

Web Commentary

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Lebanon in Precarious Drift as Parliament Fails to Elect President

By Paul Salem

Despite intense last minute efforts by Lebanese politicians and a host of regional and international mediators, the November 23 deadline for electing a new president before President Emile Lahoud's term ended that evening came and went without success. The office of the president now lies vacant and may remain so for many weeks and months. A meeting of parliament to once again try electing a new president is scheduled for November 30, but few in the country expect this meeting to be any more fruitful than the previous ones.

The real fears of an outbreak of violence as the presidential deadline approached influenced the process and altered the positions of several of the main players. The anti-Syrian March 14 coalition abandoned its threat to proceed with an election based on a simple majority in parliament, rather than a two-thirds quorum, and the March 8 coalition abandoned its threats to set up a rival government or to make moves on the ground. This helped to ease tensions.

March 14 expressed its willingness to consider candidates other than their own, and March 8 did the same. Indeed, the two sides appeared on the brink of agreement on a candidate several times in the final week, but each time the agreement unraveled. It is possible that the sides could still agree on a candidate in the weeks ahead, but without the deadline pressure of the end of a presidential term, which has now come and gone, the sides might prefer to maintain the new status quo rather than make concessions to elect a candidate who would satisfy neither side.

The paralysis of Lebanon's political institutions is now almost complete. The office of the presidency is vacant; the Siniora government is not recognized by the opposition since the Shi'i ministers withdrew last November; and parliament has not met for almost a year. However, day-to-day public services continue as the government undertakes the functions of a caretaker government, and public ministries and agencies function normally.

At the security level, both sides are committed to maintaining calm. In addition, the army is fairly effective and enjoys the support of both political camps and of the public in general; the army fanned out across the country as the presidential term ended, setting up check points and ensuring that supporters of the opposing sides did not take matters into their own hands. In his final statement as president, Lahoud called on the army to assume responsibility for the security of the country as the country was in what he described as a “state of emergency”; his statement did not have the force of law in terms of *declaring* a state of emergency since that authority is a prerogative of the government not of the president; however, it did reflect a widely shared sense that much is riding on the army leadership’s ability to manage the simmering tensions and maintain security amid the tense political divisions and contradictions.

Worryingly, reports continue to stream in that groups from both sides are continuing to arm and train. Among the March 8 coalition, Hizbollah, of course, is already very well-armed; the militia wings of the Christian pro-Syrian Marada party of Suleiman Franjiyyeh and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party have fighting experience and are regrouping. Among the March 14 coalition, the armed wings of the Christian anti-Syrian Lebanese Forces party led by Samir Geagea and the mainly Druze Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Junblat also have fighting experience and are regrouping. The Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun and the Future Movement of Saad Hariri have the least fighting experience because they did not exist as such during the 1975-90 civil war, but there are reports that they are arming and training as well. Arming and training does not mean that the parties are destined to come to blows; indeed, neither side has an interest in that; however, this spiral could be difficult to control and contain indefinitely.

At this time, it seems most likely that the tensions that rose dangerously before the presidential deadline might ebb as the parties adjust to the status quo without a president. By not electing a president each side can avoid making important concessions that it might have to live with for the next six years of a new presidential term; by indefinitely postponing the presidential election each side can hope to elect a president more to their liking in the future. It is quite possible that Lebanon might be left without a president until after the next parliamentary elections that are supposed to take place in the spring of 2009. However, without functioning political institutions and a new election law, it is not clear that such elections could even be held at all.

Although violence may be avoided, this extended paralysis of the country’s political institutions is very dangerous. To be sure, the main failure to elect a president is a Lebanese one and reflects serious loopholes in the constitution and a failure of leadership among Lebanese politicians. However, any breakdown in Lebanon would affect the entire region. It is thus in the interest of the regional and international community to redouble efforts to push the parties to agree on a president rather than tolerate such a period of extended and dangerous drift.

France took the lead in the past few weeks in trying to mediate an agreement and achieved significant results, but these efforts fell short of complete success; France does not have the leverage with Syria and Iran that Russia has nor does it have the capacity of

the United States to influence the March 14 coalition. In the wake of the Annapolis meeting, the United States and Russia should consider putting together a diplomatic initiative to push parties in the country and the region to overcome the Lebanese presidential hurdle. After all, nudging the parties to elect a president for Lebanon is nowhere near as difficult as addressing the Arab–Israeli conflict or the situation in Iraq; a small expenditure of concerted big-power diplomatic effort would go a long way. But leaving the Lebanese situation to drift could lead to costly consequences that cannot be undone quickly or cheaply.

Paul Salem is the director of the Carnegie Middle East Center. Prior to this appointment, Salem was the general director at The Fares Foundation and from 1989 to 1999 he founded and directed the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, Lebanon’s leading public policy think tank. Recently, Salem was a member of the Lebanese National Commission for Electoral Law Reform, a blue ribbon commission tasked with revising Lebanon’s electoral laws and proposing a new system. In 2002, Salem was a member of the Senior Review Committee for the UNDP Arab Human Development Report. He also has held various positions at the American University in Beirut. He is a regular commentator on television, radio, and in print on political issues relating to the Arab world.

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