

PolicyWatch #1299

Presidential Elections in Lebanon: Consensus or Conflagration?

By [David Schenker](#)

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On October 31, Saad Hariri, leader of the "March 14" majority bloc in the Lebanese parliament, met with opposition leader Michel Aoun, head of the Hizballah-allied Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), the largest Maronite Christian party in Lebanon. Discussions focused on the September 25-November 25 presidential elections, which will decide whether Lebanon's next chief executive will align with the pro-Western, reform-minded March 14 coalition or follow the path of current president Emile Lahoud and align with Syria. Despite increasing pressures on the March 14 forces -- including an apparent Syrian-orchestrated assassination campaign -- a breakthrough agreement between the majority and the opposition remains unlikely. Meanwhile, Hizballah has warned the March 14 bloc that if it does not compromise on the choice of president, the opposition will adopt a "more direct" approach.

Background

In the aftermath of the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, Syria was forced to withdraw its forces, and the March 14 bloc won the parliamentary elections and formed a government. The government coalition included Hizballah ministers, but differences quickly emerged, primarily over the prospective international tribunal to prosecute Hariri's killers. In November 2006, Hizballah's ministers essentially quit after Prime Minister Fouad Siniora requested UN assistance to establish the tribunal, and tensions have been high ever since.

The March 14 bloc states it has only two presidential candidates: former parliamentarian and one-time ambassador to the United States Nassib Lahoud, and current parliamentarian Boutros Harb. The opposition -- a coalition of Hizballah, Amal, and the FPM -- rejects both candidates. Although Hizballah has not yet articulated its favored candidate, Aoun -- whose coalition dominated the Maronite vote in 2005, winning twenty-two parliamentary seats -- has made it clear that no president other than himself would be acceptable.

Constitutional Issues

The confessional system in Lebanon mandates that the president be a Maronite Christian, but there are differing interpretations of what the constitution states regarding the election process. The parliament elects the president -- at issue is whether a two-thirds quorum is required to proceed with a vote if a president has not been elected ten days before the end of the previous president's term. The March 14 bloc argues that the quorum is not required; the opposition says it is. The interpretation is crucial because the majority currently holds just 68 of 127 seats. Lebanon lacks an independent supreme court to adjudicate these issues. The constitution originally established a "constitutional council" within parliament to "arbitrate conflicts that arise from parliamentary and presidential elections." But this council, which was never more than a consultative body, is now defunct.

Three articles of the constitution support the majority's interpretation of the quorum requirement. Article 34 states, "The Chamber is not validly constituted unless the majority of the total membership is present. Decisions are to be taken by a majority vote." According to Article 49(2), "The President of the Republic shall

be elected by secret ballot and by a two thirds majority of the Chamber of Deputies. After a first ballot, an absolute majority shall be sufficient." And finally, Article 73 states that the parliament should be summoned by the Speaker one to two months before the president's term expires or, failing that, should meet "of its own accord on the tenth day preceding the expiration of the President's term of office."

Presently, the opposition is boycotting parliament to prevent the establishment of a quorum. Per Article 73, however, the legislature will automatically be called to session on November 15, obviating the quorum requirement and setting the stage for elections by an absolute majority.

Aoun and the Patriarch

Concerned about divisions in Lebanon's Christian community and the dilution of Christian political power, Maronite patriarch Boutros Sfeir has met with leading opposition figures from his community in recent weeks, including Aoun. During one such meeting, Sfeir encouraged an end to Maronite participation in the boycott. For his part, Aoun told the patriarch that the March 14 bloc's intention to elect a president by a strict majority constituted "a war on the Christians." Although discussions about compromise continue, Aoun does not appear to be interested in throwing his support behind another Christian candidate who might be more acceptable to the majority. As he told his party's Orange TV on October 8, "[A]ll the statistics have given me the upper hand, so why should I transfer the support of the people for someone else?"

Compromise Candidates and Scenarios

Interestingly, Hizballah -- which entered into a political alliance with Aoun in February 2006 -- has not been a vocal proponent of his presidential ambitions. Indeed, it seems likely that the group is considering other "compromise" candidates. Some of the leading contenders in this category include current Central Bank governor Riad Salemeh, former foreign minister Jean Obeid, current parliamentarian Robert Ghanem, and former parliamentarians Fares Boueiz and Pierre Dakdash.

Other so-called compromise candidates include Michel Edde, a former cabinet minister and self-professed expert on Jewish affairs. In one scenario, Edde, who is eighty years old, would step down from the six-year post after just two years, keeping Aoun's presidential hopes alive. Current Lebanese armed forces chief of staff Michel Suleiman is another much-discussed candidate. Although he may be acceptable to Syria and Hizballah, many in the March 14 bloc are wary of the prospect of yet another general in power. Leading March 14 personality and Druze leader [Walid Jumblatt](#) has already told Suleiman that he would oppose his candidacy -- which would, in any event, require a constitutional amendment permitting an official of his seniority to stand for the presidency without the mandated two-year waiting period.

The Suleiman option could prove more appealing if the situation in Beirut degenerates, particularly if the majority elects a no-compromise president who is not recognized by the opposition. Should that happen, lame duck president Lahoud could conceivably appoint another government, leaving chaos in the wake of his departure. In this scenario, Suleiman might be seen as the sole means to avert civil war. Still another plausible scenario is that no election takes place. In that case, according to Article 62 of the constitution, the cabinet -- i.e., the March 14 coalition ministers led by Siniora -- would "exercise . . . the powers of the President."

Conclusion

Given the majority's antipathy for Aoun, Hizballah, and Syria, it is difficult to envision an acceptable compromise candidate emerging. Of course, if Saad Hariri decides to replace Siniora and become prime minister himself, the calculus could change. Hariri has said that he will not compromise, but his premiership would represent a shift from a technocratic to a political government. Should he pursue the office, Hariri may have to cede more cabinet seats to political enemies. He could also face increased pressures to compromise on the presidency.

Lebanon's majority government faces a Faustian choice. If it elects its president of choice, civil disobedience or a resumption of civil war might result. At the same time, a pro-Syrian "compromise" president could delay or derail the international Hariri tribunal, undermine government initiatives, and effectively end the Cedar Revolution. Regardless of what happens, March 14 parliamentarians are convinced that the Syrian campaign of assassinations will not end.

To date, other than repeated calls for noninterference by outside actors, Washington has not publicly weighed in on the elections. In August, President Bush signed an executive order blocking the property of persons undermining Lebanese sovereignty, a step that effectively dried up U.S.-based funding for Aoun. Other than that, the administration has taken few other measures to shore up its embattled allies. Regrettably, short of confronting Damascus, Washington's options are limited. Given the impending postelection crisis and the persistent threat to the pro-Western government, it is time for Washington to craft a policy that can help protect its allies. Given the March 14 bloc's attrition rate, it is unclear how many more crises it can endure.

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