



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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Lebanon's New Government: Toward Greater Consensus or Stalemate?

United States Institute of Peace and International Foundation for Electoral Systems
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2255
12:30 – 2:00 pm, November 17, 2009

The United States Institute of Peace and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems hosted an event on Capitol Hill to discuss Lebanon's new government. **Mona Yacoubian** of the United States Institute of Peace, Democratic Staff Member **Perry Cammack** of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and **Richard Chambers** of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems participated on the panel.

Chambers started the discussion by congratulating **Lebanon on holding one of the best elections in the history of the country and even the broader Middle East**. There was full competition between candidates, freedom of expression, freedom to campaign, but there still remains room for improvement. The March 14 Coalition won a total of 69 seats in parliament and March 8 garnered 57 seats. The results reveal severe cleavages within Lebanese society. The vast majority of Sunni seats went to March 14 while the majority of Shi'ite seats fell to March 8. However, the Christians split the seats evenly amongst the two competing coalitions.

Chambers noted that if Lebanon were to use a proportional system, as opposed to a winner-take-all system, then the two coalitions would have won an equal number of seats in parliament. But as it stands today, Lebanon's electoral system is doomed to fail in producing clear electoral winners that can make a cross-confessional majority. As a result, the **system entrenches religious sectarianism and limits political development**.

Part of the problem, according to Chambers, is that the cabinet has traditionally been constituted on a proportional basis despite the winner-take-all system for parliament. Thus every sect demands a voice in the cabinet and, in recent history, the ability to block cabinet action with a 1/3 vote. So despite the March 14 Coalition's clear electoral victory, it has taken **Prime Minister Hariri** five months to form a cabinet in the face of demands from **Michel Aoun's** Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah. Complicating the situation further, Hezbollah maintains its "extra-constitutional powers" through its weapons caches. Despite these difficulties, a cabinet has finally been formed that provides 15 seats to the majority, 10 to the opposition, and 5 to **President Sleiman**. Therefore, Chambers argued **the real winner is the president, who will now have a deciding voice in all contentious issues**.

Chambers warned that the challenges have just begun now that the cabinet must actually govern. Already, it looks like the cabinet's ministerial statement will avoid specific issues that might prove contentious. They will need to gain the trust of the people and the international community, especially now that Lebanon sits on the U.N. Security Council, all while trying to work together despite their rivalries. Finally, Chambers expressed IFES' excitement over Interior Minister **Ziyad Baroud**, who is working towards enacting key electoral reforms for the upcoming municipality elections.

Yacoubian enumerated three key points about the elections and the cabinet formation process. First, while Lebanon has formed a consensus cabinet, it still remains in “unstable equilibrium” and is susceptible to domestic and external dynamics that could unsettle the country. Importantly, the cabinet formation impasse was largely driven by internal political dynamics, not external meddling. In fact, it was external actors that eventually pushed the sides into agreement. The cabinet politicking has deepened inter-sectarian and intra-sectarian tensions, especially as the memory of the May 2008 violence sits uneasily in the back of everyone’s mind. Exacerbating these internal tensions, the relations between Israel and Lebanon continue to sour and events could spiral without warning.

Second, Yacoubian emphasized the importance of the inter-confessional dialogue that officially began in 2006. She emphasized the value of dialogue for its own sake as a confidence builder, in addition to its potential to reach agreements on other issues. Specifically, she argued **the government must pass a number of reforms prior to next year’s municipal elections**, such as the adoption of pre-printed ballot papers, the lowering of the voter age, the institution of direct election of municipal heads, and the decentralization of government. The government should focus on empowering people at the local level, especially to help minimize widespread corruption. Third, the U.S. must “stay above the fray” with a focus on strengthening institutions, encouraging dialogue, fighting corruption, and building capacity and transparency. Furthermore, the U.S. must pursue regional security and peace.

Cammack observed there is a fair amount of continuity between the Bush administration and Obama administration concerning policy for Lebanon. He emphasized the importance of separating regional dynamics from America’s bilateral relationship with Lebanon. The two countries share many interests, such as furthering the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, stability in Iraq, addressing Hezbollah’s weapons and bolstering Lebanon’s military and internal security forces. Cammack rejected the claim that the U.S. is arming the government into a civil war with Hezbollah, contending a balance of power is needed to avoid a repeat of the events of May 2008. He affirmed the necessity of supporting democratic institutions, but the question is how the U.S. can do so effectively. Cammack sees great **potential in Lebanon’s youth who grew up after the civil war and perhaps can therefore transcend the sectarian politics of their parents**. Cammack asserted we saw their potential in the Cedar Revolution before the “feudal lords swooped in” and took over. Finally, Cammack reaffirmed America’s commitment to Lebanon, regardless of President Obama’s policy of engagement with Syria.

During the question and answer session, Yacoubian clarified that while the U.S. should remain above the fray of internal Lebanese politics, it should not turn its back on the youth of Lebanon. In fact, **only by staying above the fray and supporting institutions can the U.S. effectively promote democratic ideals in Lebanon**.

In response to a question about Hezbollah’s recent invitation to the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) to enter Beirut’s southern suburb of Dahiyeh, Chambers explained that it is a “fantastic” step for the ISF, who have been saying and doing all the right things recently. It shows **Hezbollah clearly endorses the ISF as a non-sectarian, legitimate force**, as opposed to previous perceptions of the ISF as a Sunni instrument of power.

When asked about Lebanon’s civil society, Yacoubian asserted it is one of the most vibrant in the Arab world. Yet **despite the advances of civil society, their efforts have largely been stymied by a feudal political system**. For example, Chambers pointed out that parliament rejected a list of reform proposals put forth by civil society groups. However, politicians are slowly realizing the vast public dissatisfaction with the current system, compelling them towards change.