



ELEMENTS OF ANALYSIS OF THE LEBANESE POLITICAL CRISIS

BY CAMILLE GERMANOS

Lebanon is experiencing severe political upheaval fuelled by a changing geopolitical landscape.

The latest tumult began when Hizballah, the armed but participatory opposition party led by Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, took preemptive action against forthcoming STL indictments (Special Tribunal for Lebanon), widely believed to place blame for the 2005 assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on members of its own party. Hizballah's cabinet coalition prompted the sudden collapse of Mr. Saad Hariri's government. Days later, the now former opposition garnered a parliamentary majority with a sympathetic Lebanese tycoon, namely Mr. Najib Miqati, securing the post of Prime Minister.

The pace of events and the extent of the shift in Lebanon have alarmed the United States, Israel and the United Nations, all of whom favor Mr. Hariri and his Future Party who now constitute the opposition. This dramatic redistribution along the political spectrum has strengthened the Syrian and Iranian axis in Beirut, while leaks in the press depicting Mr. Hariri calling Saudi Prince Mohammad Bin Nayef *assafah*, meaning "killer" jeopardized Hariri's relationship with his main backer, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Mr. Hariri has been weakened by the unprecedented mass protests in several parts of the Arab world shaking his traditional allies.

Despite the foregone nature of the parliamentary transition, this confluence of events puts forward several uncertainties. Perhaps most pressing, will PM Miqati rescind Lebanese backing for the STL as forcefully requested by Hizballah, and how will opposing forces react in the case that he does or does not?

What future can one foresee for the Lebanese Republic, microcosm of the region's politics, with masses clamoring for regime changes in the Middle East? Already readying for international sanctions and looming hostilities with Israel, is Hizballah looking south to Egypt, preparing the ground for political entente with the Muslim Brotherhood?

Internally, Hizballah catalyzed the fall of PM Hariri, the leading political figure of Lebanon's Sunnite community, by garnering enough support to concoct the resignation of ten cabinet ministers and thereby the collapse of the government on 12 January. Four days earlier, the General Secretary of Hizballah, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, anticipated the failure of the Saudi-Syrian initiative aiming to neutralize the STL within Lebanon. He presumed that it was obstructed by American pressure over the Saudis. Rejecting the STL as a political tool against his organization, Sayed Nasrallah asked the government to halt financial support and withdraw the Lebanese judges from the Tribunal. Further, he advocated revoking the act of agreement signed with the United Nations, delegitimized by a false witness file at the STL and the disappearance from the state's coffers of \$11 billion.

In the following week, Lebanon lived tensely under political uncertainty until MP Walid Junblat dissolved his "Democratic Gathering", and backed the premiership of the Hizballah coalition through his new bloc renamed "National Struggle Front." Such a dramatic political shift raised questions about the legitimacy of the new majority, as it suggested that Junblat made this decision under threat. But the Druze leader declared that his

switch to the side of Syria and the Resistance served to preserve Lebanon's stability. Further, he accused his old ally Mr. Hariri of misunderstanding the complex political landscape in Lebanon.

Binding consultations with neutral and mutually agreeable President Michel Suleiman on 25 January secured 68 votes for Hizballah-backed Najib Miqati against 60 votes for the outgoing caretaker PM Saad Hariri. Mr. Miqati's nomination triggered spontaneous clashes in Sunnite regions, especially in Tripoli, where some of the secular and religious movements are closer to Hizballah. Meanwhile Mr. Hariri accused Hizballah of seizing power illegitimately and called for a 'day of rage.' The civil demonstrations of discontent that followed remained relatively contained and civil peace was preserved. In the meantime, both sides agreed to condemn the growing hatred expressed in some political speeches.

Having avoided the worst, namely total civil unrest, new challenges emerged and turned political again. Mr. Miqati, who presented himself as a candidate of unity and dialogue, has not yet managed to convince the Hariri coalition to join his government. It is obvious that he does not wish to claim full power and therefore is striving to reach consensus among all parties. His Christian interlocutors from the increasingly fragmented 'March 14' (anti-Syrian, pro-Hariri) coalition, however, seem more prepared to make concessions than the Hariri camp. If they can secure enough cabinet seats to veto major government decisions and if the STL is maintained, then they may abdicate from two hotly contested but lately dormant files: the disarmament of Hizballah and its merger with the army, and the possession of weapons inside Palestinian refugee camps.

No matter how the political balance might bend, political customs remain unchanged in Lebanon and internal deadlines tend to correspond with international timelines. As such, Mr. Miqati will wait for two lingering questions to be answered before composing his cabinet: the destiny of President Mubarak in Egypt, and the long-awaited public hearing of the indictments on 7 February. Also, he will not want to reveal his strategy yet to avoid clashes on 14 February, the sensitive anniversary of the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and, for many, the commemoration of his martyrdom. But Miqati's cabinet composition will reflect his overall political agenda. Can his ministerial composition strike a balance between adherence to international law and a revocation of the protocol of agreement with the UN? One option for Miqati is to compose a cabinet of technocrats and delineate a technical policy approach in which all points of contention can be handled at a negotiating table in the future.

Adding fuel to the Lebanese fire, authoritarian Western-backed regimes in the region are themselves feeling the heat. Last month, the flight of the Tunisian president in the face of a popular uprising triggered a series of demonstrations in Algeria, Yemen, Egypt and elsewhere. The Egyptian people's uprising has reached a standoff, as the people tenaciously demand President Hosni Mubarak's resignation while he tries to hold his grip and loses allies and credibility in the international community. In Jordan, protesters gathered across the country until Parliament was dissolved and the Prime Minister Samir Rifai stepped down. Syria has shut down the Facebook website and reversed some recent austerity measures. Even in Saudi Arabia, some bold demonstrators are demanding economic concessions from their government. As Lebanon's usual Sunnite allies and peace-brokers (Syria and Saudi Arabia) face their own major political challenges, Mr. Hariri will only be isolated further.

Meanwhile, the weakening of Hariri's regional support contrasts with a strengthened axis on Hizballah's side that is benefiting from rising opposition in the Arab countries. For instance, Hizballah and Iran are readying for a strengthened Muslim Brotherhood; after a three-way meeting on 1 February with Jamaa Islamiya, they declared their unity in fighting the same Zionist enemy. This bond was corroborated by the expanded Iranian naval presence in the region.

On the international level, these dramatic developments have sent tremors through Israeli and American diplomatic circles. Earlier this week, Israel warned that a Lebanese government closer to the Hizballah might face international sanctions, while the Israeli press is clearly concerned about the political shifts in their neighborhood. Although PM Miqati hasn't yet made any statements relating to the STL, Washington has emphasized the right of the Lebanese people to choose both justice and political stability.

From Davos, the General Secretary of the United Nations Ban Ki Moon emphasized the duty of the Lebanese Republic not to question the agreement with the UN. International restrictions or armed intervention are not impossible to envisage. As the STL is classified under Chapter 7 of the United Nations Charter, the Security Council can make recommendations or

decide what measures shall be taken in accordance with Articles 41 and 42 of the UN Charter to maintain or restore peace and security.

After the Appeals Chamber public hearing on 7 February, Judge Daniel Fransen is expected to study the file and issue extradition warrants in the following few weeks. While it is possible that the pre-trial judges will ask for an extension for further interpretation of the Lebanese penal code, an official accusation will soon be made. What happens if the Lebanese government refuses to comply with any request for assistance by the STL or to arrest and transfer the indicted to the Tribunal? Some sources believe that Washington intends to have the trial proceed in-absentia, thereby establishing a precedent for trying other fugitive leaders of Islamic organizations. In addition to this potentiality, Lebanon remains exposed to international isolation and potential UN sanctions.

As always, the Lebanese political scene is perhaps best compared with some of these trades that are best understood in hindsight. Yet everyone playing a role in this drama has taken a stance at this point, except one conspicuously absent player: President Obama. He is being described as the President who lost Egypt; will he also be the President who lost Lebanon?

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