

November 8, 2007

No. 34

Lebanon's Dual Crisis

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Humor, especially black humor, sometimes captures political reality even better than the most incisive analysis. According to a joke popular in some circles in Lebanon, an ambulance on the way to the hospital signifies one of two things: another bombing of an anti-Syrian personality or another Shi'ite baby about to be born. The two possibilities represent, respectively, the focus of Lebanon's near-term government crisis, whose outcome is uncertain, and the essence of its longer-term identity crisis, whose outcome is virtually foreordained.

The current political crisis revolves around the efforts of a Hizbullah-led and Syrian-supported alliance to paralyze or overthrow the government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora and, more specifically, to ensure that pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, whose (extended) term of office expires at the end of November, is succeeded by a candidate equally amenable to Syria (and Hizbullah). According to the constitution of Lebanon, the President (who must be a Maronite Christian) is elected by the 128 members of the National Assembly. In the first ballot, a two-thirds majority is required but after that an absolute majority (i.e., 65) is sufficient. The so-called March 14 coalition which sustains Siniora's government holds 68 seats, theoretically enough to prevail on a second ballot, but the inability of the two sides to settle on an agreed candidate, coupled with the threat of the opposition to boycott proceedings and take more severe actions if a president unacceptable to them is elected by a narrow majority, has caused the presidential vote to be postponed twice, most recently in the last week of October. The next scheduled vote is on November 12, just 12 days before Lahoud is obliged to leave the Presidential Palace.

But that is not the only reason for the sense of urgency. Since the last parliamentary election in 2005, the majority coalition has shrunk due to the assassination of at least five anti-Syrian Deputies (along with several other prominent anti-Syrian politicians and public personalities). The latest victim was Antoine Ghanem, whose killing led others in the March 14 coalition to take even more rigorous security measures, restrict their movements, and even go into hiding. Syrian has strenuously denied any involvement in these killings, but the fact that the wave of violence has touched only those in the anti-Syrian camp reinforces the suspicion that the longer the ballot is postponed, the more

likely it is to be decided by bullets and bombs; according to Saad al-Hariri, leader of the March 14 parliamentary coalition and son of assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, both he and Siniora are currently the targets of a Syrian plot.

Some last minute compromise may yet emerge, and much speculation focuses on General Michel Suleiman, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. If there is no agreement, the deadlocked presidential vote will precipitate perhaps the most severe political crisis since the end of the Lebanese civil war. At best, it could lead to the establishment of parallel governments – perhaps following Lahoud's "emergency" extension of his own term -- and the end of even the pretense of a (re-)united country. At worst, it could ignite another civil war, for which certain elements are already preparing. But even if the stalemate is somehow broken, it will only postpone Lebanon's identity crisis, which is grounded in longer-term socio-political trends.

The most important of these is the demographic shift in favor of Shi'ites. Because of confessional sensitivities, no census has been taken in Lebanon since 1932. But it is universally acknowledged that the Muslim population, and particularly its Shi'ite component, has been constantly growing at the expense of the Christian (and especially Maronite) population – because of both higher birth rates among Shi'ites and higher emigration rates among Christians. According to one source, some 100,000 Christians have submitted visa applications to foreign embassies just since the end of the war in summer 2006; if they are not leaving, they are at least preparing the possibility of doing so.

These trends were explicitly acknowledged in the post-civil war reforms that enlarged the parliament and replaced the previous 6:5 ratio favoring Christians with the principle of Muslim-Christian equality (despite the fact that Muslims are already widely assumed to outnumber Christians by about 60:40). Perhaps just as significantly, they were implicitly acknowledged in shifting political alliances. Until the mid-1970s, the major axis of conflict in Lebanon involved Maronites and Sunnis. Each camp had satellites and clients from other confessional groups, but it was that antagonism which lay at the heart of the civil war, in which Shi'ites were more often spectators than active belligerents. Since the 1990s, the Shi'ites have been the most assertive and coherent political force in Lebanon, and while politicians from other confessional groups – especially Maronite leader Michel Aoun -- have made common cause with them for tactical purposes, the emerging power of the Shi'ites, expressed most forcefully in Hizbullah, has driven most major Maronite and Sunni actors together in what looks, through the prism of the last civil war, like a marriage of convenience but may actually be a mutual survival pact.

Whatever form that alliance may take, it is unlikely to be more than a holding operation given longer-term demographic trends. Absent some dramatic change, the Shi'ites will increasingly put their stamp on Lebanon as a whole, and extrapolation of current reality implies that Shi'ite predominance will mean Hizbullah predominance. That outcome, however, is not necessarily foreordained. After all, Hizbullah's current agenda has not always resonated among Shi'ites in Lebanon. For many years, Shi'ites were, if not politically quiescent, then inclined to non-confessional approaches (including that of the

Communists) that promised them more equitable representation in or at least better treatment at the hands of the Lebanese state. More recently, Hizbullah's radical Islamism and defiance have appealed as the most effective vehicle to achieve those goals, and Hizbullah has also been able to use material resources with which the state could not compete to cultivate further support. It is not inconceivable that the ideological appeal of Hizbullah to Shi'ites will diminish when some of its programmatic promises are fulfilled. It is even more certain that Hizbullah's capacities will diminish if its sources of inspiration and resources in Iran and Syria dry up due to changes in Iranian and Syrian policies and/or regimes. Thus, Lebanon's domestic politics will continue to be influenced by developments elsewhere in the region.

