

A BOOST FOR THE CEDAR REVOLUTION – LEBANON VOTES FOR STABILITY

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Held on July 7 this year, the Lebanese parliamentary elections gave a boost to the ruling pro-Western 'coalition of March 14'. While 71 of the 128 seats in parliament went to the 'cedar revolution', the opposition 'coalition of March 8' only won 57. Moreover, the result is a personal triumph for the incoming prime minister Saad Hariri, a Sunnite, because it gave him a chance to step out of the shadow of his father Rafiq al-Hariri, the former prime minister who was murdered.

The peculiarities of the Lebanese electoral system do not permit any clear and final statements about percentages, for around 100 of the 128 contested seats are distributed among the two blocks in the run-up. Consequently, the suspense with which the remaining seats are watched is all the greater, with the outcome mainly depending on constituencies with a Christian majority.

The Sunnite Future Movement led by Mr Hariri is at the core of the March 14 coalition. Further members include the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) led by the Druze leader Walid Jumblat; two Christian parties, the Lebanese Forces (LF) and Qataeb; and diverse minor parties and unaffiliated parliamentarians. The March 8 coalition, on the other hand, consists of the Shiite groups Hezbollah and Amal, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) led by Michel Aoun, and again some minor parties and unaffiliated MPs. Another reason why official results are problematic lies in the fact that many originally unaffiliated MPs join a party after the elections.

While all the candidates of Hezbollah, a Shiite party with its own militia, succeeded in their constituencies, the parties that were allied with Islamists were defeated. This is why especially the hotly-contested constituencies were mostly won by March 14 candidates. The elections, whose turn-out at 54.8 percent was higher than it had been for a long time, were governed by a reformed electoral code which mainly aimed at providing institutional stability to the electoral process and preventing unease among the voters by restricting the polls to a single day. The last-named measure was also designed to minimize the risk of riots and electoral frauds.

Concluded at the end of the civil war in 1989, the Taif agreement rules that one half of the 128 parliamentary mandates should be awarded to Muslims and the other half to Christians. However, it is high time that the democratic data available were brought up to date: the last census was taken in 1932! This being so, there will have to be a debate about taking the growing Muslim part of the population adequately into account.

Basically, each voter may vote on each of the parliamentary seats that have been allotted to his constituency, meaning that his freedom to decide extends to representatives of other religious groups. However, the right to be elected is reserved for members of religious parties that are actually contesting the elections. The winner is the candidate of the group which receives the greatest number of votes.

Across the nation, a total of 580 candidates entered the lists. Protected by powerful police and military forces, the election itself remained largely quiet and peaceful. Technical problems and security infringements were few and far between. The only problem was the high turn-out which caused long queues to form at the polling stations. In Zahle, a town mainly inhabited by Christians, the military intervened when voters insulted each other and came to blows. Rumour has it that followers of the defeated March-8 politician Osama Saad rioted in Sidon. It is remarkable that Syria refrained from interfering with the elections, probably because this appeared to be the best way to support Hezbollah.

After the results had been made public, the winner, Saad Hariri, announced that nobody had won or lost the elections, the only winner being democracy and the greatest winner being Lebanon. Mr Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, similarly refrained from triumphant utterances, saying that this had been a 'victory for Lebanon, the Lebanese cabinet, and the Lebanese people'. Mr Jumblat, the Druze leader, appealed to the people not to abandon themselves to aimless celebrations as there was still a long way to go and the state project would only be realized through dialogue. At the same time, the politicians of the opposition acknowledged defeat. Even the secretary general of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, said he would take his defeat in a sporting spirit because all the country's forces would now have to join in implementing reforms and stability. At that, the head of the Hezbollah parliamentary party, Mohammed Raad, had a clear demand to address to the winners: the majority should undertake not to challenge the role of Hezbollah as a resistance party, the legitimacy of its armament, and Israel's role as a hostile country.

During the campaign, it had become abundantly clear that all parties were searching for stability. Shunning radical slogans and provocative statements, their message was that the transition to democracy should be effected by all. A feature worthy of note was the Western character of their campaigns: large posters, information stands, and television commercials were all put to use. The internet, too, had a role to play: homepages provided information about the goals of the parties, and Facebook and YouTube served as platforms for mobilizing the voters. In substance, ideological quarrels were replaced by issues like war and peace, stability and democracy.

What caught the eye was the campaign of the FPM which, highlighting the colour orange, was clearly inspired by Barack Obama's message of change. Posters and a TV spot showed an attractive young woman together with the slogan 'Sois belle et vote' (Be beautiful and vote), a take-off on the French saying 'Sois belle et tais-toi' (Be beautiful and shut up). Charges of sexism made by women's rights groups may have been the reason why the same woman was seen announcing 'Je vote Orange' (I vote Orange) on bills posted later. The posters of the Christian and pro-Western Lebanese Forces showed monochrome pictures from the civil-war era in the background together with an appeal that resulted from their content: 'You can either remain idle or do something'. Qataeb, another Christian party, showed young people with children together with the slogan 'Your stability is our project – parliament is our weapon'. Blue was the colour chosen by the Sunnite Future Movement which, alluding to the era of Syrian occupation, demanded 'Freedom first' and 'Independence first'. The Hezbollah refrained from conducting a campaign in the conventional meaning of the term, knowing full well that its followers did not need mobilizing. Anyway, Hassan Nasrallah's picture had been ubiquitous throughout the year in all Shiite regions and urban districts. Lastly, the campaign of the Shiite Amal party concentrated on two slogans, 'Solidarity' and 'Hope'.

In the middle of the campaign, on May 23 this year, the German journal "Spiegel" caused an outcry by publishing an article which held the Shiite Hezbollah militia responsible for planning and implementing the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri. Seething with fury, the head of the Hezbollah, Mr Nasrallah, countered by saying that this was the handiwork of Israel and the USA which were trying to ruin the elections, incite hatred between Shiites and Sunnites, and plunge the region into conflict. Meanwhile, Walid Jumblat appealed to the Lebanese not to lose their calm although he did say that the information published by the "Spiegel" might prove dangerous. The country's press was similarly enraged. An "Nahar" called the report a fairy tale, and the "Daily Star" cast doubt on the authenticity of the documents. In point of fact, Hezbollah felt that its honour had been slighted; after all, it is constantly and successfully endeavouring to present itself at home as a patriotic resistance group that has nothing to do with a terrorist organization.

On June 25 this year, Parliament met for its first session. For the fifth time after 1992, it confirmed the speaker, Nabih Berri of the Amal Movement, in office. Two days later, president Sleiman ordered Saad Hariri to form a government. As a symbol of reconciliation at the launch of a 'government of national unity', the chairman of the Future Movement, who was confirmed by parliament with 86 of 128 votes, withdrew all court proceedings that he had previously instituted against political opponents.

One of the positive features of the elections is that they went smoothly. After the crises of 2007 and 2008, the desire to revive institutional normality appears universal. The same purpose is served by the will to have rival forces share in the responsibility of government.

Yet there is still ferment under the surface. Especially Hezbollah has been playing false in the last few years: while participating in the democratic process as a political player, it was a force of opposition within the government and waged war against Israel. Particularly when Beirut was occupied for several days in May 2008, many were reminded of the civil war from 1975 to 1990.

The incoming government led by Saad Hariri is confronted by great challenges, among which dealing with the Hezbollah is probably the trickiest. Insisting on its disarmament might lead to domestic destabilization. On the other hand, the state would renounce its monopoly on the use of force if it did not insist on disarmament. Similarly, a reform of the electoral code, although long overdue, would inevitably strengthen the Shiite community whose membership, which has grown enormously in recent years, supports Hezbollah almost without exception.

In view of all this, the country will probably remain caught in its fragile stability during the next legislative period. Pending reforms will probably be deferred for the sake of peace. And why not? After all, it is peace and stability that the Lebanese most long for these days.

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