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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

LEBANON/ Lebanon's government in crisis

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On January 12th, the ten March 8 government ministers, as well as the independent minister, Adnan Sayyed Hussein, presented their resignation to the President of the Republic, thereby bringing down the national unity government formed in the fall of 2009.

The causes of this new governmental crisis are related to the publication of the indictment for the murder of Rafik Hariri and 22 others on 14 February 2005. The death of former Prime Minister Hariri provoked a social and political earthquake in Lebanon, the most notable consequence of which was the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country, after 30 years presence in Lebanon (26/04/2005). The other major consequence was the recomposition of the political spectrum, which would thereafter be divided into two main groups: March 14 a heterogeneous group led by Hariri's heirs, whose common cause is rejection of Syria; and March 8, led by Hezbollah, whose main feature is its proximity to Syria and rejection of Western intervention in Lebanon.

In this context, and with the explicit support of France and the United States, the political and family heirs of Hariri pressed for an international investigation into his murder to be undertaken. At that time, the Syrian regime was under suspicion. On 02 April 2005, an international investigation committee led by the prosecutor Detlev Mehlis got underway. As the investigation progressed, and aware of the difficulties that holding a trial would suppose in Lebanon, March 14 requested that the UN create an independent international tribunal. In January 2007, the United Nations and the Lebanese government signed the relevant accords to establish this tribunal.

Predictably, March 14 had to face up to the outright rejection of the opposition, which refused to reach any kind of agreement. However, on 14 May 2007, Prime Minister Siniora, sent a letter to the UN Secretary General, informing him that it had been impossible to reach an agreement with the opposition, but that thanks to the backing of a majority in parliament, he thereby requested that the Secretary General submit to the Security Council the final request for the creation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). On May 30th, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1757 ratifying the creation of the tribunal. Thus, the STL was established without the approval of the President of the Republic, Emile Lahoud, and against the wishes of March 8. In late 2007, with the end of Lahoud's presidential term imminent, Lebanon entered a period of pronounced political tension over the question of his succession. The tribunal at that time stopped making political and media headlines. It was not until the spring / summer of 2010 that the subject once again came back to the forefront.

Since the German newspaper Der Spiegel announced in May 2009, based on information from sources close to the inquiry commission, claims that several members of Hezbollah could be indicted by the tribunal, speculation about the Shiite organisation's involvement has been on the increase. Indeed, the possible involvement of the Syrian regime is no longer considered a possibility. So much so that Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated prime minister, had to publicly apologise for his accusations against Syria in the past. Hezbollah has responded to this wave of advances decisively. After the May 2010 municipal elections ended, Hezbollah put its efficient propaganda machine into action and began a massive campaign against the court and its supporters. The Shiite organization fears the consequences that an accusation of this nature might have on its image and support, both nationally and regionally. It should be noted that a significant sector of Lebanon's Christian population, and even certain Sunni sectors currently support the organisation. A well-founded accusation against Hezbollah

could put an end to these key endorsements. Similarly, Hezbollah is well admired as an organisation throughout the region for its fight against Israel, and being involved in the assassination of a Sunni political leader of the prestige of Rafik Hariri would do much to damage its image and credibility.

Hezbollah has drawn up a twofold strategy to handle the situation. On the one hand, it has tried to discredit the court by trying to prove the politicisation of the institution and serious meddling by the United States, France and Israel in all matters relating to it. The truth is that the court and the investigation have been used as a political weapon, especially in the beginning, when it was used to force Syria out of the country and discredit the pro-Syrian sector. In fact, there have been several irregularities in the process, especially during the time in which prosecutor Deltev Mehlis led the investigation (April 2005 - January 2006) in which several false testimonies were made. On the other hand, in 2010 it was discovered that an Israeli spy ring had infiltrated the country's telecommunications. Given that the tribunal's investigations are based largely on wiretaps, the issue has generated doubts. This has given the opposition an opening to reaffirm its idea that the tribunal is an Israeli weapon to attack Hezbollah.

On the other hand, Hezbollah has tried to put pressure on the Lebanese political class to distance themselves from the tribunal, or even paralyse its operations. In this sense it has been unsuccessful. Hariri cannot afford to compromise on this point. After all it is his own father's murder. But besides sentimental reasons, the Sunni community could not forgive Saad caving in to Hezbollah on an issue like this. First of all, due to ever increasing intercommunity hatred in recent years due to politicians' irresponsibility in using community issues for political purposes. Secondly because, Rafik Hariri is probably the most emblematic and beloved leader of the Sunni community, even today, five years after his death. On the other hand, if Saad Hariri gave in, he could also have problems with his Christian allies, who are very belligerent with respect to Hezbollah.

Against this backdrop, tension has grown as the months have passed, until last November, when Syria and Saudi Arabia initiated a negotiation process to try to calm matters. March 8 announced that its conditions were the following:

1. The withdrawal of the Lebanese government's financial backing for the court. When the accord establishing the tribunal was passed, the executive undertook to finance 49% of its budget.
2. The removal of Lebanese judges from the TEL. Of the nine judges that make up the court, four are Lebanese.
3. The cancellation of the treaty of cooperation between the Lebanese government and the court.

According to Hezbollah, the talks had progressed in a positive way and an agreement was close, until on 11 January, Saudi Arabia decided to unilaterally put an end to the negotiations, under pressure from the United States. Saudi Emir Faisal said however, that the Saudis had decided to give up the talks given the lack of progress in the negotiations, due to Damascus' lack of cooperation. Whatever the case may be, the end of the talks brought down the national unity government one day later.

Since then, tension around the country has only increased, and especially so after the prosecutor Daniel Bellemare delivered the indictment to the court on 17 January. That same Monday night, incidents took place in strategic locations around Beirut. Three days later, efforts by Turkey and Qatar, who had taken over from the Saudis and Syrians in an attempt to re-establish talks between the

government and opposition, collapsed and both countries announced they were abandoning the talks.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese political class was gearing up for the election of a new prime minister with all eyes placed on the Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt. After years of militancy against Syria, in the fall of 2009 the Druze leader decided to abandon the ranks of March 14 and position himself as an independent leader, while making gestures to Syria and March 8. The fall of the government forced Jumblatt to define his alliances more clearly, since his position as leader of a parliamentary group of eleven MPs would determine the colour of the next government. Finally on Friday 21 January, he made a public appearance to announce that he would support Syria and the resistance. However, the situation was still not entirely clear, given that the Druze leader did not have the support of all his MPs. Finally, six of his eleven MPs voted for March 8's candidate.

While March 14 made clear from the outset that its candidate would again be Saad Hariri, March 8 did not reveal its choice until Sunday the 23rd. With less than 24 hours to go before consultations began for the election of a new prime minister, Najib Mikati, a tycoon originally from the northern city of Tripoli, presented his candidacy. The 55 year old Sunni had already been prime minister in 2005 following the death of Rafik Hariri, and has always been more or less linked to the pro-Syrian sector. This time however, he sought to present himself as an independent. Hours after the announcement, Hassan Nasrallah announced his organisation's support for the new candidate and after him, all the March 08 leaders. Finally, between 24 and 25 January, President Michel Suleiman called all the parliamentarians in for consultations and Najib Mikati prevailed, with 68 votes compared to 60 for Saad Hariri (there are 128 seats in the Lebanese parliament).

Mikati's election has been received as a coup d'état by much of the Sunni community. The truth is that Mikati has very little legitimacy among the Sunni community. Broadly speaking, one could say that he has virtually no support outside of Tripoli, and even in his home city the Hariri family has more popular support than Mikati. In these circumstances, Tripoli and its surroundings have become a tinderbox. Mikati and Hezbollah have reached out to March 14 to participate in the new government, but Saad Hariri has flatly rejected any collaboration. So, to govern the new government may well have many problems. Internal instability is matched by the international community's rejection. Israel has already announced that it considers the fact of a Lebanese government controlled by Hezbollah to be "very, very dangerous." Meanwhile countries with a lot of influence in Lebanon, like France, the United States or Saudi Arabia, have refused to comment officially, but are expected to be disinclined towards the new government.

Although this might seem to be yet another episode in a Sunni-Shiite conflict, it is important to observe closely how the different Christian camps behave henceforth. The Christian population is divided. An important part of this population, led by Michel Aoun, backs March 8, whereas the Gemayel family and the Lebanese Forces back March 14. Thus far, it can be said that the Christian supporters of March 14 have no intention of ceding an inch to March 8. Furthermore, they have shown themselves to be ready, predisposed even, to intervening in case the Sunni-Shiite conflict gets complicated. The leader of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea has repeatedly said that this is a problem for the country as a whole, and as such, Christians have a duty to fight for their country. In the case of Aoun's followers, the situation is different. Generally speaking, his

voters are relatively moderate in their political positions and are far less prepared, ideologically, tactically and materially speaking, to intervene in case of a conflict. In any case, the interference of either Christian group in a possible confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites could be devastating for the country.

With matters thus, the future looks uncertain for Lebanon. The publication of the indictment by the court, scheduled for next spring will be key in this regard. If indeed Hezbollah is accused, or if some of its members are, publicly and with hard evidence, the consequences could be serious for Lebanon. In fact the court does have the possibility of keeping the investigators' report secret, at least in part, if it is considered necessary. Probably this would be one of the most desirable options to avoid destabilising the country. In any case, the report is due to be published within the next few months and if by then, the political class has still not reached a deal or has not effectively calmed the mood of its supporters, the country may already be in dire straits.