

# Lebanon in the Run-up to Legislative Elections and under the Shadow of the International Special Tribunal

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The ineffable Lebanon remains unaffected by the global economic crisis, banks are functioning normally and the speculative construction industry has not collapsed. Precautions taken by the director of the Central Bank have led a major financial publication to name him best director of all the central banks in the Middle East. In this market-focused republic, the risks do not lie in the banking sector but in the country itself.

Whilst little is said about the crisis, the legislative elections announced for next summer have been the nation's talking point for months. The political forces from both sides are in a state of constant mobilization in an atmosphere of virulent controversy. The choice of candidates advocates opposing ideologies. On the one hand, there is the 14 March alliance, constituted by Sunnis, Druses, Christians, supporters of the West and anti-Syrians. The group is led by Saad Hariri, son of ex-Prime Minister and Sunni Muslim Rafiq Hariri, who was killed in 2005 in an attack that led to historical upheavals in the republic. On the other hand, there are the supporters of the pro-Iranian and pro-Syrian Shiite groups, Hezbollah, and Amal and those of the Christian General Michel Aoun.

Passionate declarations can be seen or heard every day on television and radio stations and in the numerous Beirut-based newspapers, accusations against the unchanging political elite who for years have dominated power. General Michel Aoun has been accused of populism by his adversaries among the Christian community because of his criticisms of the Maronite Patriarch, which have fuelled the Eastern Church's threats of excommunication. Aoun signed a controversial agreement with the powerful Hezbollah

organization, which according to supporters has averted a Christian-Muslim confrontation, but for critics has created a deep divide within the Maronite community.

Everybody knows that buying votes will be decisive when it comes to the electoral count. Certain parties have even planned to pay for many ex-patriot Lebanese to return to Lebanon to cast their ballots, an action dubbed by some as "electoral tourism."

The security situation in several regions was severely affected last February, and fears of attacks, confessional confrontations and kidnappings raise doubts regarding the necessary pre-election stability. The last elections held in Lebanon, organized after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, saw heteroclite anti-Syrian groups win a parliamentary majority and thus end a long period of pro-Syrian political domination. Nabih Berri, the Shiite leader himself, however, was voted by this ineffable country as Speaker of the Parliament, having presided over previous assemblies.

The key areas of economic development, social justice, housing and education are excluded from debate at the expense of accentuated confessional politics, and Sunni, Shiite, Christian and Druze parliamentary blocs remain unchanged. For decades there has been no change in the governing elite. Seats left empty by the death of a deputy are sometimes passed on to their widow, father or daughter through local party elections, in accordance with regulations regarding the distribution of power among religious communities.

The worshipping and veneration of the 'zaim,' a leader figure, is engrained in a people where community identity holds more importance than civil society. Until now all efforts towards 'national reconciliation' have failed, an aim which seems all the more ambitious since the war in the summer of 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel, and political language

is becoming increasingly impregnated with a militia spirit.

The extension of the presidential term of General Emile Lahoud, who was branded as pro-Syrian, together with the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and the successive assassinations of nationalist and anti-Damascus Christian leaders was the cause of eighteen months of internal conflict that threatened to provoke another war. The subsequent disagreement between the parliamentary majority and minority regarding the election of a new Head of State worsened the situation, and although the political crisis was resolved in May of last year with the election of General Michel Sleiman, national stability has still not been fully restored.

The Doha Agreement, backed by the Emir of Qatar, saw representatives of the Western-backed parliamentary majority and the pro-Syrian and pro-Iranian opposition, sign an agreement to meet in parliament, following 19 postponements of the parliamentary session, and elect the army's commander-in-chief, Michel Sleiman, as Head of State. Two other former presidents of the republic, Generals Cheab and Lahoud, have also been commanders-in-chief of the army, and another armed forces commander, Michel Aoun, was appointed Prime Minister of a provisional military government in the Christian part of Lebanon. This is one of the few Arab states not to have suffered a coup d'état led by the armed forces. The agreement called for a national unity government of 30 ministers, including 11 from the Hezbollah-led opposition who were granted veto power on government decisions. Once again, it was regional and international pressure that forced the Lebanese to seek a solution. The street fighting in May of last year, a show of strength by Hezbollah and its allies, overwhelmed the government of Fouad Siniora, which was unwilling to yield to the demands of the opposition; an opposition that stood its ground through campaigns of civil disobedience which, in the end, led to violent protests.

Another positive move, which has helped to improve the security situation both politically and on the streets, was the establishment of diplomatic relations between Lebanon and Syria last winter. Since the independence of both countries in 1943, the Syrian state had never fully recognized this small eastern Mediterranean republic. The decision came in response

to international pressure and to the Syrian government's need to normalize relations with Lebanon. While Syria's first diplomatic representative has already been appointed but has not yet taken up the position, Lebanese leaders have yet to announce their ambassador. Evidently the change will not resolve all bilateral disputes as if by magic, such as the complex situation of the Lebanese who are either missing or imprisoned, the demarcation of borders or the revision of certain signed agreements, which have been widely criticised by anti-Syrian members of parliament.

Contemporary history has seen these nations living on a knife-edge. When the French in 1920 created the so-called "Great Lebanon", they added territories, such as the Bekaa plain, which they tore away from Syria. For decades their relationships have been highly ambiguous. The Syrian military intervention of 1976 at the request of President Frangié, to deal with Palestinian fighters during the civil war, brought Lebanon under political tutelage, a state of affairs that lasted until recently. In 2005 following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, which raised suspicions regarding the possible involvement of high-ranking officials in Damascus, the last Syrian soldiers were forced to evacuate Lebanon. However, Syria, which provides protection for Hezbollah, has recently regained some of its political influence. Lebanon cannot disassociate itself from Syria. Since the two countries are united by geography and the blood of their people, the only solution is the challenging task of establishing a balanced relationship.

Each side believes the coming elections will be vital for the republic. The recent constitution of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon in The Hague, which aims to try those responsible for the attack on Rafiq Hariri and his entourage, is a subject that may disturb the country's fragile situation. The political forces stand face to face at the hour of truth. Members of the 14 March alliance are determined to find those responsible for the assassination, believing that not only former Lebanese security heads were involved, who have already been jailed under suspicion, but also prominent dignitaries of the Syrian regime. In any case, the tribunal will take three to five years to pass its longed-for and feared sentence.