

THE LEBANESE ELECTIONS

THE DEFEAT OF HEZBOLLAH: IS THIS A NEW TURN OF EVENTS FOR THE LAND OF CEDARS?

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Summary

The Lebanese legislative elections held last week-end elicited great interest on the part of the electorate as we see from the high level of voter turn-out (54.08%), which is a 20-year record. At the conclusion of an intense electoral campaign which received extensive media coverage, the Lebanese renewed the anti-Syrian majority led by Saad Hariri and Walid Joumblatt (71 seats out of 128). The balloting was closely protected by soldiers, policemen and many international observers and took place peacefully, since no significant incidents were reported.

The electoral contest was between a ‘pro-Western’ or ‘anti-Syrian’ coalition (*the coalition of 14 March*) and the coalition led by Hezbollah and its allies (*the coalition of 8 March*), a standoff dating from the legislative vote of 2005 which plunged the country into a new civil war in 2008. Now, although Hezbollah is obliged to acknowledge its defeat, it nonetheless intends to force the formation of a government of national union and the renewal of a blocking right for the opposition.

Though the campaign and the balloting were held successfully, one has to ensure, as the Lebanese Minister of Internal Affairs Ziad Baroud says: “(...) *that everyone accepts the results*” and to avoid a new political crisis. At this moment, Lebanon seems to have temporarily put aside the threats of boycott with which the international community, and especially the United States, had confronted Lebanon should there be a Hezbollah victory. We must not deceive ourselves: even though it lost the elections, the pro-Shiite militia-party remains one of the unavoidable elements of the Lebanese political scene.

A country ravaged by internal conflicts ever since the last legislative elections

Ever since the assassination of Rafik Hariri in February 2005 and the wave of assassinations targeting pro-Western opponents (politicians, journalists), the political forces on the ground have not ceased tearing one another apart. Indeed, during the last four years, the Lebanese political scene was dominated by two rival camps: an anti-Syrian coalition supported by the West as well as by many Arab countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc.) and the bloc of 8 March, supported by Syria and Iran.

The coalition of 14 March¹ comprises: the movement for the future (Saad Hariri), the Progressive Socialist Party (Walid Joumblatt), the Lebanese Forces (Samir Geagea) and the Phalangist Party (Amin Gemayel).

The coalition (or bloc) of 8 March² comprises: Hezbollah (Hassan Nasrallah), the Amal movement (Nabih Berri) and the Free Patriotic movement (General Michel Aoun), as well as other small groups.

We note that the majority of leaders of today's anti-Syrian coalition were the allies of Syria during its "presence" in Lebanon for the three last decades. As for support given to the pro-Syrian coalition headed by Hezbollah, it brings together the worst enemies of Syria of the past, especially in the person of General Michel Aoun³. Though it is somewhat simplistic to summarise the position taken by most of the Lebanese institutions in the conflict as pro- or anti-Syrian, it nonetheless remains true that this latent conflict between the two camps has polarised the Lebanese political scene. This battle also exacerbated tensions between the Shiite and Sunni communities of the country at a level hitherto not equaled since the civil war which ravaged the country between 1975 and 1990.

It was only on 21 May 2008, at the end of a year and a half of confrontations that plunged the country once again into chaos resulting in a hundred deaths that the two coalitions signed an agreement in Qatar (the Doha Accords). Among other things, this agreement provided for the appointment of Michel Suleiman as President of the Republic, the formation of a government of national unity – with blocking right for Hezbollah and its allies (the Free Patriotic movement of General Michel Aoun) – as well as the prohibition on use of arms in the framework of any domestic conflict. And while the agreement well and truly put an end to a period of intense instability, it is no less true that *in fine* it admitted Hezbollah! Indeed, most of the demands of the Shiite militant party were granted and so it de facto strengthened its position on the political scene.

¹ The name '14 March 2005' makes reference to the date of a large-scale demonstration which brought together in Beirut more than a million Lebanese. This unprecedented mobilisation was aimed at demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country and demanding that light be fully directed at the assassination of Rafik Hariri.

² The name '8 March' makes reference to the demonstration organised at the initiative of Hezbollah on 8 March 2005 to denounce 'foreign interference in Lebanon and Resolution 1559 (aimed at disarming Hezbollah) the day following a speech by Syrian President Bashar El-Assad promising total withdrawal of his troops from Lebanon in two stages.

³ In 1989, General Michel Aoun launched a "war of liberation" (from 14 March to 22 September 1989) aimed at eradicating the Syrian presence. This very ambitious project only resulted in a bloody 'civil war' between the Army and the Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea which accepted the Taef Accords. A division of power took place at the end of October in the same year, when the Lebanese and Syrian forces wore out the troops of General Aoun.

The behaviour of Hezbollah before and during the balloting

During the Israel operation in Gaza "Cast lead" this past January, Hezbollah held back from making any provocation against the Jewish state and did not launch any of its rockets against the North of Israel, contrary to what it did in 2002 while the Israeli operation 'Protection Wall' was going on. This restraint does not really reflect a change of attitude vis-à-vis the Jewish state ; rather it appears to have been the result of an electoral calculation – to avoid clashing with the Lebanese population by opening a new front. By acting in this way, Hezbollah intended to maintain its chances of succeeding in the elections.

The local media seem unable to verify charges that the two camps indulged in electoral corruption: '(...) despite the spread of rumours on this subject, it has not been possible to obtain the slightest tangible proof [ed.: of corruption],'⁴ writes Mahmud Hard in the daily newspaper *Orient-Le jour*. Certain diplomatic sources are less reserved. Indeed, according to a high ranking diplomat interviewed by *Newsmax*, many weeks before the balloting: 'Iran and a certain number of other countries have been financing the campaign of their friends, and in some cases they are involved in buying votes for cash. We are 'prudently' watching this dealing and we are monitoring especially Hezbollah and Iran.'⁵ At the end of April, the *New York Times* published the account of Hussein H., a young man aged 24 who is unemployed and comes from South Beirut. He was happy to sell his vote to the highest bidder: 'Whoever pays more will get my vote. I will not accept less than \$800.'⁶ Other accounts confirm that tens of thousands of votes were 'purchased' in this way on the day of the balloting.

During the campaign, Hezbollah vigorously rejected accusations that if it won it would put in place a government based on the Iranian model having as its main objective the establishment of an Islamic republic. In fact, it is not very likely that Hezbollah has the desire and the means to impose such a societal model on Lebanon even if it is true that the place of Shiites is ever more important in Lebanon. It is also certain that the societal model envisaged by the Party of God would clearly harm an economy which is already at the edge of the abyss and whose survival is intimately linked to subsidies coming from outside.

Thus, the failure of Hezbollah may be partly explained by the fact that a fair number of voters were frightened by the threats of the international community over a possible Hezbollah victory. During a visit to Beirut last month, American Vice President Joe Biden issued a warning, saying that American aid⁷ would depend on the composition and the political orientations of the new government. As Abderrahman Al-Rached explained before the elections: 'The Lebanese must consider the price they would have to pay [ed.: by electing Hezbollah]. Just as the residents of Gaza have had to take into account the price they paid by voting for Hamas rather than for Fatah (...) There will probably not be a shortage of flour and petrol, but Lebanon will have many points in common with Gaza. Many countries, including Arab countries, will stop giving assistance to the country of the Cedars.'⁸

The defeat of Hezbollah cannot be doubted. Yet, the day after the elections, the fate of the future government remains uncertain.

⁴ Mahmoud Harb, 'A Jbeil, the CPL and Hezbollah close ranks,' *l'Orient-Le jour*, 8 June 2009.

⁵ Ken Timmerman, 'Iran, Hezbollah, Set to Buy Lebanon Elections,' *Newsmax.com*, 16 March 2009.

⁶ Robert F. Worth, 'Foreign Money Seeks to Buy Lebanese Votes,' *The New York Times*, 23 April 2009.

⁷ Since 2006, American aid to Lebanon has amounted to more or less 1 billion dollars.

⁸ Abderrahman Al-Rached, 'Story of a dreaded catastrophe,' *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 28 May 2009 in *Courier International.com*

Iranian influence on the voting

Iranian influence on Lebanon has grown continuously during these past few years. Though the numbers given in propaganda coming from Tehran are highly exaggerated, the financial manna granted to Hezbollah is, according to the sources, between \$25 and 50 million. This amount is not intended to aid Lebanon but rather to assist Hezbollah in its quest for power. In parallel, Iran has contributed extensively to rearming Hezbollah. Thus, experts have hardly any doubt today that Hezbollah has not only recovered its military capabilities in South Lebanon but that they have even doubled since the end of the war between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006.

Iran has unquestionably weighed on the electoral campaign. As Diana Muqalled explains: '(...) *the Iranian influence is stronger. The slogans that you encounter on the posters of their Lebanese ally [ed.: Hezbollah] show that Iranian fever is spreading in the country of Cedars. It has introduced a democratic sterility there. The Lebanese media have not been able to resist it.*'⁹ For the Iranian President: '*the result of the Lebanese elections will have important consequences for the entire region.*'

But Iran was not content just to interfere in matters of 'form.' As we already said, the Islamic Republic also transferred large sums of money in cash to finance the campaign and to sponsor the purchase of votes. Many Lebanese sources speak of the use of Hezbollah airplanes to directly transfer money coming from Nigeria. Other sources¹⁰ report that large quantities of American dollars were sent to Lebanon via Syria and Dubai.

The conflict which now pits Iran against part of the Arab world seems to have crystallised during the entire electoral campaign in the country of Cedars. According to an advisor to the Saudi government, while Tehran sent millions of dollars to Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia also transferred hundreds of millions of dollars intended for the coalition of 14 March: '*We are supporting the candidates on lists against Hezbollah, and we will ensure that Iran feels the pressure.*'¹¹ Egypt also gave its support to the coalition of Saad Hariri, concerned, like Riyadh, about the consequences that a Hezbollah victory would have for the entire region. We note in this regard that the Egyptian authorities recently dismantled a vast terrorist network linked to Lebanon's Hezbollah. This is an episode which raised a bit further the tensions between Egypt and Iran.

The challenges facing the new government

The role of "resistance" of Hezbollah is at the heart of the challenges which the new Lebanese government must face. Though the worst scenario – a Hezbollah victory – has now been averted, the disarmament of the militias which the coalition of 14 March hopes for – and which has been called for my many resolutions of the United Nations Security Council – will not be easy. The day after the elections, Mohammad Raad, a Hezbollah deputy, told the *AFP* that the powerful arsenal of the Shiite movement was one subject on which the movement was not ready to compromise: '*The majority must commit itself to the Resistance not being a negotiable subject, (to consider) that its arms are legitimate and that Israel is an enemy.*'¹² Ensuring the future of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (charged with the task of trying the assassins of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri) seems to be the other difficult task which the future government must undertake. Though it seems obvious that Saad Hariri (the son of Rafik Hariri) will have the stomach to see the guilty persons sentenced, his government must confront opposition from Hezbollah. In fact, the court began its work in March in the Hague.

⁹ Diana Muqalled, '*Elections under reciprocal influence,*' Asharq Al-Awsat, 5 June 2009 in *Courrier International.com*

¹⁰ Ken Timmerman, op. cit.

¹¹ Robert F. Worth, op. cit.

¹² *L'Orient-Le jour*, 8 June 2009.

But Hezbollah has questioned the neutrality of the court, especially after the court decided to release 4 pro-Syrian generals (imprisoned without charges since 2005). Meanwhile, the Lebanese Parliament has never formally approved the constitution of the court which was established following a resolution of the Security Council of the United Nations in May 2007.

The new government must also undertake to free itself somewhat more from Damascus's supervision of Lebanon. This objective has been on the agenda of the coalition of 14 March ever since the assassination of Rafik Hariri. In addition to its interference in domestic political affairs, Syria has also been accused by the pro-Western coalition of holding up the work of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and arming Palestinian groups in Lebanon. But, as Bassel Oudat explains, Syria is also accused by the pro-Western coalition of being involved in other sensitive matters: [ed.: accused] *of delaying the new drawing up of Lebanese-Syrian borders (and the problems of the Cheeba Farms), of supporting the Supreme Syrian-Lebanese Council and of ignoring requests concerning the return of Lebanese prisoners and those who 'disappeared' in Syria.*¹³

By way of a conclusion

Although the Lebanese expect a great deal from the coalition of 14 March, the challenges which the new government must deal with are colossal. New tensions will very likely emerge between the two blocs as soon as the government tries to touch the positions achieved by Hezbollah. Moreover, one should not expect profound change in Lebanon, given that the same political elites have been fighting for power for more than thirty years. On the other hand, the new government may perhaps be tempted to rein in its aspirations "for change" in order to avoid a new conflagration. We are certain that Lebanon will continue to be, as it has always been since its creation, an object of contention among the states of the region and a territory where tensions are concentrated and exacerbated.

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¹³ Bassel Oudat, 'Will Syria intervene?' Al-Ahram Weekly, 1-4 May 2009, Issue No. 950