

## **Lebanon: Elections Endangered**

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*Translated from Arabic by Julia Choucair*

With the departure of Syrian troops from northern Lebanon and the approaching withdrawal from the rest of the country by April 27, the electoral balance of power in Lebanon has radically changed in advance of elections scheduled to be held by May 31. Even before the February assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, the extension of President Emile Lahoud's term in September 2004 had generated widespread opposition and launched new dynamics in the Lebanese political scene. Hariri's assassination multiplied this sentiment, widening the opposition's popular base.

The prevailing belief in Lebanon is that the elimination of Hariri, irrespective of who was responsible, was aimed at preventing him from filling the political void left by an eventual Syrian withdrawal. Hariri's unique position made him most able to form a bridge between Lebanese opponents—he had large support from Sunnis and other Lebanese, played a prominent role in the Arab world, and had international connections. In short, Hariri and his allies were the most capable of restoring normalcy to Lebanese political life and replacing the artificial powers sustained by Syria. The opposition's slogan "we want to know the truth" (in reference to the assassination) expresses the public's rejection of politics imposed by force in Lebanon through imprisonment, exile, and assassination. The opposition is demanding the truth in order to deprive those responsible of any popular support, particularly after the government has been accused of hindering investigations.

Currently, there is a sense in Lebanon that the elections are endangered because the escalating political struggle has taken precedence, with the opposition pushing for the truth about the assassination and for the resignation of security leaders in Lebanon. The opposition's choice of the street as the forum for this confrontation has delayed discussions about the electoral law that was referred to parliament before the assassination. This leaves little time for legal arrangements for the elections. No party, however, Lebanese or international, dares suggest postponing the elections and thus assuming the responsibility in the eyes of the public. The pro-Syrian Lebanese authorities, however, have made an implicit decision to delay elections, as expressed by some pro-Syria ministers, who have asked unabashedly why they should surrender power to the opposition via elections without exacting a price.

While the country was mourning Hariri's death, Syria's supporters ignored the political consequences of the event and rushed to devise an electoral law. Recently pro-Syrian officials have departed from their original proposal to divide the country into small electoral districts (qadas). Instead, they have suggested using the Taif agreement, accepted by all parties since it ended the civil war in 1989, which created larger districts corresponding to the governorates (muhafazat). Opinion polls show that if this system were used coupled with proportional representation instead of majority rule, the

opposition would still win in many areas. Based on these calculations, Damascus began pressing its allies to extend the current parliament's term and delay elections for one year in the hope of a change in the balance of power. This plan was abandoned, however, due to international and Arab pressure on Syria as well as Hezbollah's taking care not to depart too far from the popular will by aligning itself too closely with Syria. Currently, the authorities are trying to fleece the opposition—authorities promise to postpone elections for no more than three to six months if the opposition agrees not to contest the re-election of certain key supporters of Syria.

For its part, the opposition faces the challenge of designating Sunni candidates in Beirut, the north, Mt. Lebanon, the Beqa, and the south. Hariri was unrivaled among Sunnis and intended to run candidates in all regions, a departure from previous elections where he left room for other candidates by Syrian demand. Although his assassination increased popular support for his party, the lack of a figure with Hariri's stature will complicate the task of uniting various forces, unless the Hariri family and his party's leaders can devise an electoral equation to fill the void. Another issue for the opposition is the intensifying competition among Christian forces. Figures such as General Michael Aoun, the Lebanese Forces, and traditional and family leaders are eager to fill the gap left in Christian areas by the loss of influence of pro-Syria candidates.

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