

Lebanon's election and Washington-style democracy

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It is barely two months since President George W. Bush proclaimed that “the Lebanese people have the right to determine their future, free from domination by a foreign power.” He was extolling the so-called “Cedar revolution”—the protests in Beirut’s Martyrs Square against Syrian occupation that followed the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. Last week, speaking at the International Republican Institute in Washington, Bush called for the new leaders of Lebanon to “build a lasting democracy” after the elections, and again insisted that the polls “must go forward with no outside influence.”

Whilst Syria has since removed its troops and intelligence officers from Lebanese soil, there has been little questioning in the Western media of what happened to the much trumpeted “democracy” and “freedom” that Washington claimed to have revived in Lebanon and intends to spread throughout the Middle East. The protest movement has been disbanded and the expectations among the predominantly student demonstrators that a brighter future would begin without Syrian occupation have given way to disenchantment, while politics have turned into a sectarian power struggle that threatens a return to civil war. Moreover, as the hundreds of thousands of pro-Hezbollah demonstrators in Beirut on March 8 foresaw, the slogans against Syrian outside influence have been used to entrench that of the United States.

The first round of the Lebanese elections saw a mere 28 percent turn out, smaller than the turnout in 2000 under Syrian control. All 19 seats in Beirut went to the Martyr Rafik Hariri List led by Saad Hariri, Rafik’s son, with nine of the candidates unopposed.

Whilst the May 29 part of the election was in the capital only—the rest of the country votes over the next three Sundays in stages, covering the south, Mount Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, and the northern regions—most of these seats are also expected to be taken by candidates who have already been chosen in horse-trading among Lebanon’s political elite. Hariri has formed an anti-Syrian opposition alliance with Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, the Christian

Qornet Shehwan, and the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces that is likely to win a majority of the 128 parliamentary seats.

It is expected that the only constituencies where seats will be seriously contested will be those in mainly Christian regions in the north. The Free Patriotic Movement led by former army commander General Michel Aoun will organise its own list, campaigning for votes from Christians who feel that their traditional dominance of Lebanese politics has been undermined by the Hariri-Jumblatt list.

Aoun returned last month from exile in Paris, where he fled after the defeat of his attempt to lead the rump of the Lebanese army against the Syrian forces in 1990. His populist-style of political leadership—his opponents call him “NapolAoun”—apparently caused his negotiations to set up a joint list with Hariri and Jumblatt, as well as with the Shia Muslim organisations of Amal and Hezbollah in the south, to break down.

The current electoral system, the same as that in the 2000 elections, is structured on the basis of 18 recognised religious sects, with the dominant sect in each multi-seat constituency choosing not only its own candidate, but also the minorities’ representatives. Discussion of the candidates’ policies is virtually nonexistent, with voting for lists following sectarian lines. In line with the pattern set by the French colonialists, Christians remain disproportionately represented in parliament at the expense of the Shiites, who constitute the largest group. In the past, district boundaries were drawn up and manipulated under the supervision of Syrian intelligence forces to favour the election of pro-Syrian candidates.

The key players in the current elections are no longer pro-Syrian, but they have been able to manipulate the system to their advantage.

The *Lebanon Star* published a May 21 comment, “Have Outside Powers Manipulated Lebanon’s Christians?” It explained that the 2000 voting system was insisted on by the US, backed by France and Saudi Arabia. After the deeply divided Lebanese political elite were unable to agree on an

alternative to the present voting system, Washington demanded that the poll go ahead regardless. Elections were to be called within the US's May timetable as a part of the overall Middle East "democracy" campaign.

The *Star* noted: "Even inside the opposition many politicians have spoken of replacing one outside interference with another. Consequently, they say the election law that served one power could easily serve its successor under the same conditions that allow powerful coalitions to 'manipulate or buy' electoral tickets."

Reference to "manipulation" of the Christians means that the Sunni and Druze elites of Hariri and Jumblatt have been able to incorporate Christians into their voting lists to win seats under the 2000 election law, whereas the Christian elite have been unable to do the same. The Christian Maronite patriarch, Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, bitterly complained to the US that under the present system, Christians will be able to directly elect only 14 members of parliament, with a further 50 of the traditional total of 64 Christian seats elected through the list system in Muslim-dominated voting districts.

Sfeir attacked the decision to go ahead with the elections and, in turn, was accused by "unidentified sources" in the Bush administration of "whipping up sectarian sentiments." In March, Sfeir visited Washington and held talks with Bush, advising the US on how to maintain the delicate sectarian balance in a Lebanon no longer dominated by Syria.

It seems that Sfeir was sidelined in the decision to go ahead with the elections. According to the *Star* (May 19), there was an "under-the-table agreement between Jumblatt, Saad Hariri, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri [the leader of Amal], and Hezbollah, who saw the legislation as an opportunity to protect or expand their power base." Sfeir "was kept in the dark on the deal, or key aspects of it."

The *Star* questions whether the Hariri-Jumblatt ticket, with Christians "marginalized," can bring about the changes desired by the US. They claim that US Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman attempted but failed to "mend the rift between Aoun and Jumblatt." But it is highly probable that whatever section of the Lebanese opposition elite is in government, having removed Syria, Washington will now demand the disarmament of Hezbollah, which it still regards as a terrorist organisation.

Part of the US agenda will be to strengthen the Lebanese armed forces. Current Prime Minister Mikati has already visited Arab countries to ask for support in this task. Mikati has also held talks with World Bank Officials to discuss the free market "reforms" that the international banks are demanding of the Lebanese economy, which opposition political leaders are also willing to implement.

Among the majority of the population there is widespread opposition to the present voting system, and a gaping chasm exists between the interests of working people from all religious backgrounds and the wealthy ruling circles. *Al Safir* newspaper carried out a poll in which more than three quarters of people questioned said they supported a democratic secular system, and more than half wanted political representation based on secular parties rather than religious sects.

Meanwhile, Michel Aoun is stirring up right-wing Christian political resentment against the Hariri-Jumblatt list in advance of the next round of the elections. With his characteristic demagogy, he denounced the opposition leaders as "responsible for 15 years of corruption and misleading the country." They had only recently adopted an anti-Syrian stance, were betraying their popular base, and were "looking out for their own interests." Calling himself the "real opposition" to Syria, he accused the Hariri-Jumblatt ticket of "exploiting an emotional state that occurred after the martyrdom of Premier Hariri to blackmail people" into voting for them.

In his most recent pronouncements, Aoun has also called for a strengthening of the army and the "liberation" of institutions "from the grip of the security regime," by which he apparently means not only Syria, but the bulk of the present political establishment that had worked under Syrian intelligence. Echoing the demands of the pro-Israel Christian right, he also called for "more efficient foreign diplomacy" to "remove the dangers of settling Palestinians in Lebanon."

Amongst the worst atrocities committed during the civil war were the massacres of thousands of Palestinian refugees at Tel al-Zaatar in 1976 and at Sabra and Shatilla in 1982, by the Christian Phalangist militia with the support of Israel. Aoun is now calling for the removal of the 200,000 or more Palestinian refugees still forced to live, disenfranchised and poverty-stricken, in camps in Lebanon.



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