbollah intimidation – managed to secure a minimum parliamentary majority for billionaire former Prime Minister Najib Mikati to form a government in January. Since then two Arab regimes have fallen and several other uprisings have taken place. Since Lebanon's political situation is inextricably linked to regional dynamics, the fate of Lebanon's future government hangs in the balance; another reason to expedite reforms to ensure constitutional processes are clear and respected.

Any future reforms in Lebanon must start with a democratic, fair and representative electoral law; a clearly outlined process to phase out sectarianism and a timetable for the implementation of the forgotten Taif Agreement.

Until then, Lebanon's craving for cyclical crises will continue, with no end in sight.