



### **LEBANESE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2009: A DETERMINING FACTOR IN LEBANON'S FATE**

January 6, 2009

#### ***Background***

The confrontation in Lebanon between the pro-sovereignty forces of March 14 coalition and the pro-Syrian March 8 groups will reach a crucial and decisive point with the 2009 parliamentary elections. Those who will win the elections will rule the country, at least for the next four years and possibly beyond.

Lebanon is a parliamentary democracy, and the Parliament holds significant power over the Executive branch, be it the Presidency or the Council of Ministers. To appreciate the importance of parliamentary elections in Lebanon, one needs only to recall that the Syrian regime, during its occupation of Lebanon, exerted considerable efforts in drafting Lebanese electoral laws, in forming lists of candidates for parliament, and in ensuring the success of certain candidates. Furthermore, the late PM Rafic Hariri was killed to prevent a victory of the anti-Syrian coalition in the 2005 elections, then in 2006 and 2007 as many as four parliamentarians were assassinated along with scores of innocent civilians, and dozens of MPs were forced into hiding in an effort to eliminate the legitimately-elected majority control of the Parliament.

Today, and following the Doha agreement of May 2008 which led to the election of a new President, the formation of a national unity council of ministers and the passage of a new electoral law, the country is going through a period of status quo pending the parliamentary elections of 2009, which will produce a new political landscape. This could easily and radically change the current political situation and lead to a reversal of the last four years' achievements of the Cedar Revolution.

#### ***The Election Law***

The Doha agreement of May 21, 2008 concluded two weeks after the Hezbollah takeover of Beirut, and the new electoral law passed on September 29, 2008 under the pressure of forced entente, set up the showground for the parliamentary elections of 2009.

Despite the unfavorable circumstances surrounding the generation of the new law, positive elements have nevertheless emerged, eliminating the nefarious effects of the Syrian occupation on the previous election laws and implementing some of the reforms proposed by the Special National Commission on Electoral Reforms.

Most notable of these elements are (1) the return to the caza law of 1960, with a more reasonable districts distribution, (2) the enactment of campaign financing laws, and (3) the passage of campaign media laws.

Still many hoped-for reforms remain absent, particularly (1) the proportionality system of election, (2) the equality among electoral districts, (3) the lowering of the minimum voting age to 18, (4) the Out of Country Voting, (5) the usage of pre-printed ballots, and (6) the creation of the Independent Electoral Commission.

## ***Concerns***

The democratic forces in Lebanon are still concerned about:

1. Security Threats, emanating from:
  - Absence of any legal authority over many electoral districts, specifically the ones controlled by Hezbollah in the South, in Baabda, in Beirut, and the Bekaa totaling as many as seven districts out of 26.
  - Use of violence, assassinations, bombings, and different forms of intimidation against voters and candidates alike.
2. Syrian interference, manifested already through:
  - Movements of troops on the Syrian-Lebanese borders next to certain districts unfavorable to Syrian candidates, e.g. Akkar.
  - Statements by Syrian politicians, including President Assad, predicting the triumph of the pro-Syrian March 8 groups.
  - Activities by Syrian Intelligence, noted by some in Lebanon, particularly after Brigadier Rustom Ghazali was apparently assigned the task of monitoring the Lebanese elections.
3. Iranian interference through monetary influence and other forms of bribery channeled through parties and individuals allied with the Syrian-Iranian axis, i.e. Hezbollah and Aoun, to illegally buy votes in certain districts.
4. Fraud and other ways of tampering with voters' lists, with ballot casting and with ballot counting, all of which happened in previous elections.

## ***Proposals***

Several measures need to be put in place to counter the abovementioned threats:

1. Monitoring systems are to be active early on in the process-as early as candidacies are declared and campaigns are launched. Candidates and all Lebanese citizens should be made aware of these systems and be encouraged to notify of any illegality, particularly if it is security-related.
2. Reporting mechanism should accurately inform authorities in Lebanon and the friends of Lebanon abroad of the unfolding of the whole elections' process up to the announcement of the final results.
3. Rapid and proper responses from the USG and other nations in the world concerned about Lebanon's future should take place in case of irregularities; and the interested parties should quickly intervene to expose and stop any attempt to sabotage Lebanon's democracy during the 2009 elections.

The Government of Lebanon, Lebanese political groups, Lebanese and non-Lebanese NGOs, the USG, the European governments and the UN should cooperate to ensure the safe and lawful progression of the elections.

Free and Fair elections in Lebanon in 2009 are undoubtedly a crucial milestone in the recovery of a democratic and sovereign Lebanon.

In addition, these elections are decisive in advancing freedom in the Arab world and bringing about stability and peace in the region.