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Lebanon's Presidential Race

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The thorny parliamentary process of selecting a new president could rekindle violence if it results in substantial delays or further sectarian friction.

Last week, Lebanon's parliament convened for the first round of balloting to elect a new president. While Samir Geagea -- who leads the Christian "Lebanese Forces" party, which is aligned with the pro-Western March 14 coalition -- received the most votes, he failed to secure the requisite two-thirds parliamentary support. In the coming weeks, legislators are slated to continue meeting until a president is selected. Unlike last week's session, in which the Hezbollah-led March 8 bloc did not challenge Geagea's candidacy, the voting promises to become increasingly contentious in subsequent rounds. Perennial sectarian tensions exacerbated by the war next door in Syria have complicated the historically wrought and arcane election process. Should a compromise candidate not emerge by May 25, the term of current president Michel Suleiman will expire, leaving the post vacant.

In the past, the presidency -- which by law must be held by a Christian -- was the dominant office in Lebanon's government. But the 1989 Taif Accord effectively stripped the position of its powers, delegating them to the prime minister, who must hail from the Sunni Muslim constituency. Given the post's largely symbolic nature, some might argue that the tense selection process is much ado about nothing. Yet the presidency remains an emotionally evocative issue for Lebanese Christians, and both the March 8 and March 14 blocs see a sympathetic chief executive as an important advantage worth fighting for.

BACKGROUND

Lebanon's confessional system stipulates that the 128 members of parliament elect a Christian president by secret ballot for a six-year term. If no candidate receives a two-thirds majority in the first round of voting, subsequent balloting occurs during which a president can be elected with a simple majority of 65 votes, provided a two-thirds quorum is present.

During round one on April 23, Samir Geagea secured 48 votes. The runner-up with 16 votes was Henri Helou, a Maronite Christian parliamentarian from Aley who is aligned with Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). Former president Amin Gemayel of the Kataeb Party -- part of the March 14 coalition -- received one vote. In addition, fifty-two blank or spoiled ballots were reportedly submitted, likely by legislators affiliated with March 8. A second round of voting was to take place yesterday but was cancelled because it did not meet the quorum requirement.

LEADING CONTENDERS

For the past decade, Lebanon has been divided into two camps: one pro-Western, the other aligned with Iran and Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Both covet the presidency. The March 14 coalition has declared its support for Geagea and remained disciplined during the first round of balloting. Yet it is difficult to envision him getting 65 votes. Since 2005, he has been the country's most consistent anti-Assad and anti-Hezbollah voice. This principled stand -- along with his convictions for ordering assassinations during the 1975-1990 civil war, crimes for which he served eleven years in solitary confinement -- makes him a highly polarizing figure even by Lebanese standards.

Ostensibly, Hezbollah should be supporting Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun, the Shiite militia's ambitious octogenarian partner in the March 8 coalition. Aoun has not yet declared his candidacy, but Hezbollah's backing for the former general already appears tepid at best. In recent months, he and his representatives have been meeting in Europe with March 14 leader Saad Hariri, purportedly to negotiate the coalition's potential backing of Aoun's candidacy. Any such arrangement would stipulate that the FPM reorient itself away from Hezbollah's bloc. Yet this scenario is unlikely to transpire because March 14 -- much like Hezbollah -- distrusts Aoun.

By default, then, the leading presidential contender appears to be Jean Kahwaji, commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Not only is the LAF the country's most respected institution, it is widely credited with maintaining stability throughout the war in Syria. Moreover, the past two presidents have hailed from its ranks. Although Kahwaji was appointed to his current position in 2008 by former March 14-aligned defense minister Elias Murr, he has detractors within the coalition. Some March 14 supporters bemoan the militarization of the presidency; others criticize current LAF efforts to stabilize Lebanon as targeting only Sunni -- and not Shiite -- militants, suggesting that Kahwaji is sympathetic to Hezbollah.

DARK HORSES?

Several other names have also been frequently tied to the presidency. Walid Jumblatt -- who wields a critical swing vote -- nominated PSP parliamentarian Henri Helou for the post as a sort of compromise candidate, distant from the March 8 and 14 blocs but reportedly close to the Maronite church. Other potential candidates affiliated with March 14 include former ministers and current members of parliament Boutros Harb and Robert Ghanem, both of whom were considered for the presidency in 2008. Former interior minister Ziyad Baroud -- who has the distinction of emerging to his position from the NGO world -- is also said to be on March 14's short list.

Interestingly, Hezbollah supported Helou's candidacy in the September 2003 by-election to

fill the parliamentary seat of his late father Pierre. Nevertheless, March 8 seems unlikely to accept him or any of the other dark-horse presidential candidates. In addition to serving as the constitutionally mandated "symbol of the nation's unity," the next president "must be a friend of the resistance," according to Hezbollah parliamentarian Ali Fayyad. This is shorthand for saying the president must allow the militia to retain its arsenal and its operational independence.

Ghanem tried to thread this needle when he announced his candidacy earlier this month. "The values I believe in are closer to March 14's," he said, "but I also believe in some of March 8's values, notably resisting the Israeli occupation." A more appealing candidate for March 8 is Sleiman Frangieh, a parliamentarian from Zgharta who has been close with the Assad family ever since the 1978 assassination of his father by militiamen from the Kataeb Party, a faction now allied with March 14.

Ultimately, given the animosity between March 8 and March 14, the most likely scenario is the selection of a consensus president. This category of candidate might include Riad Salameh, the impressive governor of Lebanon's Central Bank who has managed to expand the economy since 1993 despite wars, difficult neighbors, a global financial crisis, and a huge legacy debt from the civil war. Yet it is unclear how Hezbollah views Salameh, who has investigated and shut down several of the militia's local bank accounts after prompting from Washington. Moreover, because he currently holds a senior civil service position, his candidacy would require a constitutional amendment.

Former foreign minister Jean Obeid is another potential compromise candidate whose name is being floated. While some in Lebanon consider him too close to Assad, others point out that when he served under the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, he contravened orders from Damascus by refusing to attend a 2004 parliamentary vote extending the term of Syria's preferred president Emile Lahoud.

POTENTIAL FOR DESTABILIZATION

Over the next three weeks, these and other candidates will likely be considered. If a leading contender emerges but is deemed unacceptable by either of the two main blocs, then March 8 or March 14 members will boycott parliamentary sessions en masse and thereby stymie efforts to procure a quorum. This dynamic could heighten tensions, and, if a new president is not selected by May 25, open a vacuum in Lebanese politics -- a development that Prime Minister Tammam Salam said would be "a bitter pill" to swallow.

Technically, parliament could decide to amend the constitution and extend Michel Suleiman's term. (By law, he cannot run for a second consecutive term even if he were so inclined.) On several occasions over the past year, however, he has criticized Hezbollah's destabilizing military involvement in Syria. In March, he characterized the militia's longstanding formulation of "the army, the people, and the resistance" as "wooden," a remark that drew a sharp rebuke from Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah: "What is golden remains golden," he said, "even if someone changes their opinion about it and said it became wooden." An extension, it seems, is doubtful.

Without a consensus candidate or an extension, the debate could stretch beyond May 25, resulting in yet another domestic crisis at a particularly inopportune time. Three years into the war next door, more than a million mostly Sunni refugees have fled from Syria to

Lebanon, where sixteen car bomb attacks occurred in 2013 alone. The hostilities have ebbed lately due to a combination of aggressive LAF action against Sunni militants, Assad regime victories in strategic border regions, and -- some say -- a quiet Saudi-Iranian agreement to deescalate tensions in Lebanon. While few Lebanese articulate an interest in renewed sectarian bloodshed, a prolonged, contentious, or inconclusive presidential election could rekindle the violence.

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