



## *The long road to a new Lebanese national contract*

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*Part of the ingrained and predominant discourse of Lebanese politics is characterized by visionary and promising elements which culminate in the image of a dream: the dream of building up Lebanon, a viable Lebanon, a stable and flourishing one and above all a sovereign Lebanon. This notion of a dream has been used by many politicians - prominent among them former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri - as one of their favourite buzzwords and has turned into a useful rhetorical means which captures Lebanese sentiments as it nurtures hope of a better future. Against the background of forthcoming elections and prearrangements for the launching of an international tribunal aimed at convicting al-Hariri's murderers the question arises what has happened to the dream: has it been deferred, become extinct or lived on?*

On February 14, 2009 hundreds of thousands of people convened in Beirut to commemorate the fourth anniversary of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri's assassination. The thousands of people who gathered in downtown Beirut's Martyrs' Square were heartily welcomed by the members of the March 14 alliance who emphasized in their speeches the significance of parliamentary elections:

'The upcoming elections on June 7, 2009 are a defining moment in Lebanon's democracy; we look forward to elections in a democratic atmosphere, in compliance with the law, under Arab and international monitoring as required by the current state of affairs. I call upon all the Lebanese parties to rise above differences and adopt constructive dialogue; to maintain our co-living and steer Lebanon away from any form of violence,' Saad al-Hariri, leader of the parliamentary majority stressed in his speech at the rally. However, he also stated that the March 14 alliance would 'handle the results of the polls in a manner that respects democracy and restores the principle of power transition in Lebanon', implying that his party will not enter into a coalition government in case it and its allies lose in the forthcoming elections.

Meanwhile, the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt turned his attention to his neighbouring opponents in particular Syria while reiterating his fierce critique of the latter: 'None of the Lebanese are our enemies ... But we will not compromise or apologize when it comes to the Syrian regime,' he said. 'Alongside Israel, our enemies are tyrannical regimes that want to block our progress and development,' he stated.

Former President and Phalange Party leader Amin Gemayel, whose son Pierre was killed in November 2006, explained to the people that the elections stand for a 'choice between our camp which wants freedom, sovereignty and independence and the other camp which wants a return to hegemony and foreign tutelage.' Moreover, he insinuated that the March 8 (Hizbullah-led) alliance strives for replacing 'Beirut with Tehran and Tripoli with Damascus.'

Furthermore, Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces (LF) stated that the 'Cedar Revolution' also called the 'Independence Intifada', reconstituted Lebanon's freedom, sovereignty, and independence. 'When asked about the achievements of the Cedar Revolution, we say that without such a revolution Lebanon would have remained a country without freedom and liberties,' he told the crowd on Saturday February 14.

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The parliamentary elections - which will take place on Sunday June 7, 2009, rather than taking place on separate days for different areas which was the case in the past - will decide whether the Sunni-led coalition (March 14 alliance) backed by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia preserves its slim majority or loses to Hizbullah-led Shi'a alliance (March 8 Alliance), supported by Syria and Iran. Needless to say, that a victory of Hizbullah and its allies would lead to a huge setback for the Western-backed parties that achieved a majority in the previous elections in 2005 in the light of large anti-Syrian sentiments following the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri.

Additionally, the speakers of the March 14 Alliance addressed during the commemoration of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri's assassination on Saturday February 14, 2009 the issue of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon which is due to begin its work on March 1 in The Hague in order to condemn former Prime Minister al-Hariri's killers. In this context, his son, told the masses on Saturday's February 14, 2009 rally that 'today we stand at the threshold of the international tribunal. The hour of truth and justice has come and your voice will overcome that of the oppressors and we will know the truth.' Al-Hariri's killing represents one of the worst actions of political violence in Lebanon since the 1975-1990 civil war, and later led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops which had been present on Lebanese soil for 29 years. Syria has been largely accused of the killing of the ex-Premier minister. So far, seven suspects have been arrested whereas four of them are Lebanese generals while senior Syrian officials have been involved in the UN investigation as well. A delegation from the UN International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC) traveled to Syria on February 13 taking with it a list of names of the officials who are meant to be questioned. However, Damascus has disputed any association with al-Hariri's death and President Bashar Assad stated several times in the past that any Syrian suspect would be convicted in Syria although Syria is obligated to surrender any suspects.

Nevertheless, after the rally a bout of political violence broke out between March 14 and March 8 adherents in several neighborhoods in Beirut while people were on their way home resulting in the killing of Lufti Zeineddine, a PSP supporter on February 14. He was stabbed in front of his son and died on Sunday in the hospital. Additionally, 30 people were injured. Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir used his Sunday sermon to criticize the incident by posing the question 'When will the Lebanese learn that Lebanon is for all of them?' Additionally, al-Hariri characterized Zeineddine as 'another martyr for our quest for Lebanon's existence, God willing, justice will prevail,' he said. On Monday a huge army search took place for some 50 suspects in connection with the various attacks.

Two days after al-Hariri's remembrance Hizbullah commemorated the assassination of military commander Imad Mugniyeh in 2008. Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah addressed the crowd in the Beirut suburb Rweiss via a video link. His message was two-pronged as on the one hand he demanded civil peace and claimed restraint alluding to the violence which erupted after the rally on Saturday. He addressed all leaders and prompted them to minimize tension in their political rhetoric while referring to Lufti Zeineddine as a martyr and expressing his condolences to Zeineddine's family and to the PSP. On the other hand, he emphasized that the resistance had the right to own an anti-air defence system in order to confront the Israelis while warning any future government of Israel of defeat if it dares to attack or invade Lebanon again. Regarding the elections Sayyed Nasrallah stressed once again his commitment to consensus and partnership in ruling Lebanon after the elections: 'If we win the elections we will ask the parliamentary minority to join the government. But if they insist on refusing to join, our team will form a government on its own and govern with a national perspective.'



Inextricably linked to the different statements made by both sides is Speaker Nabih Berri's critique of MP Saad al-Hariri for refusing to take part in the next cabinet if his party loses the June 7 elections. 'I regret to hear this from Hariri and other politicians who know that this country cannot be ruled without partnership between rival parties,' Berri told the pan-Arab daily Asharq Al-Awsat. 'This has been the case ever since Lebanon's independence in 1943. Any party that tries to change this path would end up losing and inflicting a loss on the entire country.'

It seems as if both sides (the March 14 and the March 8 alliance) employ different events in order to boost their position in the light of the forthcoming elections. Precisely, the March 14 alliance incorporates the assassination of al-Hariri, the assumed Syrian involvement in the case and the Iranian/Syrian support for Hizbullah in its discourse in order to create 'us-versus-them dichotomies'. This exclusionary mindset which leads to the externalization of the 'other' and the essentialization of the 'self' equates Hizbullah with hegemony, backwardness, tyranny and foreign tutelage and the March 14 alliance with independence, progress, freedom and sovereignty. This was epitomized in the various speeches during the rally on Saturday whose turnout was considered by many analysts as an indicator of voters' mood before the elections. 'Their ability to rally people will be carried over at the ballot box,' Osama Safa, head of the Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies, said.

Hizbullah and its allies on the other hand, put a lot of effort into capturing the popular sentiments of the Arab world. They are aware of the fact that to a large part their popularity is based on their explicit critique and actions against Israel and the U. S. According to Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, lecturer at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, Sayyed Nasrallah's popularity cannot be explained by his 'democratic credentials' but by his vehement opposition to Israel and the U. S. while 'the existence of Israel provides the very *raison d'être* of movements such as Hizbullah'. Additionally, Hizbullah strives toward reducing fear among the Lebanese people as it has often been perceived and presented as an exclusive transnational Shi'a party; therefore it has declared the Palestinian cause under its management and allied with Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) while being aware of the fact that the Christian community in Lebanon is fractious as its main parties support rival alliances. Even its rhetoric makes very clear that it wants to place itself into the confines of the Lebanese nation-state as it has a clear political agenda for Lebanon and (re-)acts to particular national circumstances - for instance, it rivals the state in offering social services as the former has almost stopped providing these. In doing so, it becomes a visible and respectable part of the political landscape in Lebanon.

Thus, the situation in Lebanon seems to be still characterized by polarization which fosters merely political standstill, and the threat of internal violence. However, lately there is some talk about the emergence of a 'centrist' or 'national' bloc prior to the parliamentary elections which nurtures hope to the fulfilment of Lebanon's dream. The idea has already been accepted gladly by some politicians. Most prominent among them is Walid Jumblatt one of Lebanon's most well-known and influential leaders who overzealously expressed his enthusiasm for such a formation. He was quoted earlier as telling the pan-Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat that there would be no solution to Lebanon's political crisis in the absence of a centrist bloc that is allied to the president. It is ironic that a person such as Jumblatt who could be compared to a chameleon due to his several political transformations is eager to provide a firm center of gravity. Nevertheless, that is exactly the problem: the last thing Lebanon is in need of is another party under the custody of a patron. Particularly, if politicians care about Lebanon, Lebanon's vision and are genuinely interested in offering voters a real alternative to the two poles available they have to move beyond appearances. The following months will show whether Lebanon's politicians are ready for this transformation; for now, Lebanon's dream has been deferred.