

Swing to right-wing Christian leader Aoun in Lebanese elections

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Voting in the third round of the Lebanese general election saw an unexpected swing to supporters of the right-wing Christian former general Michel Aoun. Fifteen out of the 16 seats in the predominantly Maronite Christian area of northeast of Beirut went to candidates allied to Aoun in the complex sectarian-based voting system. Altogether, Aoun and his allies took 21 of the 58 seats that were contested in Mount Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley.

It seems increasingly unlikely that the main anti-Syrian opposition, led by Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated former prime minister Rafik Hariri, and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, will be able to win a majority in the 128-seat parliament. There are now only 28 seats left to contest in the fourth and final stage of the election due in North Lebanon on Sunday, and the opposition forces have so far won only 46 seats.

Far from the “freedom” and “democracy” that the Bush administration claimed the elections would bring about, they have revealed the sectarian divisions that simmered below the surface during the Syrian occupation of the last 15 years.

All 19 seats in Beirut in the first round of the election went to the Hariri list, whereas in the second round of the election in South Lebanon, the pro-Syrian Hezbollah and its Shia allies took all 23 seats. Both results were expected and both elections saw low turnouts. Hezbollah and its allies won a further 10 seats in the third round in the Bekaa Valley.

After the “Cedar Revolution,” the anti-Syrian protests that took place in February and March following Rafik Hariri’s assassination, it was assumed that the mainstream opposition would sweep into power with 80 or 90 seats. Syrian troops have now been completely withdrawn from Lebanon under demands from the United States and Western governments.

Saad Hariri’s list of candidates included “moderate” Christian parties—the Qornet Shehwan Gathering, and the Lebanese Forces. Although Qornet Shehwan is led by the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir, it appears that the Christian elite feel their interests are better served by Aoun, despite the fact that many of his seats were won by his alliance with pro-Syrian politicians.

Sfeir had opposed the elections going ahead without changing the present voting system that was set up under Syrian domination, but was pushed aside as the US insisted on an immediate vote.

Aoun, leading the rump of the Lebanese army, fought against the Syrian army in 1990. This conflict ended the Lebanese civil war when he was defeated. It was followed by the Syrian occupation, which the US supported to stabilise the country after the civil war and in return for Syrian support in the Gulf War against Iraq. Aoun fled to France, where he has been in exile for the last 15 years, enabling him to denounce the Hariri-Jumblatt opposition leaders as a “corrupt political class” that cooperated with Syria over the last period only to go into opposition “looking out for their own interests.”

In the campaign for the northern Lebanon region, Aoun has brought together two of the most pro-Syrian politicians from the previous government, former premier Omar Karami and former interior minister Sulieman Franjieh. The grandson of the president who invited the Syrians into Lebanon in 1976 at the beginning of the civil war, Franjieh is said to be a close friend of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Robert Fisk, the *Independent* reporter in the Middle East, even suggests that the winner of Lebanon’s elections will be the pro-Syrian president, Emile Lahoud. It was widely assumed that Lahoud, although

technically holding office for another three years, would be forced out when the opposition won a two-thirds majority and changed the constitution. But Lahoud brought back Aoun from exile this year and claims to have predicted that Aoun would tear apart the anti-Syrian opposition.

The success of pro-Syrian candidates, even though from opposed religious groupings, can hardly please Washington. Towards the end of last week, the US stepped up anti-Syrian propaganda by claiming that Syria has developed a “hit list” that targets senior Lebanese politicians.

The information, said to originate from a “variety of credible Lebanese sources,” includes the claim that Syria, after withdrawing its troops and intelligence operatives from Lebanon, had begun sending intelligence personnel back into the country over the last week.

An unnamed official stated, “This is a moment when many politicians are facing overt Syrian intimidation in the middle of the election period.” Referring to the assassination at the beginning of June of Samir Kassir, a well-known journalist, opposition leader, and leading member of the Democratic Left breakaway from the Lebanese Communist Party, the official continued: “When Lebanese sources tell us that they are hearing that the Kassir killing will be followed by others, we take it seriously.”

Speaking on US television, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, “What we don’t want is that there is a pattern now of assassination of key figures because that would be very, very destabilising in Lebanon, and I think it would have to point a finger at those forces that have been destabilising in Lebanon.”

US officials also claimed that Syrian intelligence is using Palestinian refugee camps as a hiding place.

The accusations continued this week with White House spokesman Scott McClellan saying, “We have real concerns about Syria’s continued intelligence presence inside Lebanon,” and demanding that UN verification teams return to Lebanon and stay there throughout the formation of a cabinet to ascertain whether Syria is meddling in Lebanon’s affairs.

Whilst it would be surprising if there weren’t Syrian intelligence operatives in Lebanon, along with their counterparts from the US, France and Israel, there has so far been no evidence that Syria was behind the

assassination of Hariri or Kassir or is planning further political killings. As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out after the Hariri assassination: “The Syrian government is among the least likely sources of the attack. It has little to gain from the assassination, which will only strengthen the Lebanese opposition and provide a pretext for the United States to intervene in the area, something Syria has been desperately seeking to avoid.”

The US has been demanding that Hezbollah be disarmed, despite the continued threats across the southern Lebanese border from the Israeli army, and is now making allegations of “hit lists” in order to step up the pressure on Damascus. The United Nations, backed by the US, is now carrying out an investigation of the Hariri and Kassir killings.

Robert Fisk, no supporter of Syrian intelligence and its role in Lebanon, writes: “There are rumours in Europe that Washington’s real purpose in supporting the UN probe is to implicate President Assad and have him taken, Milosevic-style, to an international tribunal—producing another ‘regime change’ but without the need for an American invasion.”



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