

Lebanon: A Welcome End to the Hariri Era

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Parliamentary democracy is a tricky thing. Prime ministers come and go as alliances shift and majorities change. As this week's uproar in Lebanon proved, it is a reality outgoing Prime Minister Saad Hariri has yet to grasp.

Lebanon's sectarian political structure adds a twist of complexity to the country's governance: the prime minister must be a Sunni, the president a Maronite and the speaker of parliament a Shia. Additionally, cabinet and parliamentary seats must be evenly divided between Christian and Muslim and represent all the nation's confessional groups, in fixed proportion.

So when 11 opposition ministers withdrew from Hariri's cabinet on Jan. 12 in wake of his refusal to candidly address the politicized indictments expected from the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, it brought down his government.

Shortly thereafter, Druze and Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt declared, "I hereby ... confirm my party's position by the side of Syria and the Resistance [Hezbollah]."

Jumblatt was dubbed kingmaker because the 11 seats under his (now-disbanded) Democratic Gathering would decide which political bloc controls parliament. Although he was once squarely allied with the March 14 coalition led by Hariri's Future Movement, in a typical change of position, he distanced himself from them in 2009 and functioned as an independent. After Hariri scuttled the Saudi-Syrian initiative and his administration collapsed, Jumblatt placed his eggs in the basket of the March 8 opposition led by Hezbollah, Amal and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement.

Of 128 seats in Lebanon's Chamber of Deputies, a prime ministerial candidate needs the support of at least 65 legislators. March 8 had 57 and March 14, 60 and the Democratic Gathering 11. With the defection of Jumblatt and seven party MPs, March 14 lost the majority they once claimed in the June 2009 elections.

Having stated they would no longer back a Hariri premiership (Aoun said that reappointing Hariri would be "tantamount to consenting to domestic corruption"), March 8 nominated Tripoli MP, former prime minister and billionaire telecom tycoon, Najib Mikati.

A moderate and centrist holding good relations with all sects, Mikati branded himself the "alternative consensus candidate" and went out of his way to extend an olive-branch to Hariri:

"I extend my hand to everyone without exception ... I say to Prime Minister Saad Hariri, let us all work together for the sake of Lebanon."

In a televised address Sunday, Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah likewise struck a conciliatory tone:

“We want the new prime minister to form a national unity government in which everyone participates. We don’t want a cabinet that excludes any party ... We respect everyone’s right to representation. All claims that Hezbollah has plans to install an Iranian or Shia government is distortion, misleading and outright false.”

The response?

“The Future Movement announces its refusal to participate in a government headed by a candidate named by the opposition.”

After March 8 had secured a total of 68 seats, President Michel Suleiman named Miqati prime minister on Tuesday and asked him to form a government.

It was a peaceful exercise in parliamentary democracy that Hariri, March 14 and their United States patrons thoroughly rejected.

“As for the coup that Hezbollah is carrying out, it is an attempt to put the office of prime minister under the control of *waliyatul faqih* [rule of the clerics],” said Hariri loyalist Mustafa Alloush in Tripoli , who told Sunnis to reject “Persian tutelage.”

Mirroring the specious claim of Israel , the U.S. and Saudi Arabia , March 14 issued a statement saying that Hezbollah would make Lebanon an “Iranian base.” Samir Geagea, head of the extremist Lebanese Forces in the March 14 alliance, said Hezbollah would “turn Lebanon into Gaza .”

In stark contrast to last week’s silent show of strength when Hezbollah men appeared on Beirut ’s streets clad in black T-shirts (which Hariri supporters nonetheless described as “hooliganism”), the supposed March 14 moderates called for a “Day of Rage.”

It nothing more than blatant sectarian incitement.

Tripoli — Lebanon ’s northern, Sunni-dominated port city that is a hotbed of Salafi extremism—became the epicenter of violence. Protestors burned tires, fired weapons, torched a van belonging to Al-Jazeera television network and attacked other reporters covering the unrest (who had to be rescued by the Lebanese Army after the rioters had surrounded them). They ransacked the offices of another Tripoli MP backing Miqati and carried banners with sectarian slogans such as “the blood of Sunnis is boiling,” “ Iran ’s project will not go through Tripoli ,” and “Miqati, the Shiite dog.”

In Beirut , they blocked streets as well as the north-south roads connecting the capital to Tripoli and Sidon . Highways to Syria through the Beka’a valley were likewise cut. By Tuesday’s end, 45 people had been wounded, 35 of them Lebanese Army soldiers.

March 14 had successfully unleashed a tide of ugly sectarianism that rocked the country.

“ Tripoli has said its word” was Hariri’s reply to the street thuggery he instigated.

Highlighting American’s duplicity in its treat to cut off aid to Lebanon after March 8

nominated the prime minister, Nasrallah commented:

“ ... had the situation been reversed with the other camp’s candidate being appointed as prime minister and with opposition supporters heading to the streets, we would have heard condemnations from Washington and Western capitals ... Why do you respect that [March 14] majority and not this one?”

If Hariri is the victim of anything, it is the transient nature of power in a democratic system. Anything but the statesman, he instead threw a nationwide temper-tantrum.

Lebanon ’s June 2009 legislative elections brought the March 14 coalition to power, thanks only to Lebanon ’s sectarian distribution of seats. They unambiguously *lost* the popular vote, however, which March 8 handily won. One-and-a-half-years later, the people’s mandate has been realized.

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