

## Now Comes the Hard Part

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Articles & Testimony

On June 7, Lebanon's pro-West March 14 coalition surprised the world by defeating the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance in parliamentary elections. Although March 14 was the incumbent, the coalition was widely seen as the underdog vis-a-vis its Iranian- and Syrian-backed opponents. The victory not only returns the March 14 coalition to power, it confirms for the second time in four years the anti-extremist orientation of Beirut.

The election outcome is good news for Washington and Beirut. If Hezbollah had triumphed, the Obama administration would have reevaluated its financial and political support for Lebanon. Instead, the organization's defeat at the hands of a U.S. ally may at least temporarily slow the momentum of Tehran's regional "resistance" agenda.

But March 14 is not out of the woods. Despite the majority's victory there are no mandates in Lebanese politics. And if recent history is any indication, the coming months will be perilous for the majority, especially if it tries to take bold initiatives.

After winning elections in 2005, for example, March 14 dared to raise the sensitive topic of Hezbollah's weapons. Subsequently, a three-year campaign of assassination against anti-Hezbollah politicians -- believed to have been perpetrated by Syria and its Lebanese allies -- decimated its parliamentary majority, nearly reversing the election results.

More recently, in May 2008 when the government made decisions to enhance state sovereignty inimical to Hezbollah's interests, the organization's militia invaded Beirut. Hezbollah only returned to the barracks when the decisions were reversed and March 14 agreed to provide the organization with the ability to block all future government initiatives, a perquisite known as a "blocking third" of the cabinet.

While Hezbollah has conceded defeat at the polls and said it would "accept the will of the people," the organization has made clear that no spoils will go to the victor. A day after the elections, Hezbollah's parliamentary leader Mohammed Raad said that the "crisis" in Lebanon would continue if the majority persisted in raising questions about Hezbollah's arsenal. He also suggested that regardless of the election results, Hezbollah should again be awarded the blocking third. March 14 is on record as opposing this concession.

Raad himself did not indicate what would happen should March 14 refuse to grant this veto power to its foes, but Beirut's leading pro-Hezbollah daily Al Akhbar provided a clue. Either Hezbollah would retain its blocking third or Lebanon would "return to before May 7 [when Hezbollah invaded Beirut] heading toward a collision; no one knows where it will lead." Essentially, if March 14 demurs, Hezbollah has threatened a return to civil war.

Hezbollah's allies in Damascus have been no less explicit about their expectations. In Syria, the government-controlled press is publishing articles by "scholars" recommending the establishment of a Lebanese "national unity government" with Hezbollah veto power. The first official postelection proclamation by a Syrian official echoed this sentiment, calling for a "spirit of consensus" to prevail. Syrian president Bashar Assad phoned his Lebanese counterpart, Michel Suleiman, and congratulated him on the success of Lebanese consensus in the elections, a "spirit . . . necessary to face the forthcoming developments and tackle them."

While these messages seem innocuous enough, given the history of -Syrian meddling in Lebanon, March 14 understandably views such unsolicited suggestions as other than friendly advice. The Obama administration's initial reaction to the elections has also generated anxiety among the majority. Of particular concern was the White House statement calling on March 14 to "maintain your power through consent," a message seen as U.S. support for providing Hezbollah with a parliamentary veto.

During his June 4 address to the Muslim world, President Obama said that "America respects the right of all peaceful and law-abiding voices to be heard around the world, even if we disagree with them." There is little doubt that Washington continues to "disagree" with Hezbollah, but it is also true that the organization is neither peaceful nor law-abiding.

The coming weeks will be tense in Beirut, as the winning coalition navigates the formation of a government and its ministerial statement, the policy guidance for Beirut. If March 14 has its way, unlike in 2005, this statement will not legitimate Hezbollah's weapons, which the U.S. government describes as "a threat to Lebanon." In addition to opposing a Hezbollah blocking third in the cabinet, March 14 appears to favor the appointment of Saad Hariri -- the leader of the bloc -- as prime minister. Syria is already signaling its preference for another candidate believed to be more disposed to Damascus.

Given Hezbollah's preponderance of force, March 14 may not ultimately succeed in its effort to deny the blocking third or to compose a ministerial statement that strengthens state sovereignty vis-a-vis the Shiite militia. But the Obama administration should not undermine March 14's ambitious attempts to effect

real change in Lebanon. While the election was a good start, Washington's continued support for March 14 in this difficult period will be critical if there is any hope of consolidating the election gains.

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