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Lebanon's New Political Moment

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The assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in a bomb blast in Beirut on February 14, 2005, has forced the Lebanese to confront one another on the question of Syria's role in the Lebanese political system. The loss of such a prominent figure and the circumstances surrounding his assassination have pitted pro-Syria politicians with vested interests in the status quo against an increasingly vocal opposition movement backed by popular demonstrations.

In an unprecedented event in the Arab world, the pro-Syrian Lebanese government resigned on February 28, 2005, due to popular pressure, after political adversaries joined forces and citizens took to the streets in protest against Syrian presence in Lebanon. The future of the Lebanese political process will be dominated by a redefinition of the Lebanese–Syrian relationship, which will be played out in the process of establishing a temporary cabinet tasked with overseeing the parliamentary elections scheduled for May 2005.

Syrian Intervention Mobilizes the Opposition

Syria has had troops in Lebanon since 1976 and has been the main power broker since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. With an estimated 15,000 Syrian troops still in the country, Syria controls the intelligence and security apparatus. Many Lebanese politicians owe their power and survival to the Syrian authorities. Lebanese have been aware of the extent of Syrian influence but tolerated it as long as they could still participate in seemingly democratic practices such as presidential and parliamentary elections. In the last six months, however, Syria's involvement in Lebanese politics has become more overt and heavy handed, gradually increasing opposition to its presence.

The semblance of democracy was shattered in September 2004 when, despite widespread public opposition, the Syrian government pushed Lebanon's parliament to amend the constitution and extend the presidential term of Emile Lahoud, a Maronite Christian widely seen as a Syrian puppet whose term was due to expire in November 2004. The Lebanese parliament voted on September 3 to enact a "one-time, exceptional amendment" of article 49 of the constitution to extend President Lahoud's term by three years. The article prohibits presidents from serving more than one six-year term consecutively. Ninety-six of 128 members of parliament voted for the extension, fulfilling the two-thirds majority required to amend the constitution. Syrian President Bashar Al Asad apparently preferred to force an unpopular decision on Lebanon than face the risk that the parliament would select a less

pro-Syrian president. Al Asad summoned Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri to a hastily convened August 28 meeting to instruct him to support the amendment. Hariri, who had been locked in a bitter rivalry with Lahoud for years and had initially resisted the extension of his term, gave in. He reportedly informed the cabinet that “the situation in the region requires special measures and a continuity of leadership.”

This show of force by the Syrian government angered prominent politicians. Most significantly, Druze member of parliament (MP) Walid Jumblatt voiced dissatisfaction with the decision, and three ministers from his Democratic Gathering Bloc resigned in protest on September 6. One of them, Marwan Hamadeh, was badly injured several days later in a botched assassination attempt. Amid the growing political crisis over Syria’s influence in Lebanon’s affairs that had paralyzed the government for weeks, Prime Minister Hariri resigned on October 20. He was replaced by Omar Karami, a former prime minister and close ally of Syria, who formed a pro-Syrian cabinet on October 26.

This wave of resignations changed the face of the Lebanese opposition. Until that time, the opposition movement consisted mainly of the Qornet Shehwan Gathering, a Christian, mainly Maronite, group supported by the powerful head of the Maronite Church Patriarch Cardinal Nasrallah Butros Sfeir. The group had become more vocal in calling for Syrian withdrawal after Israel left southern Lebanon in May 2000. The events of late 2004 spurred an increase in the opposition’s ranks.

In December 2004, political activists and parties from across the political spectrum met at Beirut’s Bristol Hotel. In addition to the Qornet Shehwan Gathering, those attending included Jumblatt’s Progressive Socialist Party, the Democratic Forum and the Democratic Leftist Movement (the latter two leftist parties led by former members of the Lebanese Communist Party), the banned Christian Lebanese Forces (right-wing phalange Christian party), and members of exiled General Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Front. Some members of Hariri’s parliamentary bloc also attended. The opposition thus included Christians, Sunnis, and Druze of various ideological orientations. Notably absent were representatives of the Shiite community, and in particular the Amal movement led by speaker of parliament Nabih Berri and the Shiite Islamist party Hezbollah that has the allegiance of a large part of the population. The meeting resulted in the Bristol Declaration that “denounced the amendment of the Lebanese constitution and the extension of Lahoud’s term in office under Syrian duress” and called for “a fair and just election law and an impartial government to supervise the upcoming elections in May 2005.” In early February, the opposition met again at the Bristol Hotel and demanded a “total withdrawal” of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Amal and Hezbollah did not participate in the second meeting either.

The heavy-handed Syrian intervention also led to outside reaction. Rising U.S. and French concerns about Syrian interference in Lebanon led to the passage on September 2, 2004, of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the withdrawal of “all foreign forces” from Lebanon and for a “free and fair electoral process” without foreign interference or influence. The resolution does not mention Syria by name. It also calls for the disarmament of militias, as called for in the 1989 Ta’if Accords, an agreement brokered by Arab nations (particularly Saudi Arabia) that ended the civil war. The Ta’if agreement exempted Hezbollah from disbanding as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Resolution 1559, however, targeted Hezbollah when it called for the disarmament of militias.

The passage of Resolution 1559 led to increased tension between former prime minister Hariri and the new Lebanese government. Since Hariri enjoyed good relations with the U.S.

and French governments, the Lebanese government accused him of being behind the resolution.

The Opposition's Demands

The assassination of Rafiq Hariri on February 14 led to an outpouring of grief in Lebanon and an escalation of anti-Syrian sentiment. The public lost its trust in the government not only because of the assassination but also because of the way it handled the aftermath, including its initial refusal to allow an international investigation of the assassination and Minister of Interior Suleiman Franjeh's insistence that the blast was caused by a suicide bomber despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Despite a ban on protests following the assassination, thousands of Lebanese demonstrated against the government with the slogans of "Syria Out" and "Freedom, Sovereignty, Independence." Unexpectedly, the government reacted not by turning to the security forces to halt the demonstrations, but by resigning. Although Karami's government would have won a vote of confidence in parliament (only a simple majority of MPs present is needed and most MPs are Syrian allies), he backed down in the face of such popular pressure.

Backed by the popular upheaval, the opposition movement is now focusing its demands on the resignation of top officials of the security forces in Lebanon and on a thorough investigation into the assassination of Hariri. It is also calling for the establishment of a "neutral cabinet" formed by a small number of ministers with no political ambitions or electoral aspirations who can stabilize the political environment in order to avoid an economic crisis until elections are held in May. The opposition rejected the call of pro-Syrian politicians for a large "national coalition" government arguing that such a government would not deal with the fundamental issues at hand.

Encouraged by increasing regional and international pressure on Syria to withdraw its troops, the opposition has also stated that it will not accept the holding of parliamentary elections without a complete withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanese territory. It is important to note that the opposition, and particularly Walid Jumblatt, has been very careful to clarify that its demands are not "anti-Syrian" but rather aim to establish healthier relations between the two countries.

The Electoral Law

The present crisis increases the importance of the parliamentary elections scheduled for May and thus has given a new urgency to the issue of reform of the electoral law, which has dominated political debate in Lebanon since the end of the civil war. The Ta'if agreement created six electoral districts for parliamentary elections corresponding to the governorates (muhafazat). However, in every election since Ta'if, parliament has passed a law changing the number of districts and gerrymandering their borders. This maneuvering perpetually undermines potential opponents to Syria and weakens coalitions of independent candidates. For example, prior to the 2000 parliamentary elections, electoral districting was designed to weaken the Christian opposition and ensure the victory of candidates backed by President Lahoud. In anticipation of the May 2005 parliamentary elections, the Lebanese cabinet endorsed a new electoral law on January 27 dividing the country into small electoral districts (qadas) along confessional lines, with voting based on a majority system. The bill was seen as targeting Hariri because it rearranged Beirut into three districts grouping its different religious communities. This redistricting weakened Hariri's power base in Beirut and undermined his coalition of candidates across the country in the upcoming May elections. The draft electoral law had been submitted to parliament for a vote by February 15, but the

process came to a halt with Hariri's assassination. The temporary government will be charged with the difficult task of drafting a new law, which must then be approved by parliament before the elections in May. The opposition has requested an international commission to oversee the elections.

The Future of Lebanon

Despite initial concern that reactions to Hariri's assassination would lead to violence and possibly another civil war, so far the Lebanese have avoided major violent clashes. Instead, Lebanon is witnessing a process of political confrontation between pro-Syria forces and an opposition movement calling for the end of Syrian influence in Lebanese affairs. Lebanon's political future will depend on the debates that ensue in the run up to the elections and on the nature of international pressure on Syria. President Lahoud will engage in constitutionally mandated consultations with parliamentary groups over the appointment of a new prime minister. Lahoud will then consult with the new prime minister to form a transitional cabinet. The opposition will have to decide whether to participate in the consultations with Lahoud or boycott them (demonstrators are still calling for Lahoud's resignation) and how they will deal with the Syrian government if it redeploys its troops.

At a meeting in Damascus on March 7, Syrian President Al Asad and Lebanese President Lahoud outlined plans for moving Syrian troops closer to the border by the end of March but stated that a full pullout would have to wait for negotiations with a future Lebanese government. The opposition criticized the announcement for failing to provide a framework and a timetable for a withdrawal of troops and for not dealing with the problem of how to remove the Syrian intelligence network in the country. Syrian ambiguity on a schedule for withdrawal is likely to exacerbate the current political paralysis.

Another important issue is the position of Shiite politicians. Significantly, while many Lebanese Shiites joined the protests and rallies as individuals, official Shiite groups initially maintained a relatively low profile in the events. Both Amal and Hezbollah blamed Israel for Hariri's assassination. As Syrian allies, the Shiite political groups found themselves in a very difficult position: They did not want to oppose Syria and President Lahoud but they also wanted to avoid a confrontation with the opposition. Hezbollah took a stance on March 6 when its leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, asked the Lebanese to "express their gratitude" to Syria by protesting against foreign intervention and UN Resolution 1559. Nasrallah also reaffirmed that his party would never give up its arms because Lebanon "needs the resistance to defend it." Hundreds of thousands of pro-Syria protesters rallied in central Beirut on March 8 holding only the Lebanese flag, as requested by Nasrallah.

Because of its resistance against Israel and its provision of social services, Hezbollah is extremely popular and quite entrenched in the Shiite community. However, Hezbollah realizes its survival depends on its acceptance as a legitimate and responsible party by the broader Lebanese polity. Nasrallah's call for a rally was intended to remind the opposition that it is not the sole representative of popular will and to show the world that Hezbollah is a force that cannot be ignored. Hezbollah representatives are meeting with members of the opposition movement, and Nasrallah struck a conciliatory note by stating that he agreed with the opposition's goals but not with its methods. Through these actions, Hezbollah is trying to fashion itself as a mediator between the opposition and the staunchly pro-Syrian Lebanese government.

Hezbollah's actions shed light on the challenges facing Lebanon's political system. The pro-Syrian rally on March 8 shattered the euphoria of revolutionary movement and clarified just

how entrenched Syrian allegiances are. Even if Syrian troops withdraw fully from Lebanese territory, three decades of Syrian intervention have created political alliances and structures that will endure. As President Al Asad stated in his speech to the Syrian parliament on March 5: “Syria’s power and role in Lebanon do not hinge on the presence of Syrian forces there...Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon does not nullify the Syrian role.” Lebanon has a long history of internal rivalries that are periodically manipulated by foreign powers in the service of geostrategic interests. The current situation offers the Lebanese an opportunity to redefine their political system, redraft an electoral law to hold free elections, and produce a government that genuinely reflects popular will. It remains to be seen whether Lebanon can overcome the obstacles to this ideal.■

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