

The Lebanese Velvet Revolution

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On Friday the first of December waves and waves of thousands of Lebanese had converged, from the four corners of Lebanon, into the capital Beirut for an anticipated long sit-in demonstration against the present government demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his ministers, the formation of a new more representative government, and the reforming of the country's electoral laws. The protesters pitched tents near central Beirut's Martyrs' Square and on streets leading to government's headquarters, where the Prime Minister Siniora and several of his cabinet ministers were holed up inside. They determined to sit-in as long as it takes for the government to acknowledge their demands and to resign.

The Lebanese opposition, which organized this mass demonstration are Hezbollah (Party of God), AMAL Movement (Afwaj Al-Mouqawama Al-Lubnaniyya; Lebanese Resistance Detachment), and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). They claimed the legitimate right for such protest based on the Lebanese constitution that grants the people the right to change their government. They described Siniora's cabinet as "a government representing one party", March 14th Alliance, under the leadership of young "Saad Hariri", the son of the assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. They accused the March 14th Alliance of being puppets and subservient to foreign regimes; US, Israel and France. They have asked for a more active role in the decision making in the cabinet by reconfiguring it into a national unity government to have a fair representation of all the factions of the people. Originally the opposition did not want to abolish the present government but proposed to form a national unity government including the present members. When the government rejected such a proposition the opposition threatened to take the matter to the people.

The government is accused of failing to serve and to protect the people and their interests; it protects only the interests of a minority on the expense of the majority. Under this government the Lebanese public debt had jumped to over \$44 billion. Economic debt is the modern type of occupation. The country's assets were opened to privatization for foreign investors. Unemployment jumped to 18%, and official reports claimed that around 75% of the people are hovering around the poverty line. The government could not foster security and stop the series of assassinations and bombings. Its weakness is represented in calling for international investigation into the assassinations and for an international tribunal to try the criminals, thus opening the door for international mandate over the country. Hezbollah had accused the March 14th Alliance of attempting to disarm and dissolve their group and of providing the Israelis with coordinates of Hezbollah's fighters during the war last July.

Siniora's government is accused of failing to protect Southern Lebanon from the Israeli savage attacks and of opening the country for international mandate. During the Israeli attacks against South Lebanon last July Siniora had failed to send the Lebanese Army to support Hezbollah's fighters in defending the southern villages. Instead he sobbed like a

child during his address to the ineffective Arab League diplomats in Beirut last July begging for their help. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni mocked his tears and urged him to “utilize” the Lebanese Army to “solve” the problem. Siniora hastened to accept UN resolution 1701 without reservations opening the country wide for foreign mandate in the form of 15,000 armed UNIFIL troops south of the Litani river and a NATO armada at the Lebanese shores, whose real job is to protect Israelis, not Lebanese, by preventing Hezbollah from replenishing its arms. Israeli war planes are still routinely and daily penetrating Lebanese air space violating resolution 1701 and UNIFIL is doing nothing to stop such violations. The real intention was to have UNIFIL control all Lebanese borders and ports, but the opposition rejected this.

Since the end of July war until now Siniora’s government had failed to provide shelter and aid for the Lebanese victims of the war, and have not even started rebuilding the damaged infrastructure, while Hezbollah had started this process immediately after the cessation of Israeli aggression. Promising full compensation and rebuilding Hezbollah had donated money and provided shelters for the victims. Siniora is still standing at the doors of the so-called Paris donors’ conference, scheduled early 2007, begging for financial aid, that will come based on political conditions, severe restrictions, and high interest rate. Can the Lebanese victims wait that long?

The Siniora government and its supporters, on the other side, reiterate their routine accusations of the opposition as pawns in the hands of Syria and Iran; a position the American administration and Israel adopt and declare repeatedly. This is a great insult to the Lebanese, who exhibit strong patriotic feelings, and who enjoy high political awareness to know what is good for their country. It is worth noting that the Free Patriotic Movement was anti-Syrian. They accuse Syria and Iran of meddling in Lebanese affairs and of using Lebanon as a battle ground for their war against the West. All the political assassinations and bombings were attributed to Syrian operatives. They labeled this demonstration as a Syrian coup. They are accusing the opposition of leading the country into a sectarian civil war. Despite the fact that Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians had joined the opposition government officials are attempting to explain the demonstration as the result of a Sunni/Shiite conflict.

The Siniora government is claiming legitimacy through majority in the cabinet, although Nabih Berri, the Speaker of the Parliament, had refused to reaffirm this majority and legitimacy until the recent crises is resolved. Government officials condemned the demonstrations stating that political matters should be resolved through negotiation, something they had sabotaged in the past when the opposition proposed the national unity government on the tables. They also accused the opposition of breaking the Taif Agreement, yet a major element of the Taif is to establish a national unity government. Government officials claimed that the opposition orchestrated the demonstration because they have rejected the international tribunal, set to try Hariri’s assassin, and are trying to protect Syrian regime (March 4th Alliance accuse Syria of Hariri’s assassination). Nabih Berri, the Speaker of the Parliament, refuted this claim as false and unjustifiable since the opposition insists on the international tribunal to flush out the real assassins. The opposition accuses US and Israel of the assassination citing the use of depleted Uranium explosives (found in US and Israel armament), and the disruption of Hariri’s electronic jamming system manufactured by an Israeli company).

The government tried to belittle this mass movement by claiming that it is condemned by

Arab and international communities, who recognize only the Siniora government as the legitimate representation of Lebanon. On the Arab side Saudi, Jordanian, and Egyptian officials hastened to support the government, condemn the demonstration, and warn of religious civil war. US, UK, German, French, and even Israeli officials did the same thing. They also warned that "Hezbollah" victory could lead to international isolation and financial embargo similar to that imposed on the Palestinians. In an interview with Lebanese Broadcasting Corp. (LBC) the American Under Secretary Nick Burns explained that the international financial community, planned to convene in Paris III conference, has faith in the credibility of Prime Minister Siniora, not Mr. Nasrallah (Hezbollah's leader), and would provide him with a tremendous financial help for the long-term reconstruction of Lebanon. The US accused the demonstrators of using violence and intimidation to topple a democratic government. People still freshly remember that the US had fully endorsed as a democratic process a similar Lebanese mass demonstration in March 2005, known as the Cedar Revolution, that brought down the pro-Syrian government of Prime Minister Omar Karami.

This Lebanese crisis is a part and parcel of the Middle Eastern regional power conflict. To understand its true nature one needs to go back into history to the early 1970's when Jordan's King Hussain violently kicked the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) out of Jordan. The PLO re-established itself in Beirut, Lebanon. Lebanese Christian Phalange, supported and armed by Israel, started the civil war by attacking the Palestinians. Syria, Israel, and the US were drawn into the civil war. The PLO left Lebanon, US left after its consulate was bombed, Israel withdrew from parts of Lebanon but stayed in the South, while Syria stayed in Lebanon until March 2005. Hezbollah was born out of the resistance and was able to liberate most of the southern regions from the Israeli occupation. Israel is still occupying Sheb'a Farms.

The American Bush/Cheney administration started its campaign of expanding the American empire. It started implementing its "Democratic New Middle East" plan by occupying Iraq. After reaching the real goals of the Iraqi occupation (control of oil, privatization of local natural resources, and sectarian divide) the administration turned its guns towards Iran and Syria, who formed a defense pact. First, the Israeli borders are to be secured since Israel is planned to be the leading striking force against Iran in a "self-defense" pre-emptive strike against Iran's Ahmadinejad's threats of wiping Israeli off the map. The American/Israeli team planned a series of political assassinations of figures in the March 14 Alliance, first to draw them closer into their arms asking for "protection", and second to accuse Syria of the assassinations.

The assassination of the high profile Rafiq Hariri led to UN resolution 1559 demanding Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. Syria withdrew and Lebanese election took place. Hezbollah won six seats in the cabinet, but with two thirds of the seats the March 14th Alliance was able to make all the political decisions. Hezbollah demanded the formation of a national unity government, as per the Taif Agreement, to represent all the Lebanese factions. Hezbollah, now, paused a political threat to the American-backed March 14th Alliance, as well as pausing as a military threat to Israel on its northern borders. Hezbollah was to be eliminated.

A small contingent of Israeli soldiers was sent, as bait, across the Lebanese border into one of Hezbollah's strong holds. Hezbollah swallowed the bait and took two Israeli soldiers as prisoners. Israel used the incident as a justification for its July 2006 attacks on southern Lebanon with its declared objective of finishing off Hezbollah. Israel was emboldened by some Arab leaders' condemnation of Hezbollah, and by American political cover and military

support. The US provided Israel with its new generation laser guided bombs, and blocked all UN condemnations to Israel. Yet, after 34 days of continuous bombardment, Israel failed to achieve its objective.

Empowered by its military victory Hezbollah, backed by AMAL and FPM, demanded more seats in the cabinet. After the failure of negotiation with March 14th Alliance they decided to resort to public demonstration demanding a national unity government.

Changing a ruling regime in any Arab country had always been a violent act throughout history. This Lebanese attempt to affect changes in the government has been, so far, a peaceful and well organized procedure. It came as a precedent feared by many Arab rulers, who worry that it might spread to their countries. One wonders how long they, with the cooperation of the West, would wait before they send their operatives to stir confrontation and violence among the masses to give justification for "international interference" under the guise of protecting Siniora's government from the "Syrian and Iranian mob"!

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