

Getting to Arab Democracy

LEBANON SPRINGS FORWARD

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For four consecutive Sundays beginning on 29 May 2005, the voters of Lebanon turned out to choose a new parliament in elections that capped an extraordinary passage in the history of their country as well as that of the broader Middle East. The road that brought them to the polls in the late spring of 2005 had begun in mid-February with the assassination of ex-premier Rafiq Hariri—Lebanon’s single most popular public figure—and then had led through weeks of peaceful protests featuring some of the largest spontaneous popular demonstrations that the Arab world has ever seen. A prime minister resigned on live television. One of the world’s most hardbitten dictatorships found itself overmatched by, among other forces, crowds of Lebanese citizens armed with nothing more dangerous than wry slogans and red-and-white placards bearing their country’s green cedar-tree emblem.

Now this heavily indebted and resource-poor land of fewer than four million people—a survivor of two civil wars in the last fifty years—has turned a page, if not a corner. Its legislature, the unicameral 128-seat National Assembly, has been voted in via one of the freest and best-monitored electoral processes in Lebanese history. Its civil society has shown a knack for nonviolent mobilization in at least partial defiance of the deep sectarian divisions that historically have split the Lebanese people into warring camps. Its one-time military occupier, Syria, has withdrawn all its uniformed troops and now finds its covert intelligence apparatus under pressure in the midst of a high-profile, UN-sponsored investigation into Hariri’s death that is rocking the Dam-

ascus regime. All these are hopeful signs, even if much long-postponed work of reform, consolidation, and national reconciliation remains to be done and a workable, democratic power-sharing formula remains elusive.

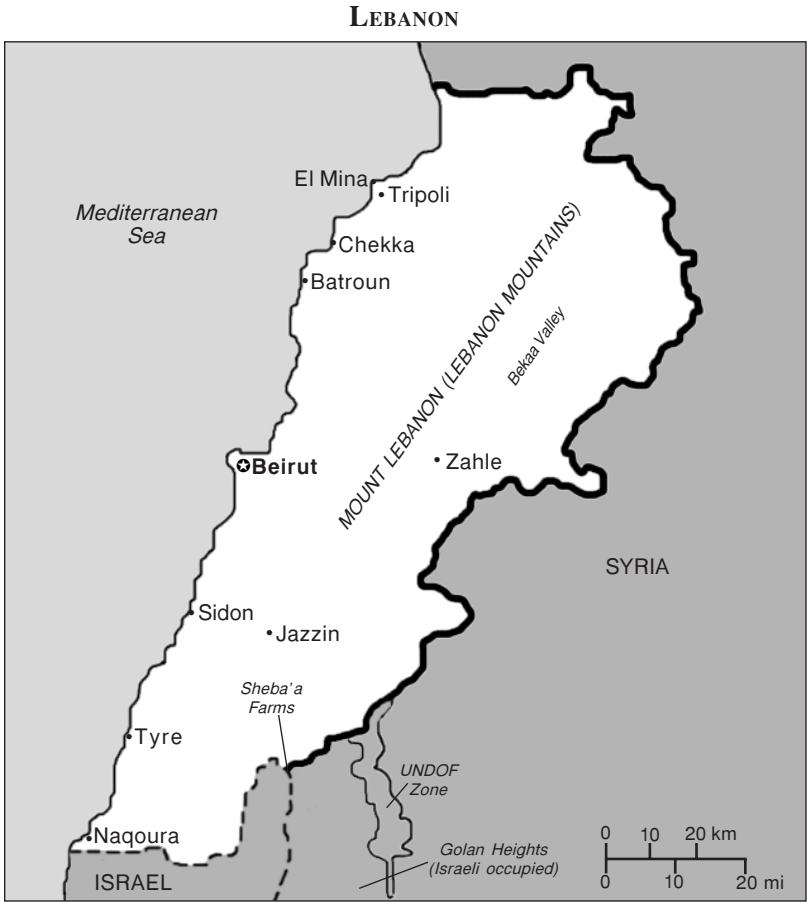
The new majority in parliament represents an opposition coalition that has frayed somewhat since the headiest days of street protests, but which still appears to have a good bit of steam in a parliamentary environment which itself is displaying a new dynamism. The voters helped to see to this by unseating a number of traditional leaders and sending a total of 61 new deputies (or almost half the Assembly) to represent constituent interests in Beirut. While the total of women legislators remains small at six (or 4.7 percent), that figure represents a doubling of the previous number.

The ruling coalition controls 72 of the Assembly's 128 seats. Its biggest single member is the Future Movement (36 seats), a largely Sunni Muslim party founded by murdered former premier Rafiq Hariri and now led by his son, Saad Hariri. Its second-largest member is the Druze-based Progressive Socialist Party (16 seats) led by Walid Jumblatt. The larger of the two opposition blocs is Resistance, Liberation, and Development (35 seats total), a Shi'ite Muslim coalition led by Amal (15 seats) and Hezbollah (14 seats). The smaller opposition bloc is led by the Maronite Catholic politician and retired general Michel Aoun, whose Free Patriotic Stream (14 seats) leads a grouping with 21 seats all told. While the government's 72 seats give it a 16-seat majority, it falls well short of the 86 seats needed to pass constitutional amendments.

The overall result of the elections—a government with a clear but not commanding majority—underlines the fresh dynamism that now actuates Lebanese legislative politics. Whereas the Syrians and their Lebanese affiliates had reduced the Assembly to a rubber-stamp body, the new balance of power that the voters have created will demand much more active politicking if the legislature is to pass laws and take care of the people's business. Few candidates ran on the basis of clear programs, and the general tone among the new MPs suggests a novel degree of openness to debate. But some old habits may die hard: The speaker whom the members chose (by custom this post goes to a Shi'ite) is Nabih Berri of Amal, a longtime Syrian ally and an embodiment of the confessional communalism that has long overshadowed institutional considerations in Lebanese politics.

A Divided Society

The roots of Lebanese confessionalism run deep. Modern Lebanon—or “Greater Lebanon,” as it was called—came into being in 1926 as an entity that European colonial powers cobbled together by layering a weak political system atop a congeries of Arabic-speaking but compet-



ing religious minorities. These included the Maronites, a rite within the Roman Catholic Church led by Saint Maron, who defected from Syria in the seventeenth century; Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic Christians; and both Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims, along with the Druze, who form an offshoot of Shi’ism dating to the tenth century. The Ottoman Empire had long used divide-and-conquer tactics to rule these groups, promoting Maronite-versus-Druze rivalries, for instance, as a diversion from having either or both of these communities turn actively against the Turkish imperium.

Sectarian tensions all too often exploded into violence, sowing a legacy of bitterness and suspicion that to a troubling extent still exists today. Between 1860 and the outbreak of the First World War, a measure of stability was achieved through the creation of a provincial council for the Ottoman-ruled portion of modern-day Lebanon known as Mount Lebanon (the “mount” is not a single peak but rather a range of summits as high as 3,000 meters that parallels the Mediterranean shore to the

east of the coastal plain whose largest city is Beirut). Turkish authorities apportioned seats in this body to the various sects in an early instance of the formal consociationalism that would become a hallmark of Lebanese political life. This arrangement, which European powers and especially France had helped to broker, proved workable for a time and yet also opened the way for the growth of direct French influence. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed as a result of the First World War, France's role became even more pronounced. The pattern was now firmly set of dividing power among confessional groups via a process overseen by a dominant foreign country.

The additions of territory to Mount Lebanon that brought into being Greater Lebanon meant the introduction into the new polity of large numbers of Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims. The land added to Lebanon had been carved out of Syria in accord with the secret 1916 Sykes-Picot Accord in which Britain and France had agreed on how to divide up the Middle East into a sphere of influence for each. France, acting as the League of Nations "mandate" power in the area, gave Lebanon a constitution modeled on that of the French Third Republic. Nineteen confessional groups received official recognition, with the Maronites forming the largest of these in accord with the results of the 1932 census (Lebanon's latest to date). Lebanon became a parliamentary democracy with Christians and Muslims sharing power according to a 6:5 ratio of legislative seats, cabinet posts, and so on. The years between 1926 and Lebanon's independence in 1943 saw much political contention, with Muslims opposing the French and the Maronites, who appeared in many Muslim eyes as a stumbling block to Lebanon's "natural" affiliation with Syria and the larger Arab world, in which the Christian presence was dwindling due to emigration and relatively low birth rates.

On the eve of independence, Sunni and Maronite leaders struck an unwritten accord for power-sharing and governance after the French left. This National Pact decreed that the president (who was to hold the lion's share of executive power) should always be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, and the speaker of parliament a Shi'ite, with remaining cabinet and senior administrative posts shared among the various confessional groups. The pact was meant to be consociational, ensuring that no single sect would be able to dominate in contravention of Lebanon's plural nature. Not surprisingly, the pact masked deep divisions. Worse, it entrenched confessional politics and failed to offer a resilient state structure that could adjust as demographic and social realities shifted. The pact thus laid the basis for a weak and fragile polity wherein major decisions had to meet the crippling requirement of virtual intercommunal unanimity.

The 1943 pact worked well for a time, helping to make Lebanon the "Switzerland of the Middle East" and a popular tourist spot with a booming (if asymmetrically distributed) service-based economy and one of

the most open societies that the region has ever seen. Beginning with the birth of Israel in 1948 and the rise of Arab nationalism, however, history would administer shocks that the Lebanese system was hard-pressed to withstand. Christians and Sunnis began to struggle over whether the country should align itself with Arab nationalism or continue to lean toward Washington as once it had leaned toward Paris. With a brittle and precariously balanced system overseen by hidebound leaders, Lebanon became polarized and its consensus-based version of democracy ever more nominal rather than real. Most Lebanese, meanwhile, remained poor and rural despite the urban, service-sector boom. Internal economic migrants began creating teeming shantytowns around Beirut and other cities.

Shocks from Abroad

It is impossible to understand Lebanese politics without noting how regional and international trends have affected this small and divided country. The Ottomans, the French, nearby Arab states such as Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, and the United States have all made their weight felt in this politically fragile corner of the Levant. In particular, Nasser's rise as the champion of Arab nationalism and socialism roused the backing of Sunni and leftist forces. Efforts by the United States to thwart the Soviet-aligned Nasser and his fellow Arab nationalists split the region between the Nasserite Egyptian-Syrian camp and the Western-aligned Iraqi-Jordanian pairing. Lebanon felt the strain, with Sunnis, Shi'ites, and Druze generally taking a pro-Nasser stance and most Christians backing the Western position.

Events surrounding the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 exerted intense pressures as well. Palestinian refugees settled in various camps across Lebanon, threatening to upset the delicate confessional balance. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), backed by Arab regimes, used Lebanon as a base for guerrilla attacks into Israel, which retaliated by shelling Lebanese villages and infrastructure. The PLO's actions spurred rural dwellers from south Lebanon to swell the shantytowns around Beirut, planting the seeds for further destabilization. The Palestinians, aided by largely Muslim local leftists, tried to create a state within a state and weaken the Christians militarily. The latter violently opposed the PLO, seeing its alliance with Lebanese Muslims as a direct existential threat.

The problem in Lebanon, atypically for the Arab world, was not stultifying dictatorship, but a weak state whose institutions were easily overshadowed by parochial communal interests. As the PLO-Israeli conflict along the Lebanese border continued, Christians called for the disarming of the Palestinians while Muslims accused Christians of wanting to split Lebanon from the Arab fold. Armed factional militias began

secretly to form in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In April 1975, full-blown civil war broke out (the previous civil war had been a small and brief affair in 1958).

State institutions swiftly crumbled and militia violence ruled. The army fell apart along confessional lines. The various communal groups sought outside help in order to win or at least to shield themselves. The Christians looked to Israel, which invaded Lebanon in June 1982 and temporarily disarmed the Palestinians before retreating to the border and establishing a 9-miles-deep security zone. The Muslims obtained Syrian aid. Syrian forces entered the country nominally to enforce a cease-fire in 1976, but quickly took sides in the fighting and would not leave for almost three decades.

Lebanon's most dire agony finally ended in 1990 after the Arab League brokered an agreement for Lebanese members of parliament to sign. This Document of National Reconciliation (better known as the Taif Accord for the Saudi Arabian city that hosted the meeting) included constitutional amendments that made the Sunni premier and the Shi'ite parliament speaker stronger and the Maronite president (whom the French had favored in the old arrangement) substantially weaker. In this and other ways, the Taif Accord reflected the widely known if unquantified demographic shift that had seen the Maronites sink below their 28.7 percent share of the population as measured by the 1932 census.

The Taif Accord anchored communalist politics ever more firmly by calling for many decisions to be made by consensus in the assembled council of ministers, and by making the president, the premier, and the speaker into a governing troika whose members all had veto power over one another. Hand-in-hand with this recipe for governmental paralysis went the Accord's provisions for a "special relationship" between Lebanon and Syria. From this flowed a string of treaties that put the smaller country at a disadvantage in the realms of agriculture, customs tariffs, and natural-resource sharing.

In return for Syria's symbolic participation in the anti-Saddam coalition during the First Gulf War, Syrian president Hafiz al-Assad gained a free hand in Lebanon. Hoping to control the country as, among other things, a buffer zone in relations with Israel, Damascus ignored the Accord's provisions and kept more than 20,000 troops, plus a similar number of plain-clothes intelligence agents, stationed throughout Lebanon. The Lebanese parliaments elected in 1992, 1996, and 2000 all had Syrian-aligned majorities. Reliable Syrian allies began to fill the military's officer corps and the security services as well as senior civilian posts. Syria confirmed the tutelage in which it held its neighbor in 1998, engineering the ascent to the Lebanese presidency of the Maronite and staunchly pro-Syrian army general, Emile Lahoud.

While the Taif Accord kept some members of the old elites in power, it also made warlords and militia chiefs (among them beneficiaries of a

1990 general amnesty) into new decision makers for postwar Lebanon. The Syrians kept their Lebanese allies loyal by encouraging continued mafia-like behavior in running state affairs and doling out the spoils of power.

The Shi'ite Hezbollah (Party of God) movement was also one of the new forces of the post-Taif years. It had risen to prominence in 1982 as a secretive guerrilla force that used its Iranian and Syrian training and support to attack Israeli occupying troops. Largely responsible for driving Israel out of Lebanon and still commanding a large armed wing, Hezbollah eventually began to act as a mainstream political movement with an impressive network of vocational schools, orphanages, and mobile clinics. It now commands respect among nearly all Lebanese, and its popularity among Shi'ites is immense. Having never been involved in intra-Lebanese infighting, it elicits trust even though its military wing refuses to disarm, citing continued Israeli presence on a sliver of disputed borderland known as the Sheba'a Farms.

The Rise of Rafiq Hariri

In addition to warlords and Hezbollah, the years after 1990 also saw some genuine statesmen enter public life. Among these was a man with a stature and a past quite different from those of the warlords. Rafiq Hariri, a self-made Sunni billionaire based in Saudi Arabia, had no violent wartime past. Well known within Lebanon for his generous underwriting of humanitarian causes, Hariri was close to the Saudi royal family and had played a significant role in securing the Taif Accord. He was a man of exceptional vision and courage who enjoyed powerful worldwide connections. As Lebanon's leading Sunni politician, he became prime minister in 1992 and stayed in that post on and off until his assassination.

Unfazed by such unsettling factors as stalled peace talks with Israel and the presence of Hezbollah's armed wing, Hariri steamed full-speed ahead with his plans to rebuild the country and restart economic growth. His commitment to economic liberalism and free markets helped to jolt awake a lethargic economy, and he spearheaded the sprawling reconstruction effort that restored Beirut's once-glorious but badly war-ravaged downtown. Hariri's larger-than-life status and genuine interest in rebuilding and unifying Lebanon made him a source of concern for Syria's rulers. They instigated various forms of trouble for him, often just after his return from a successful trip abroad. They also monopolized security matters and cut off any prospect of an independent Lebanese foreign policy by marginalizing the post of foreign minister or filling it with nonentities. Thus, Hariri's efforts were restricted to the economy.

When Hafiz al-Assad died in 2000 and was succeeded by his 36-year-old son Bashar, things went from bad to worse. In order to ensure total control of Lebanon, the inexperienced new Syrian president formed a

tight Syrian-Lebanese security apparatus run by General (later President) Lahoud. The security men were to have final say over any significant economic or political activity. Rafiq Hariri clearly stood in the way of this strategy. Lebanon's council of ministers, swollen to more than thirty members, became a battleground where Lahoud and Hariri often squared off, with governmental paralysis the predictable result. On several occasions, senior Syrian officials stepped in to resolve lengthy standoffs.

Confrontations continued into 2004, when Lahoud's six-year term was due to end in November. The Syrians, anxious to stick with a known ally despite the available coterie of pro-Damascus Maronite politicians, sought to force through parliament a constitutional amendment that would allow Lahoud to stay in office. Hariri staunchly opposed any such move, and began making this clear as early as the spring of 2004. The international community, led by the United States and France, denounced the proposed change and the Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs that it represented. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 of 2 September 2004 called for the immediate withdrawal of foreign (that is, Syrian) troops from Lebanon and the disarming of all militias (the largest of these being Hezbollah and certain armed Palestinian factions). The next day, Lebanon's pliable parliament voted 96 to 29 to amend the constitution so that Lahoud could stay on for three more years.

On August 26, a week before that infamous parliamentary session, Assad had summoned Hariri to Damascus. Their meeting was unusually brief. On September 3, Hariri inexplicably changed his position and voted, along with his parliamentary bloc, to extend Lahoud's mandate. It was widely thought in Lebanon that the Syrians had twisted Hariri's arm. On October 20, as a sign of protest, Hariri resigned as prime minister. His replacement was the pro-Syrian Omar Karami, heading a government formed mostly of incompetent Damascus lackeys known for their anti-Hariri fervor.

Before Hariri stepped down, opposition to Syria's overweening influence in Lebanon and to the extension of Lahoud's mandate had been growing among the Maronite and Druze communities. An opposition bloc of Christian political figures called the Qornet Shahwan Gathering had come into being. The Druze leader Walid Jumblatt had taken his own small but influential parliamentary bloc into the camp of Syria's more vocal critics. With Hariri too breaking ranks, the Syrians faced the dangerous prospect of a Maronite-Sunni-Druze united front against Syrian tutelage. On 1 October 2004, a car bomb in downtown Beirut nearly killed a Druze legislator and close Jumblatt advisor named Marwan Hamade. It was the first of what would become a series of attacks and acts of harassment directed against the newly formed opposition.

In the months that followed, Syria's Lebanese cronies launched a slander campaign against Hariri, accusing him of corruption, bribery,

and (ironically) serving as an agent of foreign imperialists. Plainly, the Syrians were feeling the pinch of international pressure and were scrambling at all costs to squelch dissent inside their Lebanese satellite. This effort intensified as the parliamentary elections set for May 2005 began to draw near. Knowledgeable forecasters predicted a Hariri sweep, something that the Syrians could not face. The Syrians felt that Hariri was silently aiding the increasingly vocal opposition and plotting to rouse international decision makers against the Syrian military presence in Lebanon.

The Saint Valentine's Day Assassination

On the bright, sunny early afternoon of 14 February 2005, a few minutes before 1 p.m. and a few feet from the Mediterranean shores of downtown Beirut, a massive car bomb pulverized Rafiq Hariri's armored convoy, killing him and 21 others. This shocking atrocity was a blow aimed not only at one man, but at what many would come to call Harirism, meaning the ambitious vision of a Lebanon rebuilt upon the ashes of war and restored to its lofty reputation as the shining star of the Middle East. The murder triggered an outpouring of grief. Masses of Lebanese held vigils in Martyrs' Square, the capital's largest public space, surrounded by a recently reconstructed cityscape that was among Hariri's tangible legacies to his homeland. The Hariri family, backed by the parliamentary opposition, announced plans for a public funeral but said point-blank that state officials would not be welcome at it. Charges that the joint Lebanese-Syrian security apparatus—and by extension Syria—was behind the killing struck a chord with citizens. A budding civil society movement began to organize. Many observers noted the inspiration that Lebanese activists were drawing from the examples of the Rose Revolution of 2003 in Georgia, the Orange Revolution of 2004 in Ukraine, and the Purple Revolution of 30 January 2005 in Iraq.

Everything about Hariri's funeral bespoke his immense popularity. About a quarter of a million people, including opposition leaders and a host of international figures, saw the slain prime minister to his grave. Opposition groups held marathon meetings in an effort to unify their plans for street mobilizations. Public anger at the killing overwhelmed the authorities, who could not stop the spontaneous marches that were beginning to form every evening near Hariri's grave and at the murder site. Under pressure to get swiftly to the bottom of the crime, the government produced several stories, including one about Islamist suicide bombers that turned out to be a total fabrication. The government's weak resolve and inability to provide a serious and satisfactory explanation or investigation increased its vulnerability. Sensing this, the opposition groups began to unite around calls for open demonstrations, vigils, and increased pressure on the government to suspend the heads

of the security services, allow a UN Security Council investigation, and hold legislative elections free of outside—particularly Syrian—interference. More important still, the opposition called for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Syrian troops and intelligence operatives from Lebanon.

The intensifying calls by the opposition turned into mass demonstrations and rallies shouting anti-Syrian and antigovernment slogans—a practice that had spontaneously started during Hariri's funeral. Backed by various elements of civil society and using mobile phones, e-mail, and public announcements to spread the word, opposition groups organized daily vigils and marches at various spots around Beirut. Late February and March saw the most intense period of street marches in the history of modern Lebanon. Ordinary business came to a standstill as people from all walks of life left their offices, shops, campuses, and homes to march and pour out their heartfelt anger and sorrow at Hariri's murder. The authorities issued bans on these protests, but were powerless to make them stick. Marchers joined together in large numbers from across the confessional spectrum—a rare display of unity in a country beset by religious divides. The late prime minister's charisma and skill as a builder of bridges between Lebanon's various sects and confessions seemed to be living on after him like another gift to his country.

The opposition groups included members of the Socialist Party (mostly Druze), the Qornet Shahwan Gathering (Christian), the student movement of the outlawed Christian Lebanese Forces party, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, the Christian Phalangist Party, and Hariri's own predominantly Sunni Future Movement. Also present in opposition ranks were large numbers of Shi'ite Muslims who belonged to neither of the two big Shi'ite groups, Amal and Hezbollah. The latter preferred its usual cautious approach of staying out of the fray. It also felt wary about blaming Syria, which Hezbollah leaders credited with having unstintingly backed its struggle to drive Israeli forces out of southern Lebanon.

In addition to parties, the opposition also featured a number of civil society groups that saw Syrian domination of Lebanon and its puppet government as a denial of freedom and basic rights. Eventually rallying to the opposition's banners were student and youth movements; women's groups; syndicates of writers, journalists, artists, and workers; the Lebanese Bar Association; industry groups; and a host of chambers of commerce. The opportunity to win back sovereignty and end the Syrian chokehold was finally within reach.

The first priority of the antigovernment rallies was to force out the Karami cabinet on the grounds that, even if no direct state involvement in Hariri's murder could be proved, the government could be considered culpably negligent or incompetent by virtue of its failure to uncover what must surely have been an elaborate assassination plot. A large

group of students belonging to several opposition parties and civil society groups built a permanent camp in Martyrs' Square in an effort to keep the heat on until the main opposition demands were met.

Reassured by Hezbollah's relative quiescence, the opposition forged ahead with plans to put on the largest public demonstration that the Middle East had ever seen.

Throughout the crisis and ensuing standoff with the government, sympathetic print and broadcast media—themselves basking in what they saw as the restoration of full freedoms of speech and assembly—gave the demonstrators wide and favorable coverage. Moreover, Hariri had been a longtime investor in media concerns, and his family's influence over Lebanon's media ran strong. Not that any string-pulling was needed—the press too had suffered under the heavyhanded Syrians and their Lebanese cronies, and now it was payback time. Young protesters appeared daily on television and in the pages of widely circulated Arabic-language daily newspapers. Interviews, talk-show discussions, and commentaries buzzed with the drawing of parallels between the Beirut protests and the Ukrainian sit-ins that had filled the streets of Kiev a few months earlier after ex-communist forces tried to steal the presidential election through means that included a possible assassination attempt on a popular opposition leader.

Having been Lebanon's prime minister for ten of its fifteen postwar years, Hariri had strong ties with the West, including a close friendship with French president Jacques Chirac, as well as good relations with Arab leaders. His moderate views and liberal economic policies had earned him high credit worldwide. He had also been a joint Lebanese-Saudi citizen with exceptionally close ties to the Saudi royal family. As the Arab world's traditional power broker, Saudi Arabia saw Hariri's murder as a strike against one of its own and insisted that Beirut and Damascus should spare no effort in revealing the full truth behind the assassination. It was with strong Arab and international support, then, that the protesters pressed their demands. On February 28, as tens of thousands in Martyrs' Square watched via a giant-screen outdoor television, Prime Minister Karami announced his resignation. The crowd's euphoria was unchecked by the wintry sea breeze whipping off the Mediterranean as demonstrators celebrated the prime minister's resignation. It was the first of what would become a string of opposition victories.

President Lahoud, already the target of considerable opposition wrath by virtue of his suspected involvement in the assassination, held hasty talks with parliament and then asked Karami to form a new government. The opposition responded by upping the ante, calling for open strikes and sit-ins to block a Karami comeback. Amal and Hezbollah, mean-

while, were feeling isolated by the anti-Syrian protests. Hezbollah also worried that more opposition wins might invite intensified international demands for disarming its militia under Resolution 1559. On March 8, Hezbollah staged a huge rally—at about half a million people, the biggest up to that time—near Martyrs' Square in order to denounce the Security Council resolution, pay tribute to Syria, and emphasize that Hezbollah would expect to be consulted on any deal regarding a new government. Interestingly, the Hezbollah ralliers carried Lebanese cedar-tree flags rather than party banners, a hint that Hezbollah—while it found itself hesitant about turning against its Syrian backers—also did not find itself in total disagreement with the mainstream opposition.

While Hezbollah had announced that it would organize rallies like that of March 8 on a weekly basis in cities across Lebanon, it soon stood down and willingly sat on the sidelines, having made the point that its sympathizers and supporters—a significant and mostly Shi'ite chunk of Lebanon's citizens—were in accord with the opposition's overall goals but felt more cautious about how and how fast to implement them. Reassured by Hezbollah's relative quiescence, the opposition forged ahead with plans to put on the largest public demonstration that the Middle East had ever seen. On March 14, an estimated 1.2 million protesters—more than a quarter of Lebanon's population—thronged Beirut in order to demand Syria's withdrawal, the uncovering of the full truth behind Hariri's assassination, the resignation or sacking of senior state-security officials, and the holding of legislative elections on time and without interference of the sort that Syria or its compliant Lebanese regime had committed in earlier years.

In a show of unity rare for Lebanon, the March 14 demonstrators used the tree-blazoned Lebanese flag as their protest symbol. Hence was the so-called Cedar Revolution born. While angry at the inaction of the Lebanese government, the demonstrators blended serious demands with wry humor in their signs and banners. Musical groups, bands of artists, and students sang and chanted catchy slogans to articulate the opposition's common demands amid the decidedly nonviolent and even carnival-like atmosphere. The Lebanese Army, though under orders to prevent demonstrations, looked the other way. Its troops were soon overwhelmed with kindness anyway as citizens, instead of trying to force their way through military cordons, greeted the soldiers with flowers, sweets, and choruses of friendly singing. Considering the hodgepodge of opposition groups and the sheer size of the crowds, the insistence on nonviolence and nonconfrontational tactics worked like magic. The March 14 rallies were beamed all over the world thanks to Arabic-language satellite-television networks, and messages of support poured in from across the globe all the next week.

For the international community led by the United States and France, the rallies were a showcase of what it was hoped nonviolent, popular

regime change in the Arab world could look like. They gave Washington an opportunity to increase the pressure on Damascus for a troop pullout, which would in turn reduce Syria's influence in regional politics. Paris, disappointed with Syria's lack of reforms and sensing an opportunity to restore traditionally Francophone Lebanon to the French sphere of influence, decided to join in the calls for a Syrian withdrawal. Armed with Resolution 1559 and supported by major Arab countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the United States and France demanded and received the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. On 26 April 2005, the last uniformed Syrian soldier left Lebanese soil. Lebanon was free from Syrian domination for the first time in 29 years.

An international fact-finding mission into the Hariri assassination followed the Syrian troop withdrawal and paved the way for an international investigative commission. On 19 October 2005, the commission's initial report appeared. It confirmed—albeit not conclusively—what many had suspected. Syria, said the report, had been involved in the assassination plot along with a host of Lebanese accomplices. The report revealed an intricate plan that had required months of preparations and a stakeout of Hariri. While the investigation continues as these lines are being written in late November 2005, the Security Council, after reviewing the report, expanded the investigative commission's mandate. In Resolution 1636, passed unanimously on October 31, the Security Council demanded that Syria begin cooperating “fully and unconditionally” with the investigation or face sanctions and possible military intervention.

The Syrian pullout and the UN's decision to launch an inquiry into the Hariri assassination put the opposition in a strong position to help shape the new government that would oversee the upcoming elections. The opposition accepted a compromise choice for prime minister, businessman Najib Mikati, on the condition that he suspend the heads of the security agencies, oversee and guarantee a free and fair election supervised by an international team of observers, and resign his parliamentary position. The opposition wanted to undercut any potential manipulation of the electoral process by the government that would oversee this process and whose head would himself be a candidate for parliament. Once again, with the help of UN and Arab mediators, the opposition got what it demanded, and the date of the legislative elections was fixed for May 29.

The 2005 Legislative Elections

The landmark elections, the freest in Lebanon since before the civil war, gave the opposition a parliamentary majority and changed the legislature's makeup in other important ways as well. Before the elections, there was an intense debate within opposition ranks over the

existing electoral law. Syrian intelligence operatives had engineered this legislation in 2000 with the goal of guaranteeing wins by pro-Syrian candidates while undermining Hariri and the Christian parties. Although the Taif Accord had called for an electoral system that would represent all Lebanese through the use of large, confessionally mixed districts, the Syrians had manipulated and distorted this system through their rubber-stamp parliaments not only in 2000 but also in previous elections held during 1992 and 1996. Opposition leaders faced the choice of postponing the balloting indefinitely while they negotiated a new law, or having the elections go forward on time but under the imperfect 2000 law. Not wanting to risk a delay that might blunt their momentum, they selected the latter option.

As the debate about timing was going on, another complicating factor arrived on a plane from the West. It came in the form of Michel Aoun, who returned to Lebanon after 15 years in exile. A former commanding general of the Lebanese Army, Aoun was the Maronite leader of the Free Patriotic Stream. In 1988, as the head of a transitional military government during the last phase of the civil war, he had staunchly opposed Syria's plans to consolidate control over Lebanon. He launched an armed campaign against the Syrians, but it failed to generate the hoped-for international support, and he had found himself forced to seek refuge in France. Seeing the potential of leading the Christian opposition and playing on the emotional outpouring of popular support for an exiled leader, Aoun announced a clean break from other Christian leaders and forged his electoral programs independently. Aoun was also eyeing the presidency and wanted to eliminate any competition by independently leading an opposition bloc.

With voting staggered over the four Sundays that began on May 29, an international observation commission set up by the European Union remained throughout the period to monitor the campaigning and polling. Lebanese civil society also mobilized to help ensure a fair expression of the people's will, employing a never before seen degree of coordination to deploy hundreds of local observers throughout the country. The coalitions that formed during the campaign period were a mix of old and new themes, ideas, practices, and alliances. Lebanon is a confessional country at heart, and has yet to go through a genuine reconciliation process to help bind the grievous wounds inflicted during the civil war. Sectarian rhetoric heated up so much during the campaign that it threatened the coalition associated with March 14. Aoun's return, in particular, upset plans to pick up the two-thirds majority of parliament needed to change the constitution.

Hezbollah and Amal formed their own coalition in southern Lebanon and ran a strong, practically unchallenged, list of candidates. As reworked by the Syrians, the electoral law allowed candidates to run on lists. Given the majoritarian voting rules in effect, having a strong list

in a given district would mean sweeping all the seats in that constituency. In the south, the combined Hezbollah-Amal list won easily, with challengers picking up no more than a few hundred votes.

In a parallel fashion, the list headed by Rafiq Hariri's son Saad won practically unchallenged in Beirut and in the Sunni areas of eastern Lebanon. In Mount Lebanon's four districts, in the North, and in the Bekaa Valley district of Zahle, races were more competitive. Aoun had wasted little time in forming or renewing ties with some longtime traditional politicians, and together they quickly built a strong coalition to take on the forces led by Hariri and Walid Jumblatt. This allowed Aoun to win big in two of Mount Lebanon's districts, where he took 15 seats, and in Zahle, where he took 6, for a combined total of 21. The contest in the North district was tough, but Hariri's entire list managed to pull out a win there, gaining 28 seats that would prove crucial in making up the new majority in parliament.

The Tasks Ahead

Prospects for deeper and fuller democracy in Lebanon must clear serious but surmountable hurdles. Hariri's victorious bloc named as prime minister not Rafiq's son Saad, but instead Fouad Siniora, a longtime close aide and confidant of the late premier. A modest, calm, and hardworking man, Siniora has almost a decade's worth of experience as finance minister under his belt. He will need it, as one of the more urgent challenges that he must master is the difficult economic situation. Lebanon's current US\$38 billion debt is equal to 180 percent of its annual Gross Domestic Product. The extent to which the government can help the country to steer itself out of the current economic shoals will have a serious effect on plans for political recovery and democratic openness.

There is also the demand to tackle political and administrative reform. The overhaul of the electoral law is now in the hands of a national commission that counts among its members longtime experts from civil society, academics, and lawyers. Its task is to organize nationwide consultations and recommend to parliament a draft electoral law that all Lebanese will find acceptable. This is the first time that Lebanon has used an apolitical commission in order to organize and inform a systematic nationwide discussion of a key and rather sensitive issue. The commission's efforts so far—and the generally positive and constructive responses that they have elicited—bode well for, among other things, civil society's efforts to influence policy making in Lebanon.

Despite the successful elections, the security situation remains shaky. Though serious progress has been made in deconstructing the Syrian-Lebanese security apparatus, 14 car bombs exploded in East Beirut between June and September 2005. Four of the explosions were clearly

aimed at silencing prominent critics of Syria. The bombs were seen as warnings to the anti-Syrian forces that they had better not carry on with their plans for a clean break from Syria. Even under the best circumstances, putting Lebanon's relations with Syria on a fairer footing will be a complex and arduous task that ought not to be put off. Borders will need to be delineated, and diplomatic exchanges regularized with an eye to preserving Lebanese sovereignty. Lebanese political prisoners now being held in Syrian jails will have to be repatriated, and the unfair treaties that now bind Lebanon to Syria will have to be scrapped or rewritten.

As of this writing, moreover, the opposition's most important demand is still waiting to be met: The world must know the truth about who murdered Rafiq Hariri. The final report of the international investigation into his killing is anxiously awaited in Beirut, for on this document hinges the future of stability in Lebanon. All indicators suggest that the UN investigative commission will produce evidence to corroborate the involvement in the crime of senior Syrian and Lebanese intelligence officers. Syria will have to deliver the officers named in the report first for investigation and then to an international tribunal that will most likely be set up for that purpose on neutral territory.

In sum, the Cedar Revolution remains half-finished. Revealing the truth about the Hariri assassination and then prosecuting those responsible for it will go a long way toward providing a sense of national satisfaction and security. Then there must follow a serious and comprehensive dialogue on the country's future. This discussion must include all the various factions, plus civil society. Without this, the gains of March 14 and after may dissipate. Friends of democracy should hope to see civil society become a growing force. It is already one to be reckoned with, as can be seen in the way that politicians frequently refer to "the spirit of March 14" when discussing the need for political change.

In order to move forward, Lebanon must capitalize on the small gains earned so far, including the free elections and the national commission that is now busy reforming the electoral law through a process of broad consultation. The success of this reform effort will create a precedent that must be emulated as the country tackles even more difficult issues, such as the phase-out of the confessional system (something that the Taif Accord called for back in 1990, but which has never been done). Lebanon will also need to take up other unfinished business outlined in the Taif Accord, including straightening out its relations with Syria by rebuilding them on a sounder and more equitable basis—and this will remain the case regardless of whatever results the Hariri investigation produces. Moreover, Lebanon must control its spiraling debt and kickstart a comprehensive reform process that restores the international community's confidence in its future.