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Lebanon: Scenarios for the Presidential Election

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The Lebanese parliament is due to elect a new president for a six-year term during the sixty-day period beginning September 25. As is often the case with Lebanon, numerous domestic and foreign factors complicate what should be a straightforward political process.

First of all there is a legal/constitutional dispute between the two major blocs, the Sunni/Druze/Christian alliance headed by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the Shi'i/Christian bloc led by Hizballah. Siniora's bloc, currently holding a parliamentary majority, insists on continuing to govern despite the resignation of Shi'i ministers in November 2006. Hizballah and its allies claim that this violates the unwritten 1943 National Pact regulating relations among confessional groups, as well as the constitution. They insist on a consensus democracy in which all sects are represented in the parliament and the cabinet, regardless of the outcome of parliamentary elections.

The second domestic dispute is over the insistence of Hizballah, validated by its struggle against Israel, to maintain its state within the Lebanese state—and to try to take control of the Lebanese nation while pretending to preserve the roles of the other sects. To accomplish this, Hizballah relies on the Shi'i community (the most populous in Lebanon), its military strength, and its foreign relations, assets which the other sects cannot match. The Siniora bloc rejects Hizballah domination and is attempting to prevent it by—like Hizballah—relying on foreign support, and also by trying to convince Hizballah that it will succeed only in destroying Lebanon.

The major foreign factor is the sharp confrontation between Iran and Syria on the one hand, and the United States and most of the Arab and international community on the other. This confrontation has found ideal ground in Lebanon due to the presence of a Hizballah army representing the military, political, security, and sectarian interests of Iran; the presence of Syrian allies who will have no political future if Lebanon gains true independence; the existence of no less important

factions that refuse to allow Lebanon to be dominated by Syria and Iran; and the determination of the United States and the international community to prevent such domination, even if they cannot gain victory for their own Lebanese allies.

None of these disputes will be resolved in the short time before the presidential election. Similar to what happened during the civil war that began in 1975, the Lebanese factions have lost their independence and have become incapable of solving their own problems. At the moment each group is pleased with its foreign allies, but a time will come when they will recognize their incapacity and that their allies are taking advantage of them. Even then they will not be able to do anything, perhaps because by then Lebanon will have lost its justification for existence or the entire region will have begun to fragment.

In the current predicament, the Lebanese have five options. The first is for all parties to agree on a truce, rather than a solution, and then elect a president who will oversee this truce. His job would be to maintain the present situation with some improvements in living conditions, and perhaps to ward off the specter of greater strife. The second is to form a government of national unity, in which Hizballah and the opposition are an empowered minority, which would rule the nation temporarily if a compromise president cannot be agreed upon. The third would be to form a provisional government, perhaps headed by the military, to maintain security and prepare for the election of a new president. The fourth option is to elect for a two-year term a president who is acceptable to all parties (perhaps because he will be relatively weak and unable to rule) while waiting for an end to the confrontation to determine in what direction Lebanon is headed. The fifth possibility is to delay the presidential election with the agreement of all parties. The parliamentary majority could elect the president from within (although this is contrary to the constitution), or the current government could be allowed to exercise the powers of the president for a time. This would compel the Iranian and Syrian-supported opposition—particularly current President Lahoud—to form a new government, and perhaps to elect a new president. But it would also be a step on the path of partition, and could open the door to further conflict and perhaps civil war.

Which of these scenarios is likely? Unfortunately, the fourth and fifth scenarios are the most probable, although there is some hope for the third. However, we must not resign ourselves to this fate as there are more than two months before Lahoud's term ends, during which time anything could happen.

Sarkis Naoum is a Lebanese journalist. Kevin Burnham translated this article from Arabic.