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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

BRIEFING PAPER:

LEBANON / The entrenchment of the government crisis

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Date of Publication: 14 June 2011

Observatorio Electoral

Taller de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

www.election-watch.org
www.opemam.org

ISSN: being processed

www.observatorioelectoral.es

The last four and a half months since the fall of Saad Hariri's government have been a period of dialectical confrontation and political dealing which have still not produced any results.

On January 12th, the ten opposition ministers and an independent minister presented their resignation leading to the fall of the national unity government formed after the legislative elections of 2009. The reason was the imminent publication of the indictment for Rafik Hariri's assassination in February 2005. Hezbollah and M8 (March 8)¹ had spent several months trying to halt the process and de-legitimize the inquiry commission and the international tribunal, as many leaks pointed to the Shiite organisation's involvement in the assassination.

On January 25th, Najib Mikati was appointed Prime Minister after a series of last minute political changes and thanks to the support of M8 and certain more or less independent parliamentarians, such as Walid Jumblatt. This first step was solved quite quickly, but the greatest difficulty would be the negotiation process prior to the formation of the government. Initially M8 and Mikati in particular tried to incorporate M14 into the process. Leaders of the coalition headed by Saad Hariri spent more than one month negotiating individually and collectively the conditions for their participation, and had no success. The existing differences of opinion regarding issues such as the international tribunal, Hezbollah's weapons and the distribution of ministries made it impossible to come to an agreement. Nevertheless, M14's refusal to participate did not make things easier for Mikati. Four months later, there are still many obstacles hindering the formation of the government. To begin with, the leader from Tripoli is not able to decide about the type of government he wants to establish. The problem which impedes him taking that decision is that he must reconcile the personal ambitions of several stakeholders and, at the same time, create an executive which is not seen as a threat by the sociopolitical sphere that supports M14 or the international community (especially France, the USA and Saudi Arabia).

In this sense, there are certain ministries which are particularly troublesome: those related to national security, especially the Ministry of Interior. In 2008, after months of a presidential vacuum and the country being on the verge of a civil war, it was agreed that the figure of the president would be turned into an independent figure who is able to lessen the conflicts between M8 and M14². For that purpose, the new head of state, Michel Suleiman, was assigned a number of ministries which he allocated to different figures with low political profiles who were loyal to him. Two of them were the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense. However, after the fall of the government, Michel Aoun, leader of the main Christian faction in the Parliament and a key component of M8, demanded around 12 ministries, among which the Ministry of Interior. In this context, President Michel Sleiman and Aoun have got tangled up for weeks in a harsh dialectical fight, straining even more the complex political situation of the country. Yet, after several weeks of stagnation, the situation now seems to be moving forward. For the time being, what is certain is that the outgoing minister, Ziad Baroud, will not continue in his position and that several names

¹ M8 and M14 refer to the two political blocs that dominate the Lebanese political scene. M8 is formed by Hezbollah and Amal, and supported by the parliamentary group of Michel Aoun, Walid Jumblatt and a series of political leaders and dignitaries of all types of creed and ideology. M14 is headed by Saad Hariri and his Future Movement, and consists of several Christian parties, such as Kataeb and the Lebanese Forces, and a range of parties and leaders of lesser political weight.

² This was negotiated and agreed on during the Doha Agreement on May 21st, 2008.

are being tossed around as possible candidates. The chosen one will be responsible for the organisation of the next legislative elections, due in 2013, and will be a key element whenever the International Tribunal starts its work. Nevertheless, the distribution of ministries such as the Ministry of Justice, of Finance and of Telecommunications remains at a standstill. Although the negotiations around these ministries have not gained so much relevance, their distribution is still quite complicated, due to the central role they play in the national political game. In this case, Aoun stands out as the most intransigent leader. In the meantime Hezbollah and, especially, Amal, which are more flexible on these issues, are trying to mediate among their members to find a solution to this situation. With regard to the other principal leader of the new majority, Walid Jumblatt, he is keeping a low profile but over the last weeks has come back forcefully into the ongoing debate, publicly criticizing his partners and putting pressure on them in order to speed up the formation of the government.

In addition, Mikati is having problems with the Sunni faction in the government. Hariri's and his allies' absence from the executive leads to a certain loss of legitimacy among the Sunni population. The Hariris and their allies do not monopolize fidelity from this sector of the population as is sometimes affirmed. There are important Sunni leaders who support M8 and Mikati's legitimacy has been acknowledged even by the Republic's mufti, *Sheikh* Mohammed Rashid Qabbani. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that most of the Sunni population, which is the majority of the country, spins in the circle of influence of Hariri and his group of supporters. In this sense, a government which is to be acknowledged and supported by the Sunni community must definitely rely on certain figures which count with this faction's approval.

Now Syria's complex situation comes on top of these problems, which are characteristic of the Lebanese institutional and political system. The Syrian government is a central agent in any decision-making process in Lebanon, as are other regional and western governments. Supporting M8, Syrian mediation was crucial for the formation of the government. The internal situation in Syria has obviously made the Syrian government push the Lebanese problem into the background. Besides, the crisis is increasing instability in Lebanon and is generating a lot of doubt. Conflict between the opponents and the supporters of the Syrian regime is being reproduced on Lebanese territory and especially in the North, an area strongly influenced by Syria, where serious altercations have already taken place. Besides, the uncertain future of the Syrian regime is generating great uncertainty among the country's political class, given that the position and the influence of some of the most relevant figures in the country are closely related to support from the Syrian government, as for example is the case of Hezbollah.

Meanwhile, on several different fronts the country's situation keeps getting worse. The socioeconomic situation has worsened considerably over the last months due to the rise of petrol prices, prison riots or US pressure on the Lebanese banking system. Besides, there is the international tribunal's shadow looming over Lebanon. In the meantime, M14 and especially Hariri have disappeared from the public scene. The Sunni leader has adopted a very low profile, leaving behind the belligerent tone and the maximalist claims which characterized the coalition in the beginning. It seems that they have decided to let the M8 coalition get bogged down in its own contradictions.

In short, the outlook for Lebanon is complicated, as it is not expected that the situation will clear up in the short term. At this moment, the international community, of great importance when taking any decision in Lebanon, has other

priorities in the region. But above all, it is the Syrian conflict that will make the decision-making process more complicated. However, a new rapprochement between Mikati and the M14, with Hezbollah's approval, might make things easier. In fact, the media has pointed out over the few last days that this could be one of Mikati's priorities at this moment.