

High Stakes, High Anxiety: Campaigning in Lebanon

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Mar 12, 2009

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Brief Analysis

This Saturday, Lebanon's pro-West March 14 coalition officially kicks off its election campaign in Beirut. Two weeks ago, the Hizballah-led opposition -- backed by Syria and Iran -- started campaigning in its stronghold in the Beqa Valley. With less than three months until Lebanon's parliamentary election, the contest, which pits March 14 against Hizballah's so-called March 8 coalition, promises to be extremely close. Four years ago, March 14 won a thin majority in the parliamentary elections, but it is unclear whether the coalition will return to power this June. Should the opposition prevail, the impact on Lebanese and regional politics -- as well as on Washington's relations with Beirut -- could be profound.

Background

Just four months after the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, Lebanon went to the polls to elect a new 128-member parliament. The resulting legislature broke down into essentially three blocs: first, the March 14 alliance, a coalition of Sunnis, Druze, and some Christians led by Saad Hariri (the slain premier's son), Walid Jumblatt, and Samir Geagea, which took 72 seats; second, the Shiite Hizballah-Amal bloc, led by Hassan Nasrallah and Nabih Berri, which secured 35 seats; and third, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), an overwhelmingly Christian bloc led by General Michel Aoun, which garnered 21 seats.

In February 2006, Hizballah and Aoun's FPM joined forces, providing the opposition with a formidable 56-seat bloc. This development was followed by a series of political assassinations allegedly perpetrated by Syria and its Lebanese allies. The killings depleted the majority bloc from 72 to 68 out of 128 seats, raising concerns that further attrition would culminate in an opposition takeover. Since then, although tensions have remained high, the status quo has not changed dramatically.

The most significant change to the election dynamic since 2005 was the June 2008 election of former Lebanese Armed Forces chief of staff Michel Sulaiman as president. Sulaiman, who is widely viewed as neutral in spite of his past close ties to Damascus, has lent his support to the establishment of a "centrist bloc" to compete for parliamentary seats, a move that could potentially siphon off Christian votes from Aoun's FPM in key districts.

March 14 Preparations

For months, March 14 has been working behind the scenes to broker a complicated compromise to the contentious issue of seat allocation -- coordinating which coalition partner will stand for seats in each district. At the same time, March 14 has worked to forge electoral alliances in key districts to improve the coalition's electoral chances. To this end, the coalition has courted former Lebanese prime minister Najib Mikati and the small but significant Armenian Tashnaq party, which has proved pivotal in recent elections, particularly the 2007 by-election in Metn to fill the seat of assassinated March 14 parliamentarian Pierre Gemayel. (Former Lebanese president Amin Gemayel ran for the seat but was defeated by a previously unknown Aounist by a margin of 418 Tashnaq votes.)

There are some tentative indications that March 14's strategy might bear fruit. In the crucial district of Metn, an alliance appears to have been struck between the March 14-affiliated Phalange Party and longtime political operator Michel Murr. Murr backs the idea of a centrist bloc, but his list is closely affiliated with March 14, effectively undermining opposition inroads in Metn and other districts. Importantly, Murr is also expected to deliver a significant portion of the Tashnaq constituency to March 14.

Meanwhile, March 14 has been honing its campaign platform, focusing on state legitimacy and sovereignty -- in particular, the need for all weapons to be under the control of the state -- and a commitment to implement UN Security Council resolutions toward Lebanon.

Hizballah and the Free Patriotic Movement

In early March, Hizballah deputy secretary general and general observer for elections Naim Qassem held a campaign rally in the Beqa, reportedly attended by ten thousand supporters from the Baalbak-Hermel and Zahle districts. Under the slogan of "Together we will resist, together we will build Lebanon," Qassem presented the broad outlines of the Resistance and Development bloc.

During his speech, Qassem discussed the traditional Hizballah concept of "resistance," boasting that in addition to countering the "Israeli threat," the opposition had also demonstrated its bona fides in recent years by "clip[ping] America's fingernails in Lebanon." On the topic of development, Qassem touted

a kinder and gentler side of Hizballah, which he said believes that it is "unacceptable to deal with people as numbers." In this context, he pledged his party's support for "universal social and health insurance" and claimed his party would be a "model for fighting corruption."

The FPM also launched its campaign in the beginning of March, with Aoun framing the election as a choice between "Change and Reform" -- the name of his bloc -- and the alleged corruption of March 14. Since then, Aoun has been narrowly focused on attacking President Suleiman, Michel Murr, the idea of a centrist bloc, and the Maronite patriarch who has come out strongly in the bloc's favor. Aoun has also spent time fending off rumors that he might be excommunicated for allegedly slandering Lebanese patriarch Nasrallah Sfair, who earlier this month stated that it would be a "historic mistake" if March 8 won a majority in parliament.

Key Questions and Imperfect Polls

In Lebanon, where polling is largely a subjective matter, it is difficult to ascertain the relative support for March 14 vis-a-vis the opposition. According to the calculations of prominent March 8 pollster Kamal Feghali, the opposition has 53 secure seats while March 14 has 41, leaving 34 to be contested. Meanwhile, a poll released by the opposition-aligned Lebanese daily al-Akhbar on March 9 predicts 47 percent (60 seats) for the opposition and 38 percent (49 seats) for March 14, with 19 seats up for grabs. Earlier this week, Hizballah's Naim Qassem predicted a majority of 67 or 68 seats.

Not surprisingly, March 14 polling provides an entirely different picture. March 14 has performed strongly in recent union and student body elections, and according to the ruling coalition's numbers, if the centrist bloc with Michel Murr remains a serious and robust factor, March 14 will secure 66 seats -- and a continued majority -- while the opposition will take 58. On February 17, Murr announced that his electoral alliance with Gemayel in Metn was "final," but Syria and its allies will surely continue to press Murr to move away from March 14. A 2005 assassination attempt against Murr's son, March 14 defense minister Elias Murr, may have permanently soured Murr on Damascus. Should Murr succumb, however, the overall electoral balance could shift in favor of March 8.

Conclusion

Hizballah and Syria have said that regardless of who wins in June, Beirut should establish a government of national unity where the minority possesses a "blocking third" -- the ability to veto all major government initiatives. March 14, which currently governs under this constraint, has made no such reciprocal offer, and majority leader Saad Hariri has announced that his Future Movement would not participate in a Hizballah-led government. While a boycott might undermine the local and regional legitimacy of the government, as Naim Qassem notes, a Hizballah victory would confer upon the organization the benefits of greater global acceptance.

For Washington, the loss of Lebanon would represent a significant setback on many fronts. In the aftermath of Britain's recent ill-advised decision to diplomatically engage Hizballah, the prospect of the organization making increased inroads into Europe would be particularly troubling. At the same time, the region would perceive the reversal of the Cedar Revolution as a victory for Tehran and Damascus and a defeat for Washington -- a dynamic that could further complicate U.S. efforts to end Iran's nuclear program and convince Syria to modify its unhelpful policies. Assuredly, a Hizballah government in Beirut would also undermine the bilateral relationship with Washington.

Fortunately, while this scenario is troubling, it is far from ordained. Against all odds, with three months to go, March 14 stands a decent chance of squeaking out another narrow victory. In the sensitive context of Lebanese elections, the most productive action Washington can take is to help guarantee a level playing field. While little can be done to stem Tehran's considerable funding for Hizballah, the Obama administration can curtail, if not prevent, some of the more egregious foreign interference at the polls. In this regard, it is essential that Washington take full advantage of its renewed diplomatic engagement with Syria to ensure that its new interlocutors in Damascus do not meddle in the elections.

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