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## **Lebanon: New Government, Old Problems**

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On November 10, 2009, five months after Lebanon's parliamentary elections, Sa`d al-Din al-Hariri, the son of the slain former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and leader of the victorious "March 14" anti-Syrian/anti-Hizballah coalition, succeeded in forming a new government. However, the preceding period of complete political paralysis provided a clear indication of the underlying difficulties and challenges which continue to confront Lebanon.

The June 7, 2009 elections were contested by two rival camps, divided over both questions of power and policy, and ultimately over their competing visions for the country. Hariri, from the Sunni community, was joined in the March 14 bloc by Walid Junblatt, the leader of the Druze in Lebanon, and several prominent leaders of the Maronite community. On the other side of the divide stood the "March 8" forces, headed by Hizballah Secretary-General Hasan Nasrallah, accompanied by Nabih Berri, leader of the Shi`ite Amal movement, and by the Maronite General Michel Aoun, head of the Free Patriotic Movement and Nasrallah's close ally since February 2006.

Four years previously, in Spring 2005, the March 14 Camp had been victorious in parliamentary elections, enabling it to initiate a genuine political about-face, the so-called “Cedar Revolution.” The main element of this shift was the freeing of Lebanon from the tight grip which Syria had held over it for three decades, manifested by the presence of 30,000 Syrian troops. Lebanon’s new government aimed to get the country back on its feet as an independent state, placing its hopes on the support of the United States and France, as well as the moderate Sunni Arab states, headed by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. For the March 14 bloc, the goal of the 2009 elections was to preserve its gains from the previous elections and thus prove that its hold on power was not simply a passing episode.

Public opinion polls conducted prior to the vote indicated that Hizballah and its affiliated parties in the March 8 bloc would be victorious. However, contrary to all the pre-election expectations and assessments, the March 14 bloc came out on top by a small margin. Hizballah leader Nasrallah quickly declared that he was prepared to acknowledge his defeat and accept the results of the elections. At the same time, he demanded that the victors accept Hizballah as an equal partner in the government. In Nasrallah’s view, this demand was a requirement of the Lebanese political system: in his words, the victors must forget that they won the elections. Furthermore, Nasrallah stated that Hizballah would not give up its long-range aim of bringing about a change in the rules of the political game in Lebanon. Doing so would enable the organization to exploit the demographic advantage of the Shi`ite community, which Hizballah claimed to represent and which constitutes Lebanon’s largest single confessional group.

Sa`d al-Din al-Hariri understood Nasrallah’s message. And so, following the

elections he worked to establish a national unity government with representatives from Hizballah, the Amal movement, and even representatives of Michel Aoun. Hariri was prepared to accept most of Hizballah's conditions. These included, apart from the question of the composition of the government and the distribution of portfolios, the right to veto any governmental decision, even if this prerogative was not granted formally or in writing. It goes without saying that in order to form a new government, Hariri was prepared to abandon any insistence on governmental control over Hizballah's weapons or the disarming of the organization. By his very readiness to have the organization join his government, he essentially granted legitimacy, even if only indirectly and by implication, to its continued militarization and ongoing smuggling of weapons and ammunition in violation of U.N. Resolution 1701. This aspect of Hariri's success in forming a new government was not lost on senior officials in Israel. Hence, they made it clear that Israel would view all of Lebanon as responsible for any escalation along the border between the two countries.

Meanwhile, the concessions Hariri made to Hizballah were not enough by themselves to clear the way for the establishment of a new government in Beirut. This was because Hariri found himself immersed in personal quarrels with Hizballah's ally, Aoun, over the allocation of several portfolios. However, this difficulty, too, was finally overcome.

The composition of the new government, with its inclusion of Hizballah ministers, makes it clear that the March 14 Camp's electoral victory was only partial and short-term, merely one round in an ongoing battle to determine Lebanon's future course. There are even those who would argue that the March 14 bloc's electoral victory was merely psychological, and nothing more. Indeed, a strong indication of this was given several weeks after the elections. On

August 2, 2009, Walid Junblatt declared that he intended to end his alliance with Hariri and hinted that he was prepared to join up with Hizballah and improve his ties with Syria. Junblatt even stated that the efforts to draw close to the U.S. were misguided and that the interests of the Druze community obliged him to reevaluate his policies, especially in light of the events of May 2008, when Hizballah fighters temporarily took over West Beirut. Hariri also began hinting that he too might be prepared to put aside his hostility to Syria, whom he considered responsible for the murder of his father, and open a new page in the relations between the two countries. The implication was that Hariri would go back to serving Syrian interests in Lebanon, as his father had done in the past. Concurrently, Hariri's patron, Saudi Arabia, was showing a similar readiness to become reconciled with Syria.

In sum, on the face of it, the 2009 elections signified a victory for the March 14 Camp. Its holding action against Hizballah's attacks on Lebanon's existing political order had produced tangible results. Many observers also portrayed this victory as something of an achievement for the moderate camp in the Middle East in its struggle against the region's radical states. In light of this expectation, it would be ironic indeed if it turns out that the elections were only a prelude to Lebanon undergoing a process of renewed adherence to the radical axis. The end result of such a process would surely be the renewal of Syria's active role in the internal affairs of Lebanon and the strengthening of Hizballah's influence in the corridors of power in Beirut.

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