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Lebanon's Upcoming Parliamentary Elections:

Will Hezbollah Lead the Next Lebanese Government?

By **Doreen Khoury**

On June 7th 2009 Lebanon will hold parliamentary elections, the outcome of which will determine the course of the small Middle Eastern's country following four years of internal political polarization and occasional violence. Lebanon entered a new phase in its history after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005 and in one way or another, its aftereffects are being felt in the run-up to the election especially following the release of the four detained Lebanese security chiefs (arrested for their alleged complicity in the Hariri assassination) and more recently, the Der Spiegel report which alleges that Hezbollah played a role in the assassination.

The big question concerning the upcoming election is whether the pro-Western March 14 Alliance, led by Rafiq al-Hariri's son Saad and Druze leader Walid Junblatt, will retain their parliamentary majority, or whether, as many analysts are predicting, the Hezbollah-led opposition (backed by Iran and Syria) will win. Secondly, in the event of an Opposition victory, which will most likely be by a very small margin, there are two possible post-election scenarios: A national unity government which represents all major factions led by a neutral prime minister, or a government led by Hezbollah and its main ally, Christian leader Michel Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement.



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Introduction

The upcoming Lebanese parliamentary elections which will be held on June 7th 2009 will mark a turning point for a country that has experienced a roller coaster journey since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005. Over a period of four years, Lebanon has endured countless political assassinations and bombings, a month long devastating war with Israel, and a drawn-out war between the Lebanese Army and Islamist extremists in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in north Lebanon. The opposition's prolonged sit-in demonstration in Downtown Beirut and the ensuing political polarization which paralyzed Lebanon's main institutions, and increased sectarian tensions in the country, erupted into violence on May 7th 2008 with the Hezbollah take over of West Beirut. The event was a wake-up call for both Lebanese factions and the international and Arab communities. The subsequent Doha Accord, negotiated in Qatar and signed on May 21st 2008 by the main Lebanese parties, staved off a disastrous slide into civil war and established new rules of engagement for the opposing factions. Three important factors emerged from the Doha Accord (at least in terms of the 2009 elections): the election of a new President (former Army commander Michel Sleiman) after the post had been left vacant due to the inability of the two camps to reach an agreement over the issue; the creation of a National Unity government which gave the opposition veto power in the cabinet; and finally the adoption of a new electoral system based on the 1960 electoral law that pre-dates the Lebanese civil war.

The parliamentary elections, scheduled to be held on June 7th 2009, will certainly have a big impact on the power struggle governing Lebanese politics, in the sense that the outcome will either re-arrange the power structure in Lebanon and shift political alliances, or will reproduce the current political stagnation with both sides able to block meaningful legislation and reform.¹

¹ Currently, the majority March 14 alliance can stop quorum from occurring in parliament while the Opposition can use its veto power in cabinet decisions.

For both camps the 2009 elections are about demonstrating their popularity, and their particular vision for Lebanon, and finding the concrete means to achieve it through the power gained in parliament. Much is at stake for both factions; for the pro-Western March 14 coalition led by Saad al-Hariri (Future Movement) and Druze leader Walid Junblatt the elections are about re-affirming their popular legitimacy following key setbacks such as the May 7th events (which were widely interpreted as a 'Shiite invasion' into 'Sunni territory') and the release of the four detailed generals² in the international inquiry into Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination in April 2009 which cast doubt over the International Tribunal, a key demand of March 14. For the Opposition, led by Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (led by Michel Aoun), the elections are about increasing their parliamentary share and their decision-making powers in state institutions (although to what extent Hezbollah desires this outcome is unclear – to be discussed below), as well as, in Hezbollah's case, protecting its arms.

The most striking feature of the upcoming elections is that real electoral competition will take place mostly in Christian districts, which will decide the election result. Results of the competition in most Muslims districts is almost certainly guaranteed in advance of the elections, as the majority of Shiite voters will vote for Hezbollah, most Sunnis will vote for the Future Movement, and Druze voters are loyal to Walid Junblatt. By contrast, Christians do not have a dominant leader, and are instead split between several parties over many districts. The Free Patriotic Movement (officially secular but with a majority of Christian supporters) which is allied with Hezbollah, is competing against March 14 Christian parties such as the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party.

² Following the 2005 elections, the 4 main security chiefs associated with the Syrian era (Jamil Sayyed, Mustapha Hamdan, Ali Hage, Raymond Azar) were arrested in relation to Hariri's assassination. Although they remained in custody for 3 and a half years, no official charges were brought against them and were finally released in May 2009. The Opposition portrayed this as a political victory.

Moreover, the Doha electoral system is very favourable to Christians, as contrary to the old electoral law where Christians had to enter alliances with Muslim parties in big districts, under the new law most Christian MPs will be elected by Christian voters, and will not have to rely on Muslim votes.³

Consequently, electoral competition will occur in:

- Districts where Christians have an overwhelming majority (Jbeil, Kisirwan, Metn, Batroun, Koura, Jezzine and the first Beirut District);
- Districts where Christians are a majority but there are significant minorities of other sects (Zahle and Baabda).

The FPM is expected to win most of the seats in the Christian districts.⁴ Thus if the Hezbollah-led opposition wins, it will not be due solely to its widespread popularity, but mainly to its strategic partnership with the Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement which is the dominant Christian party in Lebanon.

Regional Arab politics, which historically have a deep impact on Lebanese internal dynamics and the consequent shaping of local alliances, have played a major role in dictating the political considerations of both the March 14 Alliance and the Opposition. In particular, tensions between the so-called Iran-Syria axis and the United States backed 'moderate' states, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have been translated onto the local Lebanese scene with the Opposition generally backed by the former, and March 14 backed by the latter. Thus the main source of contention between both sides has been the eternal dilemma of whether to pursue a more or less moderate foreign policy (supported by March 14) or to actively engage in the struggle against Israel by armed resistance (supported by Hezbollah).

³ For more information and analysis on Christian parties following the Doha Agreement, please read:

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5573&l=1>

⁴ The FPM is facing fierce competition in Beirut I, Metn, Batroun, Koura, Zahle and Baabda from the March 14 Alliance and the results are expected to be very close.

The upcoming elections, however, will not solve these problems largely because the result is expected to be very close with a difference of no more than two or three seats. Although the Opposition is expected to win a parliamentary majority, the predicted close margin of victory has already given rise to debates on what the post-election government will look like and what course it will pursue locally and regionally.

The following sections will discuss the Doha Electoral law, the key players in the June 2009 elections; the main political features of the electoral battle; and a final section on post-election scenarios.

The Doha Electoral Law

The 2005 Lebanese parliamentary elections were governed by an antiquated electoral law which allowed extensive gerrymandering, failed to regulate competition between candidates, and failed utterly to guarantee a smooth, transparent and accessible electoral process for citizens. Political parties and candidates spent huge sums of money on their campaigns and exerted significant pressure on voters in many regions.

The electoral system agreed upon in the Doha Agreement is based on the 1960 electoral law which stipulates that the *caza* (small administrative district) is the electoral district. This means that under the new law, Lebanon has 29 electoral districts, each with a minimum of 2 seats or a maximum of 10. The electoral system is majoritarian, i.e. the list or alliance with highest percentage of votes wins the entire district.

This system is much better than the old one in terms of representation, because the old law had 14 big districts which meant that large segments of the Lebanese electorate were not adequately represented in parliament.

However we should add that as long as the Lebanese electoral system remains majoritarian – with a winner takes all ethic – the implications for the political system as a whole are negative because:

- it is difficult for independent groups to gain seats in parliament and break the power of established sectarian parties
- the majoritarian system encourages political horse-trading as the numerous sectarian leaders negotiate aggressively to get as many seats as possible
- it stills fails to guarantee accurate representation for all segments of society

The draft law some of the reforms includes reforms such as campaign finance regulation and elections media and advertising regulation. However, parliamentarians chose to forego other crucial reforms such as establishing an independent electoral commission, using an officially printed ballot, and lowering the voting age to 18 years.

The failure to fully modernize the electoral law indicates a ruling class which is still reluctant to endorse total reform of the electoral process.⁵

The Key Players

The March 14th Alliance

The March 14 Alliance, which currently holds a majority of 68 seats in the 128-member parliament, is a coalition of anti-Syrian and pro-Western political parties and independents in Lebanon, led by MP Saad al-Hariri, younger son of the assassinated former prime minister of Lebanon Rafiq al-Hariri; MP and former minister Walid Junblatt of the Progressive Socialist Party; and Samir Geagea leader of the Lebanese Forces. The March 14 Alliance includes a variety of sectarian groups and parties, which traditionally do not share the same political agenda. However, they are unified mainly around three objectives:

- To reduce Syrian interference in Lebanese politics;
- To prevent Hezbollah from taking over the Lebanese political system, as it would increase Iranian influence on the country; and
- To establish an international tribunal to try the suspects of the Hariri assassination.

The March 14 Alliance makes up the majority of the current Lebanese government, headed by PM Fouad Seniora. The opposition however has veto power, and his able to block cabinet decisions.

The **Future Movement (FM)** led by **Saad al-Hariri** is the most prominent party in the March 14 coalition and has the biggest bloc of MPs in parliament. Set up by assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in the 1990s, the FM began to play an increasing role in the electoral process representing a majority of Sunni Muslims. Hariri's assassination in February 2005 had a profound impact on the FM as a political entity and Sunni Muslims as a sect. The FM gradually evolved from a loose group of supporters and activists loyal to the Hariri family, to a formal political party (officially founded in August 2007) with a political, social and economic agenda. However, the party does retain traditional and clientalist elements common to most Lebanese political parties. The transformation of the FM into a political party was largely in response to various local and regional circumstances affecting the Lebanese Sunni community and its sense of victimization following Hariri's assassination. Regional political tensions between Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the one hand, and Iran on the other, which strongly echoed on the local Lebanese scene, unified many Sunnis under the FM's political banner.

However, since the 2005 elections, the FM has manifested some vulnerabilities which have seemingly weakened it ahead of the elections. It remains very dependent on two main elements to maintain its popular support, especially in the Sunni community: its clientalist network propped up by charitable and development aid, and its use of Hariri's assassination as a rallying call for its supporters. Whether it can attract popular support

⁵ For more information on the Doha Electoral Law and the electoral reform movement which lobbied for the inclusion of key reform measures, please read: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=96630 "Lebanon's election law: a cup half full" by Doreen Khoury published in October 10, 2008.

without these two essential props is crucial to its long-term political relevance.

Significantly, Hariri has repeatedly stated that if the March 14 Alliance loses the election, the FM will not take part in the post-election government, thus ruling himself out as Prime Minister. However, with both France and Saudi Arabia inclined towards the continuation of the Doha formula, it seems he might be pressured to join a national unity government.

The **Progressive Socialist Party (PSP)** led by Druze leader **Walid Jumblatt** is another essential component of the March 14 Alliance. During much of the period following the end of the Lebanese civil war, Junblatt was a close ally of Syria and generally supported Syrian interests in Lebanon and the Arab region. After the 2004 U.S. Congress Syrian Accountability Act and the UN Resolution 1559 and the change in the regional balance of powers after the occupation of Iraq, Junblatt, who is famed for his intuitive political sense, took up a position opposed to the role of Syria in Lebanon's politics. Junblatt also became sharply critical towards Hezbollah, and called for its disarmament, claiming that Syria and Iran (Hezbollah's main regional supporters) were trying to take over Lebanon through Hezbollah. However following the May 7th events, and Hezbollah's (temporary) military incursions into Junblatt's mountain fiefdom, and the subsequent Doha Accord, his political stance began to gradually shift. Jumblatt has increasingly distanced himself from the March 14 Alliance after disputes on electoral candidates, and Junblatt sparked controversy in April 2009 when a video taken by mobile phone was released of him criticizing his March 14 allies. To what extent this will affect March 14's electoral chances in key districts such as Baabda and West Bekaa remains to be seen, especially since Junblatt seems to cultivating close ties with Amal Movement leader Nabih Berri.⁶ This change of course can be linked to the regional and international climate and the Obama administration's plans for the region.

⁶ Michael Young, "Video may have killed March 14's star." *Daily Star Newspaper* April 23rd 2009. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&category_id=5&article_id=101266

The **Lebanese Forces (LF)** is right-wing Christian party led by **Samir Geagea**. Before its transformation into a political party, the LF was one of the main militias of the Lebanese civil war.

Following its dissolution by the Lebanese government in the early 1990s and the imprisonment of Geagea for instigating various assassinations and bombings, the party went underground until Geagea's release in July 2005 following an amnesty law passed by parliament. The Lebanese Forces played a major role in the massive anti-Syrian protests following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, and began to concentrate on rebuilding its political structure and presence around the country. It has also concentrated much of its efforts on the Lebanese Christian Diaspora. The Lebanese Forces' main competitor over dominance of Christian areas is the Free Patriotic Movement.

The Lebanese Forces' most vulnerable point in the run-up to the election is its civil war stigma and its actions as a militia in most Christian districts during the 1970s and 1980s, despite big PR efforts to alter this image by emphatically supporting state institutions. Other vulnerabilities include rivalries with other Christian parties and figures in the March 14 Alliance which might weaken the alliance's overall performance in key districts.

Other key members of the March 14 Alliance are:

- The **Kataeb Party** led by former President **Amin Gemayel**.
- The **National Liberal Party** led by **Dory Chamoun**.
- The **Democratic Renewal Party** led by **Nassib Lahoud**
- **Qornet Shehwan Gathering** of independent Christian politicians (e.g. Boutros Harb, Nayla Mouawad, Samir Frangieh, Fares Soueid, etc)
- The Armenian **Rum Ghavar** and **Hanshak** Parties

The Opposition

The Opposition⁷ which holds 59 seats in parliament is led by Hezbollah, The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) led by former army commander Michel Aoun and the Amal Movement led by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. The alliance between Hezbollah and the FPM was cemented in February 2006 following the break-up of the quadruple alliance (which made up the government of the time) between March 14 and the Shiite parties over the treaty to establish an international court on the Hariri assassination. For Michel Aoun, the rapprochement with Hezbollah signaled the end of his political isolation following the elections and the quadruple alliance. Hezbollah also gained from the alliance with Aoun, as the Shiite party could claim major non-Shiite party as an ally.

The Joint Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlines the common positions between the two parties as follows:

- Affirmation of consensus rule and the Lebanese inter-community pact which requires all important decisions to be taken with the agreement of most parties
- Reform of state institutions and combating corruption
- Return of Lebanese citizens living in Israel
- Clarification of the status of Lebanese citizens in Syrian prisons
- Normalization of relations with Syria, and
- Dealing with Hezbollah's weapons via a national dialogue aimed at defining a national defense strategy.

Hezbollah is a Shiite Islamist politically party and paramilitary organization led by **Hassan Nasrallah**. Although regarded as a legitimate resistance movement against Israel by many Lebanese and Arabs, it is regarded by some

⁷ Also known as the March 8 Alliance (after the massive pro-Syrian demonstration held on March 8th 2005 by Hezbollah, a few days before the more famous March 14 anti-Syrian protest). This report will use the term "Opposition" since this is how they refer to themselves.

Western states (the United States in particular) as a terrorist organization. Hezbollah is a significant force in Lebanon politics with extensive outreach and social development programs in all Shiite districts, a radio and television station, and a popular base that has expanded beyond the Shiite community. Regionally, Hezbollah's main backers are Iran and Syria, and this purported allegiance to two external powers is the basis of the main dispute with the pro-Western March 14 Alliance which is also backed by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri and withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, Hezbollah's position initially seemed precarious but the party quickly regrouped and it is in a particularly powerful position prior to the elections. Hezbollah gained a huge amount of support following its perceived victory against Israel during the 2006 July war, and although it lost some popularity following the May 7th events (it compromised its vow not to use its weapons internally), it gained politically from the Doha Accords which guaranteed the Opposition veto power in the National Unity Government. Recent statements by Hezbollah officials have downplayed the significance of the upcoming poll, perhaps indicating that they are not entirely comfortable with taking up the reigns of power (and the increased responsibility) and would prefer the re-establishment of a national unity government after the elections regardless of the outcome.

Controversy erupted earlier this year over Hezbollah's regional ambitions when Egypt accused the party of setting up terrorist cells on its territory. Although Nasrallah denied this, he did admit to smuggling military aid to the Palestinian territories from Egypt. This confession sparked angry reactions from March 14 which accused Hezbollah of violating another country's sovereignty. The incident, which has died down for now, also called into question Hezbollah's commitment to the ministerial statement of the National Unity Government, which says that the Resistance's army are for national defense only.

Another recent controversy has been a report which appeared in *Der Spiegel*⁸, a major German newspaper, on May 23rd 2009 claiming that Hezbollah plotted Hariri's assassination and based this on classified documents from the Hariri investigation obtained by the author.

The **Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)** which is the most prominent Christian party in Lebanon is led by former army commander **Michel Aoun** who returned from exile in May 2005. The basis of the Free Patriotic Movement is the massive popular support for Aoun from 1988, when outgoing President Amin Gemayel appointed him as prime minister of one of two rival governments until 1990, when he was ousted from power by Syrian troops and fled to France. Aoun's stand against first, Syrian military and political interference and second, the Lebanese Forces which was at the time operating a mini-state in Christian areas, endeared him to many and set up his image as a nationalist anti-establishment figure. Despite Aoun's departure, he retained a big following in Lebanon especially amongst Christians who largely felt isolated following the end of the civil war and the redrawing of political lines following the 1989 Taef Accord. This popular support was translated into electoral victory following his return to Lebanon in 2005 when the FPM won key Christian districts and garnered 70% of the Christian vote. The electoral law at the time worked against him, especially in big districts, where Sunni voters were more numerous than Christian voters. However, the electoral law adopted following the Doha agreement is much more favourable to the FPM and will potentially allow the party to increase its parliamentary bloc from 21 to 36 MPs. This means that the Opposition's chances of winning a majority in the elections depends very much on the FPM's electoral performance in key electoral districts.

Aoun's detractors have criticized his reconciliation with his former enemy Syria (following his high-profile visit to that country) and his alliance

with Hezbollah which allegedly makes him part of the anti-West Iran-Syria axis. However these two policies do not seem to have had any long-term effect on the FPM's popularity, or at least a drop in popularity will not adversely affect his electoral chances. The FPM's electoral program, entitled "The Third Republic" has also attracted controversy, because it implies an overhaul of the Taef Accord (the party has denied this and linked the Third Republic to the fight against corruption).

The **Amal Movement (Amal)** is a Shiite political party led by Parliamentary Speaker **Nabih Berri**, and is the second most prominent party in the Shiite community. Since it was founded by Musa al-Sadr in the 1970s, Amal's main aim has been to secure allocation of a larger share of governmental resources for the Shiite dominated southern Lebanese regions. Although during the Lebanese civil war, Amal fought against Hezbollah (which is an offshoot of Amal), during the post-war era they became tacit political and electoral allies, with Nabih Berri often acting as go-between for the more radical Hezbollah. The Amal Movement, like most political parties, is intricately tied to Berri's personage and the power he derives from his position as Parliamentary Speaker (which allows him to almost single-handedly block legislation and prevent parliamentary sessions from taking place). Amal is a staunch ally of Syria and opposed the withdrawal of its troops in 2005. The movement is also frequently accused of corruption and does not enjoy Hezbollah's cross-sectarian support.

Other key members of the Opposition are:

- **The Syrian Social Nationalist Party**
- **Tashnag** (the most prominent Armenian party)
- The **Marada Party** (led by **Sleiman Frangieh**)
- The **Lebanese Democratic Party** (led by **Talal Arslan**)

⁸ Eric Forath, "New Evidence Points to Hezbollah in Hariri Murder." *Der Spiegel* Newspaper May 23rd 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,626412,00.html>

Other Key Political Figures

President Michel Sleiman was elected as president on May 25th 2008 following the Doha Agreement which was signed by all Lebanese parties. He was chosen as a consensus figure, to end the often violent political dispute that had divided the country. Sleiman enjoys strong Arab and Western, particularly French, backing.

Although Sleiman is not running for a parliamentary seat (the Constitution bars him from doing so) and is not officially backing any candidates, it is widely agreed that the outcome of the elections will have an impact on his role and the future of the presidency in the post-election period.

Sleiman has implied on several occasions his support for a third independent bloc which would be a stabilizing force between the two main camps, largely because his role following the Doha Accord has been reduced on a practical level "into a mere arbiter and witness over disputes."⁹ The Doha formula, which poses him as a consensus figure, has hindered his ability to play an more active leadership role, and thus his only option (since he cannot vote in cabinet) is to have a share in government represented by ministers who would support his decisions (this increasingly likely post-election scenario is discussed in the last section of this report).

Sleiman's bid for more power for the presidency is generally regarded with unease by both political camps. The opposition, especially Aoun, have accused him of meddling in the elections and working against them, while the Future Movement is uneasy about his desire to strengthen the role of the presidency which is the principal seat of Christian power.

The other challenge to Sleiman is Michel Aoun, who being deprived of the presidency, has sought to build himself as the main representative of Christian interests in Lebanon. Aoun has been

hostile to Sleiman's perceived attempt to expand his authority, and the opposition in general would prefer him to retain a consensus role.

Naguib Mikati, is a former Prime Minister and MP from the northern city of Tripoli and is considered by many as a possible consensus prime minister after the elections (as there is little chance that Fouad Seniora will return to the post). Mikati was appointed prime minister on April 2005 as a consensus figure to deal with the aftermath of the Hariri assassination and more crucially to prepare the country of the parliamentary elections which were held on May 2005. Mikati has solid relations with Syria, but has also cultivated good relations with March 14. An international businessman, he is also a major powerbroker in North Lebanon, as evidenced by Hariri's rush to form an alliance with him in Tripoli. In the likelihood that Saad Hariri refuses to join the post-election government as prime minister, Mikati is widely tipped to fill the role.¹⁰

Main features of the Electoral Contest

Contrary to past elections, the pre-election period has been notable for the launching of official electoral platforms by all political parties outlining their agendas, almost as if each party is seeking to distinguish itself from allies and rivals alike. It also perhaps signals an attempt at least to engage with each other politically rather than relying on sectarian language. TV talk-shows have played a role in this by hosting one-on-one debates between competing candidates. However, as the election date nears, many candidates have resorted to sectarian rhetoric and have often employed abusive language against each other.

Another feature of the 2009 elections has been the apparent decline in power of some traditional leaders, in the face of political parties who are

⁹ Elias Harfoush, "A Centrist Bloc or a Presidential Bloc?" *Al Hayat Newspaper* May 11th, 2009. <http://www.daralhayat.com/morenews/english/?q=opinion/O PED/05-2009/Article-20090511-306ddc2f-c0a8-10ed-00fa-e78f86df578a/story.html>

¹⁰ Another possible candidate for Prime Minister is MP and Minister Mohamad Safadi's whose profile is similar to that of Mikati, as he too hails from North Lebanon and is a prominent businessman with charity and development projects in his region. He is also viewed as a consensus figure.

seeking to expand their outreach in the traditional fiefdoms of figures such as Elias Skaff (Zahle), Michel Murr (Metn), and Salim Azar (Jezzine). Negotiations within each camp over the compilation of electoral lists have been hampered by struggles between independent politicians and political parties who have insisted on fielding their candidates in order to expand their power base. Political parties are gradually evolving, in varying degrees, into more sophisticated organized institutions building and maintaining grassroots support. This development has threatened traditional leaders who depend on charitable and financial services and family loyalty to maintain clientelist networks. Although we should note that this trend has been uneven, as some political parties, despite cosmetic changes, continue to depend on traditional political practices.

Furthermore, as noted above, the majoritarian electoral system coupled with a plethora of political parties and incongruent interests within each camp, has sparked rivalry and competition between allies, and as one commentator has noted, the fiercest contests will be over power within the two political alignments, rather than between them.”¹¹

Possible Post-election Scenario

As noted above, most pollsters and local analysts are predicting that the Opposition will win but by a very slim majority, with no more than 2 or 3 seats. Hezbollah and Amal are already more or less guaranteed a monopoly of the parliament's Shiite seats, and as this alone is not enough to give them a majority, they are dependent on Michel Aoun and the Free Patriotic Movement to win in Christian districts.

An Opposition win has potentially huge implications for the make-up of the post-election government an ultimately the path that Lebanon will take both locally and regionally.

¹¹ Michael Young, “Will the real March 14 please stand up.” *Now Lebanon* March 10th, 2009. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=83478>

The big question is whether a both sides will agree on setting up a national unity government based on the current formula (with one side having veto power in the cabinet) or whether the March 14 coalition will opt to stay out of government and sit in opposition. If March 14 decides to boycott the new cabinet they would be duplicating the opposition's strategy of withdrawing ministers as a way of emptying the resulting cabinet of legitimacy. Hariri has publicly stated that he will play no part in an opposition led government. He is unwilling to head a national unity government from a politically weakened position.

However, Hezbollah has indicated strongly that it wants a national unity government, and that they will give a veto to March 14th should they become the opposition. To make use of this veto, March 14th would have to join the government and work under a March 8th PM. Most likely, a compromise candidate will be chosen (someone close to both March 14th and Syria, like Najib Miqati), and a less volatile post-election situation would emerge.

In the event that March 14 refuses to join the post-election government, Hezbollah officials have also said that they are ready to take up the reigns of power. Al-Balad newspaper, a local Lebanese daily, reported on March 30th 2009 that Hezbollah is preparing for the possibility of becoming the majority and governing without March 14 and so are conducting meetings with European and international institutions to sound them out and get their tacit approval. They have purportedly met with World Bank officials to relay their views on fiscal policies and the economic challenges facing Lebanon and have apparently learnt that the World Bank will not take any negative measures if a new government is in place.¹²

But Hezbollah also knows very well that it faces major obstacles if it forms a government without the March 14 alliance. Firstly, without cooperation from the Future Movement a prime minister chosen by Opposition MPs would have no

¹² Ali Al-Amine, “Hizbollah prepares for period after Jun 8th.” *Al Balad Newspaper*, March 30th, 2009. <http://www.albaladonline.com/html/story.php?sid=56582>

legitimacy amongst most Sunnis. Secondly, because of the predicted close election result, March 14 could effectively block parliamentary sessions by preventing quorum (i.e. not showing up) as a two-thirds majority of MPs is required to make them valid. These are tactics which the Opposition itself used to block parliamentary sessions.

Regional and international power brokers (such as France, Saudi Arabia and Syria) have indicated that they prefer to see the continuation of the Doha formula and a post-election national unity government. France and the EU have implied that they will not deal any differently with a Hezbollah-led government, provided that it upholds international agreements (i.e. resolutions 1559 and 1701).¹³

The United States position has been more ambiguous (but not overly hostile) towards a Hezbollah-led government. A likely scenario is that the U.S. will have no contact with Hezbollah's ministers, relying on intermediaries like Nabih Berri, Fawzi Salloukh, and the new prime minister. It is unlikely that the EU will withdraw their ambassadors or put their diplomatic relations on hold, but it is possible that the U.S. might reduce its economic assistance.

It also remains to be seen how the new right-wing Israeli government will react to an Opposition and Hezbollah victory. From Israel's perspective, it will have to deal with more than the enemy "state within a state". Renewed conflict and hostilities would not anymore target a "non-state actor", but the Lebanese authorities themselves.

The internal dynamics of the two main political camps will also be closely observed following the elections. Will the alliances hold, or will some parties drift to the centre? There is already talk of Walid Junblatt, Nabih Berri and other independents forming a centrist bloc loyal to the president. Moreover, another question is whether

the alliance between Hezbollah and the FPM will be effected by regional developments.

It is unrealistic to expect major political shifts following the elections, especially in terms of political and economic policy. Each major party, regardless of the alliance to which it belongs, has its particular agenda and its interests to protect. Both sides are vehemently declaring their support for a strong Lebanese state, but their intentions are vague and the modus operandi of most political parties actually undermines state institutions.¹⁴

Ultimately a post-election national unity government is not an ideal solution for Lebanon, because in all probability it will be a replica of the current government, with political bickering hindering meaningful legislation and reform. However, if a compromise prime minister such as Mikati receives support from all sides, and the President is allowed more leverage in parliament and cabinet to create a balancing third bloc, a national unity government is certainly preferable to an opposition-led government, which will be illegitimate at least in the eyes of many Lebanese, especially the Sunni community, and thus seriously crippled in its ability to govern. Moreover, regional politics and the new regional dynamics following the coming of the Obama administration will almost certainly be a determining factor in the make-up of the post-election government.

¹³ Nicholas Kimbrell, "EU sees 'big difference' between Hezbollah and Hamas." *The Daily Star Newspaper*, May 22nd, 2009. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_ID=1&article_ID=102231&categ_id=2

¹⁴ For example, although the FM constantly attacks Hezbollah for holding arms which are outside the state's authority, the FM itself also undermines the state by its vast clientalist network (comprising of schools, hospitals, charities, etc) which substitutes state services to citizens. Hezbollah, which accuses the March 14 alliance of weakening the state through corruption and mismanagement, also has a vast clientalist network and strongly resists any discussion on its arms.