



COMMENTARY

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Lebanon Imperilled as Prime Minister Resigns Under Duress

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The resignation of Lebanon's Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, was the result of intensifying pressure between the pro-Assad and anti-Assad camps in Lebanon and the region. At a minimum, it ushers in a period of further drift and weakening of the country's political and security institutions. At worst, it might herald a serious entry of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon, a showdown between the country's factions, and challenges to its basic constitutional order.

Lebanon's leaders and foreign friends should recognize the depth of the peril and work to find a way forward to form a new government, appoint a new, effective head of the internal security forces, and hold fresh parliamentary elections.

The immediate cause of the prime minister's resignation was the refusal of the pro-Assad March 8 majority in his own government to prolong the term of the director general of the Internal Security Forces, General Ashraf Rifi, and their refusal to accept the appointment of members to the Supervisory Commission for Election Campaigns. While Hezbollah and the March 8 coalition have extensive influence in the army—particularly army intelligence—the internal security forces have remained outside of their influence and close to the anti-Assad March 14 coalition.

The head of the internal security's intelligence branch, Major General Wissam al-Hassan, was assassinated last October, and March 14 leaders accused the Assad regime and its allies. Rifi was seen by his supporters as the last man standing against attempts by March 8 to cripple or take over the internal security institution. Both al-Hassan and Rifi are Sunni Muslims and from Mikati's home region of north Lebanon and Rifi's tenure ends on 1 April.

The disagreement over the election commission relates to the urgent priority of holding parliamentary elections. The current parliament's term is set to expire in a few months, and in the absence of a new electoral law for the country, both Mikati and President Michel Suleiman insisted on respecting constitutional deadlines and scheduling elections for June. The current law—known as the 1960s law—was passed in 2008, with the proviso that it was only to be used for “one time only” to hold parliamentary elections in 2009—hence its current legal status is disputed.

Holding elections under this law was likely to produce a parliament similar to the current one, where March 8 does not have a majority and centrist Druze leader Walid Jumblatt holds the balance of power with his small bloc of seven out of 128 deputies. Appointing members of the electoral commission was a last step in completing the legally required preparations for holding elections in June.

Blocking these appointments and now the prime minister's resignation mean that elections can no longer be held in June. Not only is Lebanon facing an immediate future without an empowered government and head of internal security, but soon without a legitimate parliament as well.

The March 14 coalition welcomed Mikati's resignation, which it had been calling for since he formed the government almost two years ago. Mikati had agreed to form a Hezbollah-dominated government in early 2011, over March 14's objections. This was after Hezbollah and its allies had brought down the previous government headed by March 14 leader Saad Hariri.

For the pro-Assad March 8 coalition, the resignation of Mikati and a government that they dominated is a partial setback. But they apparently had more interest in blocking Rifi's tenure and the June elections than in maintaining the government.

Constitutionally, the president is now obligated to hold consultations with members of parliament to name a new prime minister, and the designated prime minister must then try to put together a government that is acceptable to the president and can gain a majority in parliament. Any new government would have the immediate tasks of naming a new head of internal security and holding overdue parliamentary elections.

In the absence of agreement over a new election law and given the deep divisions in the country—particularly between Sunni and Shia parties—it is hard to imagine any credible Sunni politician accepting or succeeding in this task. Lebanon is likely to drift with a caretaker government for many months.

On a more positive note, the resignation of Mikati opens the way for a resumption of national dialogue meetings. President Suleiman called for these talks to start again several months ago,

but the March 14 coalition made Mikati's resignation a precondition to rejoining the talks. If these talks resume, they might provide a venue for calming tensions, agreeing on an election law, forming a government, and breaking the current impasse.

But the main political players in Lebanon are still in a standoff. The Sunni Future Movement surmises that the tide in Syria is turning in its favour and prefers to wait until its hand strengthens rather than search for a deal now with Hezbollah and its allies. Hezbollah, on the other hand, is worried that the war against the Assad regime, which is backed by Arab Gulf states, Turkey, and the West, will be extended into Lebanon. It is eager to show no signs of weakness and to close up political and security loopholes that could represent a risk to Hezbollah in the near future.

Indeed, the precarious stability and official neutrality toward the Syrian conflict that had prevailed during Mikati's tenure might be coming to an end. Hezbollah wants to form a government that is more clearly on Assad's side, to gain control over the internal security forces, and to extend its control more fully over the Army command. But this does not appear possible given the president's firm position against a strongly partisan government, as well as Jumblatt's insistence on an inclusive and centrist way forward.

Without national agreement and revived political and security institutions, however, both Sunni and Shia armed groups might take matters further into their own hands. Hezbollah already has an extensive military apparatus. And in this climate, radical Sunni groups—who have been increasingly armed and vocal—are likely to proliferate and gain momentum. Clashes between Sunni and Alawite groups in Tripoli might be the first to escalate. Simmering tensions in Beirut and Sidon might also get worse.

Nevertheless, the basic strategy of the Future Movement is to wait for the outcome of the battle for Syria, and reassess the situation afterwards rather than seek a confrontation now. Whether this will be enough to keep the Sunni and Shia communities from coming to blows, or whether more radical elements in both camps will precipitate a fight is impossible to predict.

If Lebanon enters into a period without an empowered government, internal security force, and a legitimate parliament, it could be a time of profound institutional decline, similar to that after 1976 and the country's first bout of civil war. At that point, a return to political and security normalcy required a fundamental renegotiation of the national pact that was only reached with the Taif Agreement in 1989.

Hezbollah has not hidden its disdain for the ineffective state that was produced by the arrangements of the Taif Agreement. Some Shia commentators also point to the limited prominence of Shia posts in the executive branch. In a recent speech, Hassan Nasrallah suggested the formation of a Constituent Assembly to renegotiate and draft a new constitution for the country. If the constitutional order further weakens Lebanon, there might be no turning

back: it could unravel the Taif Agreement and make it harder to renegotiate complex power-sharing agreements among the country's various communities. And if Hezbollah feels increasingly cornered regionally, it might move to consolidate its community's dominance in the political system, similar to what happened in Iraq.

The risk of a serious political and security downward spiral is real. Lebanon's leaders as well as the international backers of the two main factions—Iran and Russia on one side, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Europe, and the United States on the other—must recognize that as they prosecute a proxy war in Syria, its neighbour, Lebanon, is at risk of spiralling out of control. All parties should move quickly to find common ground on a parliamentary election law, encourage the formation of a new power-sharing government that can appoint a head of the internal security forces, and hold fresh parliamentary elections. Only then can Lebanon's precarious stability be restored, giving it the chance to survive the Syrian civil war raging next door.

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