

Meet the Lebanese Press: Eleventh hour politics and social malaise

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A billboard in Beirut marks the days since Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated by a car bomb, 10 November 2007. ([Matthew Cassel](#))

Confused last ditch efforts to “elect” a president by local, regional, and international consensus has thrown Lebanon into new uncertainty with only a few days left before the current president’s term expires. International brokers and kingpins are busy making the rounds domestically and regionally to resolve the deadlock. Following futile attempts to reach a deal amongst the different political leaders, an uneasy consensus relegated the duty of choosing a list of candidates to the Maronite Christian Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir. Sfeir in turn — and after much hesitation but with prompting from France — reportedly handed over such a list to Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri and MP Saad Hariri, both engaged in one-on-one negotiations on behalf of their respective coalitions, March 8 and March 14. (A lot of secrecy is surrounding this list. Press reports estimate that a total of six names are included and several names are speculated.)

But bringing the presidential crisis to an end won’t be a panacea to the country’s mounting woes. Regardless of the outcome of this pivotal turn in the warrens of Lebanese politics, the presidential crisis has exposed the extent to which the sectarian make-up of Lebanon’s governing institutions is dissolving any democratic forms of governance. The relegation of naming candidates to a single man representing a major religious authority (with all the constraints from political players, many foreign) speaks volumes to that end. But the mockery of what is anything but an election of a president has also overshadowed the economic and social malaise from which the country is suffering.

Klovis Maksoud writes in *An-Nahar* on the glaring breakdown of governing structures in Lebanon that must be addressed beyond choosing a president. In *As-Safir*, Adnan al-Hajj lists some of the social and economic hardships that have been swept under the rug in the midst of the political crisis, while in his piece in *Al-Akhbar*, As’ad Abukhalil looks into the political alliances and developments over the years that has led to the complete erosion of these social services.

In the same paper, Ibrahim al-Ameen writes on the other big event of the past two weeks — the clandestine military maneuvers conducted by Hizballah in the south in response to massive military redeployment by Israel’s army on the other side of the border. Both actions are an indication of what is in store if the situation in Lebanon deteriorates amid a failure to “elect” a new president. (The following are translations of edited excerpts).

As-Safir, 12 November 2007, Adnan al-Hajj, "Lebanon enters the period of 'hour by hour' and 'day by day' in economics as well as politics":

The Lebanese citizen is facing daily living challenges with extreme difficulty. He is the weakest link in a society [plagued by] clashes of political and personal interests of some authorities whose interests are linked to regional and international interests, all of which serve none of the interests of the limited-income citizen. Moreover, these clashes weaken the citizen's ability to reclaim his minimum rights in deference to the bigger causes that [are said] address the future of this country. This is a reality experienced by entire sections of the Lebanese public. There are those awaiting the improvement of social security payments. Others are waiting for the disbursement of education scholarships that were scheduled for payment at the beginning of the academic year to about 450,000 workers in the private sector. There is also the issue of fuel subsidies, which was approved by the government today.

There is also the tenant law that has been derailed and forgotten for more than 11 years ... and nobody in the opposition or the government addresses these concerns, except within the context of incitement used to serve a particular political goal.

Al-Akhbar, 17 November 2007, As'ad Abukhalil, "The primary absentee: Social justice in Lebanon":

One topic remains absent from the cacophony of disagreements, talks and mediations dominating the interaction between the pro-government coalition and the opposition, namely the goal of achieving social justice.

The subject of social justice is a political one in Lebanon even if one doesn't adopt a Marxist framework. And the issue of social justice has become intertwined with that of sectarian conflict due to the link established between sectarian mobilization with that of class struggle (and vice versa) during the pre-Civil War period. During that period, the National Movement [the broad coalition headed by leftist forces] championed in its mandate the concerns of the poor and the suffering, and this was behind the movement's success in infiltrating the ranks of the various sects. But class worries were soon forgotten during the Civil War, and many of the movement's leaders enriched themselves during the war. The movement failed to establish a social services network (the same way the PLO did, albeit under extreme corruption aptly managed by Yasser Arafat).

Social justice dropped from the official radar during the Hariri period in the wake of the "Taif Reforms" that officially acknowledged the rights of the different sects rather than the rights of the different classes of society. Backed by a Syrian regime that entrusted him with the management of the economy, Hariri was able to further impoverish the poor and to reduce the government's social services network. And during this particular period, Hizballah struck a "Faustian" alliance with Hariri under which the latter took total control of Economic policy while the former the burden of resistance and liberation. By granting Hariri a free hand in managing the economy, Hizballah refrained from fighting the battle of liberating the individual that goes in tandem with the fight to liberate the land, and people are more valuable than land.

An-Nahar, 18 November 2007, Kloviss Maksoud, "Seventy-two hours separate US from possible relief or improbable explosion":

The anxiety of the ordinary Lebanese stems from the loss of any direct relationship between them and decision-makers. The schism between the state and society sheds light on the shortcomings of the sectarian make up ... and this in turn highlights the growing breakdown in the state's authority ... This breakdown necessarily weakens national unity and transforms Lebanon into an arena of foreign intervention.

But the obscene and sometimes audacious foreign intervention cannot be blamed solely on the sectarian breakdown in Lebanon. It is also due to the waning of Arabic unity and the contradictions among Arab countries.

What is needed now is for a president to be elected this Wednesday to avoid running into an explosive situation. But the real resolution ... is for the new president to be able to push in the direction of a critical revision of the reasons that led a lost Lebanon to the edge of the abyss. And for his priorities to include an invitation to those who are non-sectarian to take part in the formulation of a vision of a Lebanon with an Arabic identity in which the citizen is treated as such and not as someone herded by the sectarian hallucinations.

... A new president is required to bridge the gap between society and state and to bridge the gap between opinion-makers and decision-makers, and to back separation of power policies, and to push towards the provision of national security and safety for citizens.

Al-Akhbar, 7 November 2007, Ibrahim Al-Amin, "Maneuvers by the resistance and internal Lebanese calculations":

It is not easy for anyone to accept the realities of the resistance in Lebanon. Prior to the American coup that ousted the authority allied to Syria in Lebanon, a lot of those who are in power today did not accept that the resistance is a Lebanese reality. And all the conciliatory attempts that were initiated by the resistance did not succeed in breaking the prevalent image among those parties that the resistance is simply a tool driven by the Iranians.

And after all that happened since the end of the aggression until today, things remained unchanged in terms of the domestic attitude towards the resistance, and the latest maneuvers revived the debate on this issue, especially given that the position of Prime Minister Siniora who said that what took place was simply on paper, seems extremely naïve even if this position was part of his attempt to contain the inquiry by the Security Council over permitting the resistance to perform such a maneuver.

Meet the Lebanese Press is EI's twice-monthly review of what is making the rounds in the Lebanese press and the pundits' take on it.

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