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Report

Political Attitudes Surrounding the Lebanese Presidency

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Lebanese members of parliament gather to elect the new president in downtown Beirut [AP Photo / Joseph Eid, Pool]

This report is based on the results of a recent fact finding mission in Lebanon. The interlocutors we worked with included the heads of political parties, Members of Parliament, clergy, prominent figures from civil society and political parties and members of the security forces. The participants were open to dialog and constructive debate and added insight into current state of affairs in the country, post the formation of a government and prior to the election of a new president.

The Lebanese Political Model and the Presidency

In the quarter century since the signing of the 1989 Taef Agreement, which brought an end to the country's 15-year-long Civil War, the Lebanese political system has been subject to a long series of stresses and shocks. The stresses have included the continued actions of powerful confessional-based political-military organizations operating beyond the scope of state control, the presence large numbers of foreign troops (both Syrian and Israeli) operating on Lebanese soil, the continued growth of a large, politically unrepresented refugee population (with Syrian refugees now substantially outnumbering Palestinian ones and refugees currently making up perhaps a quarter of the country's total population) and the growing tensions between the country's Sunni and Shia communities. The shocks have included the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, the damaged caused by the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War and the spill-over effects of the ongoing Syrian Civil War.

Despite these massive stresses and repeated shocks the political settlement set out and Taef has been able to survive. There has been no return to a state of civil war and the multi-confessional, democratic political structure has remained essentially intact. That this has been so is in large part thanks to the fact that the Lebanese Christians have been able to act as a buffer between their conflicting Shia and Sunni neighbours, and in particular to the role played by the Lebanese President as a unifying national figure.

The Taef Agreement sets out how power is to be shared amongst the different Muslim and Christian groups that make up the political-confessional fabric of the country. Under the agreement the most important political posts are shared out according to religion: the Presidency is reserved for the Maronite community, the Sunnis have the Premiership, and the Shias have the Speaker of the House. The system does not provide answers to all questions. Nor does it satisfy everyone's exigencies and expectations. However, by ensuring that all parties are displeased in some way, it has managed to bring about a political equilibrium of sorts.

The Presidency is of particular importance to the Christian communities because it belongs to them, but the position itself is a symbol for the nation as a whole. Its ultimate importance does not lie in the practical powers of the President, which are themselves quite limited. Rather, it lies in the symbolic importance of Lebanon's being a country in the Arab world with a Christian President, one who represents 18 different religious sects. This is an essence that often gets lost among the details.

The Mechanism

On Saturday 25th March Lebanon entered into the constitutionally defined period for the selection of a new President of the Republic. According to the Constitution in place, which was adopted in May 1926 and amended through the Taef Agreement, the President is elected by Parliament, in a secret ballot, for a term of 6 years. This election period will last until May 25th and for its duration the Speaker of the House may choose to invite the 128 MPs to attend a plenary session to choose a new president. By custom, the result of the election is decided by pre-session political bargaining.

For the last ten days before the 25th May deadline, in the absence of a formal invitation from the House Speaker, the MPs can decide to attend Parliament without his invitation. For the President to be elected in the first round of voting a two-thirds majority of the House is required. In the second round the President can be elected with 65 votes (a simple majority of House), with the prevision that two-thirds of the MP s must be present for the vote to be considered valid.

In the absence of a quorum or an established consensus (a key element that the current system is designed to encourage) the political vacuum can, in theory, go on ad infinitum. When this occurs, the balance is often tipped by regional and international powers, if they come to an agreement that the institutional vacuum is hurting everyone's interests; including those of the Lebanese themselves.

With the diminishing Syrian influence over Lebanese political arena, the leading regional and international roles have increasingly been left to other powers. Saudi Arabia is an influential player, especially for the Sunni community, and the March 14 bloc in particular. Iran has a strong influence through its relationship with Hezbollah. The United States remains the main player in the region, albeit one that is in withdrawal. The second tier powers involved in Lebanon include Russia (which is playing an ever stronger strategic role in the country), France (which has a historical relationship with Lebanon) and the European Union (which is working to strengthen institutional mechanisms through UN agencies and UNIFIL).

Testing the Waters

In late March a three man Parliamentary committee (made up of MP Michel Moussa, MP Yassine Jaber and MP Ali Oseirran) formed by House Speaker Nabih Berri met with Christian political leaders, the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Rai and others, to discuss the upcoming election. The committee did not directly discuss the names of any potential candidates for the presidency; however there were few questions that made the rounds.

a) Will the MPs come if the session is convened? b) If they come, will they stay? c) Will the election take place within the designated election period?

The government has itself only recently been formed, on February 15th, after close to 11 months of failed attempts to reach a consensus. There is a general impression that any possible deal within the two month deadline would have to take place towards the end of the election period.

The Two Main Contenders

1. **March 14 Bloc**

Dr. Samir Geagea, who announced his candidacy on April 5th, has so far been the only contender to do so.

The leader of the Lebanese Forces (LF) is one of the Christian heavy-weights within the March 14 bloc. He is both well represented and popular. Despite these advantages, he has had to battle his way up within the bloc itself, as his Christian competitors have been in no hurry to support his efforts and the bloc's head, Saad Hariri, has preferred to preserve the impression that all options are still on the table.

The LF has 8 MPs in Parliament and has been reinforced at the grassroots level. Geagea and his party strongly support the principle that Christians can and should reassert themselves through institutions that create a strong, coherent state mechanism.

When (or, if) that paradigm is extended and the model becomes statutory for everyone, Lebanon will be able to take few steps closer to the multifaceted concept of citizenry that has yet to be grasped by Arab and Muslim ruling elites. Geagea maintains that transparency, rule of law, and accountability are key elements that will protect the Christian community in Lebanon and beyond.

Geagea's head start in the race may bring layered advantages in terms of wider networking in the regional and international arena. The LF's president is someone who it is increasingly important to observe and listen to.

2. March 8 Bloc

General Michel Aoun is perceived as the strongest Christian leader. He leads a bloc of 27 MPs in Parliament and has managed to survive and profit from political conflict.

In 2006 Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement signed the Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah. That agreement deepened the polarization within the Christian community, but it has also proven itself to be complex and reasonable enough to keep Lebanon in a balance of sorts through intense regional political storms.

The party has acted as a buffer in national level politics, an intermediary between Western forces and Hezbollah and a protective screen for the Christian community.
In hindsight, the experience of the years since the Memorandum of Understanding was signed can be said to have nurtured a stable partnership between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement: between Christians and Shias. The agreement is part of a complex local strategy with regional and international antennae, one that has been both firmly criticized and praised.

Between 2006 and 2008 the March 8 bloc protested against Fouad Siniora-led March 14 government. The March 8 bloc held more than 40% of the seats in Parliament and requested that it be included in a government of national unity. The conundrum started when the March 8 bloc asked for more than one third of the cabinet posts, which would have given it a veto and the ability to bring down the government. The March 14 bloc refused to accede. March 8 then went ahead with massive sit-ins in downtown Beirut and demanded that early legislative elections be held, with the intention of bringing down the March 14 Alliance. At the same time, the March 14 bloc was seeking early presidential elections to replace General Emile Lahoud, who was largely perceived – both within and outside of the country – as being Damascus' man in Lebanon.

The country remained at a standstill for 18 months until a breaking point was reached in May 2008 and a week of armed clashes between the two main political rivals took place. This reminder of the protracted Civil War was a crude wake-up call.

Minute before midnight salvation was provided by the **Doha Agreement of 21st May 2008.** This agreement stipulated, amongst other things, that Parliament would be convened to consensually elect General Michel Sleiman the new President of the country, that there would be a national unity government with neither side sabotaging the existence of that government and that the political leaders would tone down their divisive rhetoric.

The Free Patriotic Movement had emerged from the 2005 legislative elections with an overwhelming electoral success, gaining 21 seats in Parliament. However, it was in the subsequent years that the party demonstrated that it had matured politically by becoming, somewhat counter-intuitively, Hezbollah's main Christian ally in the March 8 Alliance.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the decisions General Aoun took, his leadership gave a bold trajectory to the party. Yes, the party's repositioning involved catering to Aoun's tactical political agenda, but its primary consequence was the recalibration of the internal dynamics of Lebanese politics. The alliance between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement is ongoing and, one would suspect, mutually favorable.

That said, General Aoun's stubborn, unpredictable character may damage his chances of becoming president.

A perhaps greater problem for both Geagea and Aoun is that of their past histories, including the parts that they played in the Lebanese Civil War. Both men have personal

histories that would make their candidacy unappealing, if not downright unacceptable, to significant segments of the Christian and Muslim communities. No matter how hard Geagea and Aoun try to soften their rough edges there may not be enough sandpaper to go around.

Aoun's branding is custom made and he is politically smart, but his strategy for the presidential chair lacks consistency. To the Americans he portrays himself as someone who has leverage over Hezbollah, and that may be true for some political decisions on the local stage. That said, the paradigm of Auon's relationship with Hezbollah is a nuanced one and has gone through some changes, as is perhaps unavoidable in any lasting political partnership. The view that the Free Patriotic Movement takes of President Assad's broken rule in Syria is different from that of Hezbollah. To date Hezbollah has not formally announced that Michel Aoun will have the party's backing. However, for time being there is more to keep the two parties together than there is to separate them.

The Syrian Connection

The current rapprochement between United States and Iran and the ongoing Syrian conflict together mean that Hezbollah and the US now have at least one common goal: the stability of Lebanon. The country may be in a state of semi-paralysis, as far as institutions go, but it is not about to descend into chaos.

Lebanon's current government was only formed in February 2014, although the new Sunni Prime Minister Tammam Salam was designated by Parliament in April 2013. That delay was due to a combination of inter March 8 and March 14 rivalries and the disagreements between the external sponsors of the local political process, in particular Saudi Arabia and Iran and their respective regional and international partners.

The primary task and mission of the government is the stabilization of the country. That is why the Interior Ministry has gone to the Sunni Nouhad Machnouk and the Justice Ministry has gone to General Ashraf Rifi, the former head of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF). Both of these men are close to Hariri family, and part of March 14 bloc.

Sunnis, together with Christian parties and allies in both the March 8 and March 14 blocs, are fighting together against Sunni extremism. Boiling tensions are, to some extent, being de-escalated by means of a Christian buffer. This has created a position of centralized strength for the Christians, while at the same time ensuring that their

political and security influence will not fade away. Provided that the Christians are willing to adapt and acknowledge that their political role may have changed, ongoing regional tensions should give added weight to their buffering position and enable them to achieve some positive results.

Other Names in the Presidency Pool

The idea of extending the mandate of the current Lebanese President, Michel Sleiman, for a further two years has been suggested. However, to do so would require amending the constitution. There is a common, unwritten agreement among the Christian forces, the Church included, that such an amendment would be neither popularly acceptable nor politically appropriate.

The name of Riad Salame, the Governor of the Central Bank has been suggested, but his candidacy is not realistic. Salame is an experienced technocrat but lacks broad political support and political experience. Nothing can be ruled out as impossible in Lebanese politics, but Salame's emergences as consensus candidate seems far from probable.

Another possible candidate for the Presidency is the current head of the Lebanese armed forces, General Jean Kahwagi. Kahwagi is currently in the process of implementing a new security plan in Tripoli and, according to voices from within the security arena, the first results of that action are encouraging. Similar action in Akkar, in the North, is to follow. Under Kahwagi's leadership the army is working closely with local forces and authorities in Saida to decrease the level of friction in the area. There is also now an accord in place for Ain el Hilwe, with the main Palestinian parties – Hamas, Fatah, Islamic Jihad, as well as the more militant Islamist forces – agreeing to insulate the Palestinian camps from the Syrian conflict that has spilled over into Lebanon. In the Beqaa the situation is more complex but the army is taking part in on-going cooperation activities aimed at preventing the outward expansion of radical cells based there to the rest of the country.

These successes raise the possibility of Kahwagi running for the Presidency as a strong, unifying, national hero figure. Sleiman's own move from his former position as of head of the armed forces to his current position as of head of state means that there is also a precedent. In particular, sources close to US circles of power have worked to keep Kahwagi's name afloat. The logic behind the idea is, however, flawed. There are three immediate reasons for this.

First, prominent Christian figures have explained that, with yet another general becoming head of state what was an exception would become the rule. Every

commander of the armed forces would see his position as a temporary one and keep his eyes fixed on the greater prize of the Presidency. This would be unsuitable for Lebanon and for the generals themselves, who need to be able to focus their energies on the task they have at hand and which they have been trained and educated to do.

Second, the position of commanding an army is not compatible with that of being a ruling head of state. A few individuals with military backgrounds may prove themselves to be excellent statesmen, raising the expectations for those who follow them, but these figures remain the exception. At this point in time Lebanon is not in a position where it can afford to have a president who will be essentially training on the job for a large part of his 6 year mandate.

Third, even a new President with a military background would not directly exercise the role of chief of the army. Someone else would replace him at the helm of the armed forces. The President's official role as the Commander in Chief of the armed forces is an indirect one, and he is separated from the day to day control of the military by a system of hierarchies and official protocols. The new chief of the army may well tell the President that their management styles differ and require that all communication between them be channeled through the appropriate authorities according to pre-established terms.

For the President to be able to exercise his full authority and follow a particular line in the constant political horse-trading that is the backbone of Lebanese politics, he needs to have the kind of political clout that can only be provided by a strong support base emerging from his own community. He is also required to have the acceptance of other factions. Without the broad backing of the Christian political leaders and that of the Army Commander, even if he himself comes from the army, the President will find himself to be a largely isolated figure. That is to say that military rank does not equate a successful presidency, even in a time of turmoil.

Lebanon is the only state in the Arab world to have a Christian President. This is something the Christian political leaders and all of the Christian Churches would be wise not to ignore or to forget.

The position of the Lebanese Christian politicians is a strong one when they are united, when they are able to set aside their egos and their minor squabbles and focus on their legacy. What will they leave behind them when they go? How do they want the Christian role to be remembered in the region and beyond? This is the essence, the rest is just filling.

The name of the lawyer and civil society voice, Ziad Baroud has been circulated as a potential president. As has the name of Jean Obeid, a Christian with ties to the Hariri family and the Sunni community of Beirut, but who would also be acceptable to the Shias, including Hezbollah and Amal. However, Obeid's age may rule him out of the race. The name of the former finance minister Demyanos Kattar has also been suggested, as has that of Boutros Harb, a minister in the current government and part of March 14.

The (Seemingly) Unlikely Choice

Another possible candidate is the former minister Sleiman Franjieh Jr., president of Marada party and heir of an old and prominent Zgharta family. He is a slick politician and one who has not turned his back on President Assad of Syria.

To give a very brief time-line of Lebanese Presidents and what they have represented for segments within the Christian community: General Emile Lahoud was for many, perhaps most, the symbol of Syria's strong hand in Lebanon. Lahoud was followed by General Michel Sleiman, whose political leadership was widely seen as the first part of a transition from Syrian authority and supervision to a new form of political action that was both more indigenous and more internationalized.

A Franjieh presidency could mark the end of that transitory, slowly changing status quo.

Franjieh knows the intricacies of Lebanese society and of the country's place in the region in detail, and would use that understanding to augment the de facto authority of the presidency. As head of state, he would represent all sects. Franjieh would not be afraid to use power plays in his dealings with any of the major political forces if Lebanon's stability were at stake. Marada is part of March 8, but being part of one bloc or another should not, in and of itself, prevent someone from emerging as a consensus figure for the Presidency.

Franjieh has, politics aside, stood by Assad as a family friend. This fact might cause some to view him as being Damascus' man. However, while it is certain that a Franjieh presidency would have an ear open to the voice of Damascus, it remains the case that President Assad currently has other, more urgent, priorities to attend to and is in no position to dictate to Lebanon or be a major player in Lebanese politics.

Franjieh lacks overall political support, especially from the Christians. However, though some may consider it ironic, in these agitated times he could be the most suitable candidate to take up the six year presidential mandate.

More Realistic Scenarios

It appears unlikely that the main local, regional and international powerhouses will be able to agree on a candidate prior to the May 25th deadline. The process of any negotiation is lengthy when it involves a wide circle of decision-makers making trade-offs and when all sides are moving ahead cautiously.

This will lead to a temporary political vacuum, followed by the selection of a consensus candidate. Or, Lebanon being Lebanon, to the emergence of a consensus candidate from behind the scenes.

Conclusion

There is an inherent fragility to the institutions of the Lebanese state, including the Presidency itself. In some respects that fragility is a design feature. In others it is a result of a continuing hesitation to de-confessionalize politics; a hesitation grounded perhaps on a lack of trust, perhaps on a fear the sects share that what is to come will be in some way less satisfactory the current state of affairs. Despite this, and because the entrenched confessional logic of power means that the overall mechanism in place cannot be treated lightly, it remains the case that in the current circumstances any result short of complete institutional disintegration can be viewed as a positive one.

The Lebanese state fluctuates between alpha and beta versions, but for as long as the basic mechanism continues to function there remains hope that the eventual product will get validated.

Box Info:

- Lebanon – Parliamentary Republic.
- 10,452 square kilometers in area.
- Neighbourhood: Syria to the north and east, Israel to the south and the Mediterranean Sea to the west.
- Population: 4 million, according to the World Bank.

- Confessional Power Sharing System: President (Maronite Christian) – General Michel Sleiman, Prime Minister (Sunni Muslim) – Tammam Salam, Speaker of the House (Shia Muslim) – Nabih Berri.
- Refugees – Palestinian Refugees registered with UNRWA ~ 500,000.
- Syrian Refugees registered with UNHCR – 1,000,000 (with an estimation that the figure will reach 1,500,000 by end of 2014); unofficial numbers as high as 2 million.

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