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**THE PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTIONS IN LEBANON:  
A DEADLINE FRAUGHT  
WITH DANGER?**

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## **THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN LEBANON: A DEADLINE FRAUGHT WITH DANGER?**

Of all the gridlocks affecting the Lebanese political system, the one affecting the presidential election is the most serious. For two years, no parliamentary session aimed at choosing a successor to outgoing President Michel Sleiman could be held. While the Lebanese Constitution stipulates that electing a president is a priority and holding Chamber's meetings without delay to elect the head of state is an imperative, several sessions have passed by without the quorum being met. So far, it seemed as if a higher blocking force was impeding the course of the presidential polls prior to reaching agreement on a consensus candidate, in which case, the election would have constituted a mere formality, as a pre-approved president would have been chosen

before MPs cast their ballots. This protracted institutional stalemate crossed yet another threshold in Lebanon's dysfunctional political system. Indeed, as per Article 62 of the constitution, since May 25, 2014, date of departure of President Sleiman, the presidential powers have been transferred to the government of Prime Minister Tammam Salam and granted to the council of ministers as a whole. As for the process of executing this complicated constitutional provision, if not impossible to implement in such a disintegrated framework of government, the executive authority is dividing and sabotaging itself, so to speak. Indeed, aside from the political reasons for the current discord, murky dissensions on all kinds of stipends and privileges have

contributed to discredit the executive power, adding to the presidential vacuum a quasi-complete institutional paralysis.

### **Gridlocks and Blind Alleys: Realities and Nuances**

However, to be accurate, this analysis should take into account some further elements to nuance the bigger picture.

First, the presidential vacuum in Lebanon is absolutely not exceptional; indeed, the current presidential vacuum in Lebanon is not a new phenomenon. Yet, it is undeniably the longest in Lebanon's contemporary political history, and it alarmingly reveals the volatility of a political system that is pushed to the limit due to severe polarizations. Furthermore, it makes us wonder whether the sectarian system remains capable of ensuring its own survival and

of honoring constitutional deadlines considered to be the backbone of its legitimacy. Indeed, no presidential election, except for two, were held without a temporary presidential vacuum; very short as in 1952 (four days) or long like the current vacuum that breaks all records in terms of longevity (over two years); other vacuums followed, at the end of President Amine Gemayel's term in 1988 (408 days), and in 2007 at the end of President Emile Lahoud's term, pending the election of General Michel Sleiman in 2008 (184 days). Only the presidential elections of 1964 and 1970 took place smoothly, in their due time, and were free from any foreign interference. These endemic electoral delays do not only raise doubts about the regular functioning of institutions, they also underline the institutional deterioration of a state within which the regulatory bodies of the

political system have become hostages and instruments of factional politics. Tensions between the various public bodies are the consequences of dissents between political factions. It is characteristic of the sectarian system that political disagreements easily turn into institutional stalemates, given that the political confessional system places institutions, leaders or public figures at the head of the state which are supposed to represent their respective religious community. Therefore, institutions serve as factional leverages operating as political weapons in confrontations and public debates.

Secondly, however, political life is not entirely paralyzed. The Lebanese system is primarily a system based on dialogue and continuing political discussion geared towards finding solutions and, in fact, to constantly reach a balance of power between the

ruling elites of the moment. This logic of compromise requires open channels, dialogues and discussions, which are permanently maintained, suspended then again resumed.

When this so-called national dialogue breaks down, ad hoc decisions can still be taken when budget necessity requires so or when appointments of high-ranking officials become compelling. More formally, Lebanese leaders have reestablished the never-ending national dialogue interrupted in 2006. In fact, as of September 2008, the national dialogue meetings provided for in the Doha Agreement signed between fourteen factions and political parties in Lebanon have resumed.

The signing of the Doha Agreement, thanks to the mediation of Qatar, has made the election of General Michel Sleiman possible. This national dialogue remains

on the agenda after the departure of the latter. The Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri regularly summons the parties to the crisis to resume the dialogue. However, talks have not yet led to a tangible result that could have been translated into the election of a President of the Republic and an agreement on the principles of a new electoral law. Therefore, the crisis goes on, and so does the national dialogue.

In this perspective, we easily note that a strict constitutionalist approach of the Lebanese political reality fails to get the gist. In the current institutional gridlock, without president, without government other than a caretaker government, itself stemming from a Parliament which has extended its own term, the question of power legitimacy arises acutely.

We must, however, note that in the meantime, an electoral process to elect municipal

officials was held between May 8 and 22, 2016. While the presidential election seems difficult and subject to pre-conditions of all kinds required to be fulfilled by potential candidates, and while parliamentary elections could not be held, municipal elections took place without major incidents or major disputes over the results. How can we explain this paradox of which the most disturbing aspect is the creation of local alliances that do not correspond at all to political lines that are supposed to separate the parties of March 8 and those of March 14? Certainly we know that local elections do not abide by the same logic that prevails during national elections. The dissociation of local issues and family-type alliances do not interfere significantly in national political alliances and issues related to state policy. However, given the pervasive climate of tension

in the country one could think that these elections were improbable. It is not only interesting that they were held but also that in some areas the people seized the opportunity to express their exasperation at the behavior of the political class and their distrust in its representatives. To be sure, these elections demonstrate the political maturity of the Lebanese voter, his rejection of imposed choices, his tendency not to give in to sectarian competition in some areas, and the presence of a civil society, still weak and fragile, but eager to get involved in the management of public affairs. This ability to dissociate between these different levels of politics and not to confuse national issues with local stakes underlines the resilience of the Lebanese political system. It allows moments of relief and respite away from national quarrels, especially within the temporarily static institutional

system. It also demonstrates the flexibility and complexity of the Lebanese political process. Nevertheless, this ability does not preclude the persisting manipulative power of parties and community leaders (*zu'amā'*) who keep on maintaining their ability to maneuver the political system for sectarian and personal ends.

Finally and thirdly, with the above considerations in mind, the most decisive factor affecting the current presidential election is the regional and international interference in the internal crisis. Herein lies the core issue of the conflict within the political class and its deep cause. Although not new, the impact of regional crises on the Lebanese scene is becoming more evident. Indeed, Lebanon is currently going through a period of great weakness. The war in Syria has not only revived Lebanese internal

divisions but has also added unexpected and aggravating factors to the entire Lebanese context.

First, there is the issue of refugees who have fled the fighting in their country to settle in Lebanon. There are few countries that are able to bear the weight of a foreign population amounting to a quarter of the original population without major immediate consequences for their security and stability – but for how long?

An equally disturbing element is the constant in-and-out flow of armed combatants between Lebanon and Syria, which endangers Lebanese political developments and threatens the balance between the political forces and the armed militias in their orbit. In August 2014, the battle of Ersal at the Lebanese-Syrian border showed that hotspots of confrontation could appear quickly as a

result of border fighting in Syria. Jabhat al-Nosra jihadists have conquered this small city before being driven out by the Lebanese Army, which had been surprised and overwhelmed at first. This city that, in ordinary times, had fewer than 30,000 inhabitants, had become home to around 100,000 people due to the massive influx of refugees from Syria. Thereafter, the fighting continued while the Lebanese Army strove to cut arms supply and fighters' routes from the mountainous heights constituting the border between the two countries. This has resulted in an uneasy calm marked by the death of Lebanese civilians and soldiers, some of whom were decapitated while others were kidnapped. This emblematic event with unpredictable consequences has only led to freezing the situation without reaching a definitive solution. Hostages and prisoners



were freed following a Qatari intervention at the request of the Lebanese authorities. Similar spillover effects of the nearby war can multiply. In Northern Lebanon, the presence of Sunni belligerent groups is now confirmed; the East of Lebanon has become a territory where the movement of Shiite Hezbollah troops and equipment is organized. The development of such a situation is part of the broader context of the extension of the Syrian war and even more, of conflicting regional policies that have resulted of this war. The Lebanese presidency is at the center of this attraction-repulsion dynamic exerted on the country.

### **Lebanon and the War in the Middle East**

Located at the heart of the regional turmoil, Lebanon has been divided. It seems as if the history of the Lebanese internal war is being repeated despite the Taif Agreement

and the much-touted Lebanese “reconciliation” after 1990. Although internal, the Syrian war has in fact soon generated alignments along conflict lines throughout the region. The contestation of power in Syria quickly led to destabilization attempts by regional powers backing the Syrian regime. The Syria regained its centrality.

As a pivotal state, located between Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Turkey and Iraq, Syria’s stability depends on a subtle equilibrium game where domination (Lebanon), deterrence (Israel), connection (Iraq), coordination (Iran), neutralization (Jordan), and strategic distancing (Turkey) dictate strategic alignments. These principles of balance may have varied in intensity, either as a reconciliation or hostility situation with each of these states. However, from the moment at which the Syrian regime entered a violent and determined

confrontation with its own population and strengthened its repressive grip with the only consequence to extend war on a very large part of the territory, it has become clear that no mediation is being sought and that the regime is clinging to its security normalization policy. In this context, it also appears that the regime is not isolated regionally. Iran supports the Syrian regime with massive financial and military means, providing arms and advisors. The Guardians of the Iranian Revolution (Pasdaran) are deployed on the ground under the command of Major General Qassem Soleimani, while Shiite militias are dispatched from Iraq. On the other hand, Hezbollah has been strongly involved in the war in Syria – first at the border, but soon undoubtedly alongside regime forces around cities like al-Qusayr (May 2013) and now in Aleppo (since 2015) or in the outskirts of Damascus.

Although Hezbollah's involvement was minimized, even denied at first, the Party of God could not, as the war continued, dissimulate its casualties, calling their death "the fulfillment of the duty of jihad". As a consequence, those in Lebanon who condemn any alignment with foreign regional powers are now raging against Hassan Nasrallah's party. This internal polarization reflects the radicalization of regional axes. Indeed, facing the Shiite-Syrian-Iranian axis, the Gulf powers are equally determined to block a regional alliance threatening their influence.

The will to eradicate the Syrian regime is a major element that explains the attitude of the Gulf powers. It is neither the only one nor the most important one. It is Iran, in negotiations with the group of the "5 + 1" on its supposed project of nuclear weapons technology that is actually targeted.

This fear, increased by the rise of the militias and the Shiite power in Iraq, the involvement of Hezbollah, perceived as a challenge to the Saudi position in Lebanon and its support for the Sunni community, has resulted in a global reaction from the Gulf oil monarchies, thus linking Iraq and Syria, Lebanon and Yemen in their apprehension of a global danger. The enemies of the Syrian government, including Islamist opposition forces will be at a time, rightly or wrongly, namely the so-called Islamic State or “Daesh” or other, believed to be supported by rich emirs or pious foundations in the Gulf. That was enough for the sectarian prism to develop while a frontal opposition between Shiites and Sunnis was looming, as an ultimate, simple and simplistic explanation of the regional violence.

Moreover, the impression of a Shiite offensive – or even

encirclement – has been fostered by speculations about the cautious behavior of the US ally regarding its military involvement in the region. This impression has been added to the Gulf countries’ feeling of strategic loneliness despite being great survivors of the “Arab Spring” social movements. Russia’s involvement alongside President Assad’s regime will further increase this feeling of strategic alienation coupled with the conviction of abandonment.

In this context, more than at any time in its history, despite having been caught between the tensions of the Cold War, Arab-Israeli wars, power struggles between Israel and Syria after the signing of the Camp David peace Agreement (1979) and the Palestinian strategy on its territory, Lebanon will be found embedded in the greater Saudi-Iranian confrontation. Its elites having seized an

“excellent” opportunity to adopt, once again, quarrels outside their scope from which they can only suffer having no chance at all to influence their destinies.

How can we explain this predicament? First, it is probably due to the failure to comply with the so-called “constants” of Baabda which were laboriously developed by President Michel Sleiman during the “national dialogue” meetings. These bound the Lebanese parties, among other provisions, to commit to steer clear of regional axes in the region’s volatile environment. Hezbollah intervention in Syria has shattered this non-alignment principle. The arguments of “struggle of all” including the Gulf countries against the world’s number one enemy, “Daesh”, will not make anyone forget this exit from the Lebanese consensus. By deciding to suspend its commitment to supply weapons for the Lebanese

Army alongside France, Saudi Arabia signaled that the fight against extremism could not be effectively supported by strengthening the Lebanese Army at a time where Hezbollah enjoyed a dominant influence in the government.

The Saudi-Iranian antagonism is directly affecting the Lebanese scene by matching the opposition between the parties of the “March 8”/“March 14” coalitions, while blocking the normal course of the constitutional process. Even if sustained efforts are exerted by the “international community” (Europe and France in the lead) to secure a Lebanese President who can serve as a representative to the outside world, it is improbable that regional powers will share the feeling of urgency to solve the presidential crisis. For Syria and Iran, attending to a speedy election of a head of state is to risk the formation

of a government of national consensus where Hezbollah's involvement, position and strategy will be constantly discussed and contested, hence protracting the crisis at the government level. It is not certain either if Saudi Arabia, which is contained in a regional balance of power that it deems unfavorable for its own interests, would be eager to reach a compromise. The uncertain evolution of the war in Syria as well as inter-Syrian peace negotiations, do not encourage regional parties to speed up solutions at the Lebanese level. Who knows what peace in Syria would look like, and who the beneficiaries of a political settlement would be? If Iran were to see its position consolidated through the strengthening of President Assad, thanks to Russia, Saudi Arabia would be facing a loss of influence additional to the one it believes to have suffered due to the July 14, 2015 Nuclear Agreement with

Iran.

After having exerted pressure to ensure political loyalties in Lebanon, after having attempted to consolidate a status quo that preserves its interests and an influence within the Sunni community hostile to Hezbollah and its war in Syria, after having hoped to strengthen the Lebanese Army by enhancing its equipment and armament and then abandoning this idea, the Wahhabi Kingdom has withdrawn into a vigilant position adopting a wait-and-see attitude at the Lebanese level. It will not attempt to force anything through but it will not allow Iran to expand its influence either. It is thus essential that the situation is unblocked at the regional level so that Lebanon has a chance to elect a consensus President who is agreed upon externally. Yet, it is internally that contradictions fueled by the well-known affiliation

of Lebanese key players to foreign players continue to sharpen, while we are witnessing a repositioning and shift in agendas within the different clans and camps. The reversal of alliances and the proposal made by March 14 leader Saad Hariri, suggesting a candidate who is one of the pillars of the opposing camp of March 8, namely Sleiman Frangieh, could indeed have been considered as a welcome concession and compromise to find a way out of the crisis.

But this choice would put aside another figurehead of the March 8 camp, namely General Michel Aoun, whose candidacy for the Presidency of the Republic is supported by Hezbollah. Consequently, the battle was relaunched within the Maronite camp where other candidates, declared and undeclared (usually called “independent”), are competing. Rather than strengthening the Maronite community, from which a

President is to be elected according to constitutional custom, the proposal to elect Mr. Frangieh has contributed to rendering the debate around the future president even more complex.

Yet it is also at this internal level that efforts should be made to reach a consensus candidate. While it seems currently unrealistic to expect a reconciliation between regional actors, at least no efforts should be spared to ensure that the impact of their external policies are damped by a figure guaranteeing an interest that is somewhat alien to foreign interests: the national interest.

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