

## Lebanon's Presidential Elections and Institutional Continuity

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As the extremist Islamic State continues to threaten the fragile Iraqi government and weaken the Iraqi state, and as Syria continues on its way of self-destructive chaos, Lebanon is facing an acute constitutional and institutional crisis. It has been without a president for almost five months as its parliament extends its own term until 2017 and its care-taker government teeters on the verge of collapse under the burdens of fighting extremists, hosting over a million Syrian refugees, and balancing sectarian and political rivalries. Indeed, as Lebanon lurches forward amid unpredictable events, it is hard to imagine how its beleaguered institutions will weather the perfect storm currently brewing on the complicated Middle Eastern landscape.



Former President Michel Suleiman

Lebanon was here before, a fact that both attests to the inability of Lebanese elites to learn difficult, yet essential, lessons and to the complexity of the domestic and external issues complicating political machinations in Beirut. In 2007, a political crisis pitting a Hezbollah-led coalition against the

government of Fouad Siniora deprived the country of a president until a domestic and regional deal was brokered in May, 2008, to elect Army Commander Michel Suleiman to the post. What is new today are the added complications of a Syrian civil war in which Hezbollah is a party and an extremist threat in the form of the Islamic State and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Syrian Nusra Front.

The present delay in electing a new president – President Suleiman's term ended June 20 – rests directly with Hezbollah and its political allies. The Party of God's deputies in Parliament, along with those of the AMAL Movement led by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, of the Free Patriotic Movement of former General Michel Aoun, and of a sundry of other small parties, have on fourteen occasions failed to attend a parliamentary session to elect a president. Their absence has deprived the said sessions of the necessary two-thirds, constitutionally-mandated, majority of representatives to ensure the quorum of 86 members out of a total of 128 deputies. Hezbollah and its allies have insisted on a negotiated deal that would assure the election of what they believe is a consensus candidate, in this case General Aoun himself.

The party's opponents, namely the Future Current of former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, Lebanese Forces Party of Samir Geagea (himself a candidate), the Kataeb Party of former President Amin Gemayel, and others insist on an open contest that would democratically elect a president. Independents, specifically the Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Junblatt call for accommodation and compromise but caution against the institutional vacuum at the top of the political system.

Many have speculated that -aside from the regional complications impacting Lebanon's domestic politics- the delay in reaching a compromise to elect a new president has its origins in Hezbollah's attempt, supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran, to re-fashion Lebanon's political architecture. The 1989 Taif Accords, signed between the country's political elites to end the Lebanese civil war that had raged since 1975, consecrated an even split of political power between Christians and Muslims. Exemplifying ascendant Shiism, Hezbollah has now floated ideas for a constitutional convention that would inaugurate a tripartite split between Christians, Sunnis, and Shiites. Additionally, the Party of God has advocated the direct popular election of the president -instead of the constitutionally-mandated vote in Parliament; thus assuring its full control of executive authority due to the Shiite numerical advantage in the country and its own ability to harness the Shiite community's vote.



FPM leader former General Michel Aoun

As the country faces unpredictable domestic and regional developments, it has become increasingly more difficult to explain why General Michel Aoun, the leader of the largest Christian bloc in Parliament and self-described protector of Christian interests, continues to ally himself with Hezbollah. The absence of a Lebanese Maronite President

endangers Christians' existence and interests, in Lebanon and around the Middle East, where they are increasingly under attack in Iraq and Syria. Many in Lebanon speculate that the General will not fare well among his Christian constituencies were parliamentary elections held today. His alliance-to-the-death with Hezbollah only serves him in his old bid to become President, a wish many doubt will become reality given domestic and regional developments and vetoes.

Hezbollah's plan for a constitutional restructuring of the political system is opposed by both the Christians -who have so far enjoyed more political power than their numerical disadvantage would otherwise guarantee- and the Sunnis, who both fear Shiite ambitions and resent the latter's close alignment with Iran. On a recent trip to Australia, the Maronite Patriarch Beshara Butrus al-Rahi rejected any change in the original 1943 National Pact, or the 1989 Taif Accords, and insisted on the importance of Lebanon's presidential elections. The Sunnis, most notably Saad al-Hariri, have also rejected any tampering with the political formula and have insisted on the essential role Christians play, and have played, in Lebanon's existence.

It remains difficult to speculate whether and when Lebanon's presidential election takes place. The domestic and regional environment surrounding the country is simply unpredictable. But what is clear is that institutional uncertainty in Lebanon is on the verge of causing yet more chaos and instability. As extremists and barbaric jihadists seek to widen their areas of control in Iraq and Syria, institutional continuity and strength can help provide Lebanon with the

requisite wherewithal to stay unified in the interest of all its communities.

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Images accessed 11/10/2014

President Suleiman's image

<http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/129207>

FPM leader Michel Aoun's image

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jun-30/262103-aoun-proposes-direct-presidential-election.ashx#axzz3Ifb3duv8>