

the week

the big idea



Supporters of the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party, members of the March 14 coalition, at a rally in the Beirut suburb of Ashrafieh. Joseph Barrak / AFP

Stumbling blocs

As Lebanon's closely contested elections approach, it is clear that the era of high-stakes, zero-sum politics is over, Elias Muhanna writes

In five weeks, Lebanon will hold its much-anticipated parliamentary elections. Squaring off are two political coalitions that have spent the better part of four years at each others' throats. In one corner stands March 14, a pro-American group of Sunni, Christian and Druze parties that emerged from the crucible of the "Cedar Revolution" following the assassination of the billionaire prime minister Rafik Hariri in early 2005. Opposing it is a curious yet durable alliance known informally as March 8, which unites Lebanon's two main Shiite parties (Hizbollah and Amal) with the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), a predominantly Christian but officially secularist party led by General Michel Aoun.

The country's highways have been festooned with campaign advertisements for months. On a recent drive from Byblos to Beirut, I counted 89 billboards for the FPM alone, an average of one every quarter mile. The parties have gone all out – taking the campaign beyond print and TV to Facebook and Twitter – to enrage their constituents by casting these elections as "fateful" and "epoch-making". Lebanon's very identity is at stake, they argue: its orientation and strategic alignment in a polarised region.

Despite the hype, however, signs increasingly suggest that the actual outcome of the elections will be far less significant than the manoeuvring of the post-election period – when the cabinet will be assembled, a prime minister chosen and the veto powers of the opposition decided. The months after the election seem likely to bring the break-up of existing alliances, the creation of new ones and a redrawing of the Lebanese political map. This is a product both of changing regional dynamics as well as growing fractiousness among Lebanon's political elite, who have begun to sacrifice coalition unity in favour of safeguarding their own parties' parliamentary representation.

The campaign thus far has seen intense competition over seats between coalition allies, defections from one coalition to another, electoral horse-trading between political opponents, resignations, public spats, and an overall muddying of the once-pristine image of two monolithic parliamentary blocs that defined themselves as diametrically opposed in orientation and outlook. What seems certain is that the era of high-stakes, zero-sum politics in Lebanon is over – at least for the time being – having been replaced by the mundane triangulations of consociational compromise. Even as party leaders speak gravely of fateful elections and historic decisions

facing the Lebanese electorate, the political furniture is being shuffled discreetly behind the scenes.

Between the years 2005 and 2008, Lebanon was the portrait of a society in transformation. The car bomb that killed Rafik Hariri on Valentine's Day 2005 set in motion an astonishing saga that saw the expulsion of the Syrian Army from Lebanon, a war between Israel and Hizbollah, and a power vacuum at the highest levels of government. For three years, the lines of political affiliation were etched in stone. To cast a vote, carry a flag, or attend a demonstration was – for many Lebanese – to participate in a struggle for self-determination.

In May 2008, an agreement brokered in Doha put an end to 20 months of opposition protests, a downtown sit-in, and violent clashes between Hizbollah and pro-government forces. The terms included granting a cabinet veto to the opposition, hammering out a new electoral law, forming a transitional cabinet and electing Lebanese Army General Michel Suleiman as the new President of Lebanon.

The polarised rhetoric that has characterised the last four years has not really faded since Doha, but the Obama administration's new Middle East policy has forced Lebanese parties to adjust expectations. March 14 leaders have quieted their attacks on Damascus as Bashar al Assad has been courted by American and European diplomats. Meanwhile, Syria's peace negotiations with Israel seem to have prompted Hizbollah to display greater openness to the idea of integrating its weapons into a credible national defence. Processes of engagement and reconciliation within Arab ranks and between the United States and Iran have weakened the centripetal forces that helped produce two distinct political coalitions in Lebanon.

March 14 in particular has looked increasingly disorganised of late. While its leadership has gone to

great lengths to project an image of unity and commitment to the principles of the Cedar Revolution, the cracks in the coalition are becoming ever more apparent. This was evidenced most recently by the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's diatribe against his Sunni and Christian allies, which was captured on a camera phone and leaked to the press. In it, he railed against the ineptitude of Saad Hariri's Sunni fighters, and referred to Maronite Christians as a "bad breed". Many have speculated that Jumblatt – a key member of March 14 who leads a bloc of 16 seats in parliament – will drop out of the coalition following the elections.

By contrast, March 8 has remained relatively unified and on-message, largely because its binding principle – opposition to the Siniora government – still obtains, whereas the anti-Syrian sentiment that united the March 14 coalition has weakened over time. And while the opposition has also witnessed internal squabbling over seats – between Michel Aoun and the Amal leader Nabih Berri – there have been no significant fissures. On the other hand, disagreements among the loyalists have already led to the resignation of one prominent March 14 figure (the Democratic Renewal Movement leader Nassib Lahoud), and are likely to result in the replacement of other outspoken standard bearers of the Cedar Revolution by members of established old-guard families with local followings.

Most polls predict a very close race, unlikely to give either coalition a convincing mandate. Because of the way in which electoral districts are drawn, the vast majority of seats (about 100 out of 128) will witness little competition. The remaining swing seats fall largely in Christian-majority districts; these electoral battles will determine which coalition reaches a 65-seat majority. Analysts are divided as to who has the upper hand, but there is a consensus that the margin of victory will be a narrow one.

What will a victory mean for the winning coalition? It depends, first of all, on which side wins. Hassan Nasrallah, the charismatic secretary-general of Hizbollah, has called for the creation of a national unity government after June 7, vowing to grant March 14 a veto on all cabinet decisions should the opposition win the elections. March 14, for its part, has refused to reciprocate, and Saad Hariri has gone further to say that he will not participate in a cabinet led by March 8.

Some have suggested that Hariri's stance is a ploy to enrage his base by creating a do-or-die atmosphere surrounding the polls. Others spec-

ulate that Hizbollah will try to tempt Hariri to join a March 8 government by offering him the premiership, although most believe that it will be a different Sunni billionaire, Najib Miqati, who will be tapped, due to his excellent relations with both Damascus and Riyadh. On the other hand, if March 14 wins and refuses to give the opposition a veto, it is a virtual certainty that Hizbollah and Amal will boycott the cabinet, leading to the same kind of crisis that paralysed the government from November 2006 until the Doha Agreement.

The final factor that will influence the post-election order will be the response of the United States in the event of a March 8 victory. While the Europeans have said that they will work with either side, the US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, has signalled that America would have to review its military aid commitments to Lebanon should Hizbollah emerge as a member of the parliamentary majority. This is precisely why the opposition has stressed its preference for a power-sharing arrangement, and also why Hizbollah has publicly stated that it will not attempt to increase the size of its own parliamentary share, placing the onus on its allies to push the opposition over the top. Indeed, for March 8 to win, the Change and Reform Bloc led by Aoun will have to take more seats than Hizbollah and Amal combined. Casting itself as a minority partner in a much larger coalition and calling for a national unity government are strategies designed to mitigate an aggressive American posture toward Lebanon if the opposition prevails.

These countermeasures, however, will severely constrain the governing abilities of the winning side. Power-sharing will help insulate Lebanon from civil unrest (if March 14 wins) or from a disruption in economic ties with the West (if March 8 wins), but it seems likely to provide yet another preface for both coalitions to obstruct or avoid any far-reaching reform efforts. The systemic problems that cripple Lebanese politics – sectarianism, widespread corruption, massive public debt – are unlikely to be addressed without a strong executive mandate. The weakening of coalition ties may augur the end of an era defined by the rivalry between March 14 and March 8 – but merely reshuffling the existing sectarian alliances will do little more than prolong Lebanon's paralysis.

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the tangled web

The criminalisation of journalism

Air France Flight 438, from Paris, was to land at Mexico City at 6pm on Saturday, April 18. Five hours before landing, the captain's voice announced that US authorities had prohibited the plane from flying over US territory. The explanation: among the passengers aboard was a person who was not welcome in the United States for reasons of national security.

A few minutes later, the same voice told the startled passengers that the plane was heading for Fort-de-France, Martinique, because the detour the plan needed to take to reach its destination was too long and the fuel was insufficient.

The stopover in that French territory in the Caribbean would be only to refuel the plane. Exhaustion was becoming an issue among the passengers. But the central question, spoken in undertones, was the identity of the "terrorist" passenger, because if the "gringos" say it, "it must be because he must be a terrorist".

Looking at those of us sitting in the back of the plane, two passengers said no terrorist could be there because "nobody there looks like a Muslim".

Again in the air, and preparing for another four hours of travel, a man who identified himself as the co-pilot came to me. Trying to look discreet, he asked if I was "Mr Calvo Ospina". I told him yes.

"The captain wants to sleep, that's why I came here," he said, and he invited me to accompany him to the back of the plane. There, he told me that I was the person "responsible" for the detour.

Hernando Calvo Ospina
Progreso Weekly
progreso-weekly.com



Swine flu's ticket to ride

If there was ever a graphic illustration of how global interconnectedness affects public health, it's the swine flu affair. Wherever it started, the current crop of cases seems related to Mexico, either as the epicentre or via travellers. Four US states have cases. Those not on the Mexican border are related to travel to Mexico. Kansas, New York City... the suspect cases in secondary school teachers and students in Auckland, New Zealand just returned from Mexico. And France has two suspect cases also just returned from Mexico, as does Spain. We've discussed the problem of infectious disease on aeroplanes several times here. Surprisingly there are few documented cases in the medical literature (there's a good review by Mangili and Gendreau in the March 2005 *Lancet*). There is at least one flu outbreak in 1979 caused by turning off the ventilation system in a plane full of military recruits while it sat on the runway (Moser et al, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, July 1979). Here's the abstract:

A jet airliner with 54 persons aboard was delayed on the ground for three hours because of engine failure during a take-off attempt.

Most passengers stayed on the aeroplane during the delay. Within 72 hours, 72 per cent of the passengers became ill with symptoms of cough, fever, fatigue, headache, sore throat and myalgia. One passenger, the apparent index case, was ill on the aeroplane, and the clinical attack rate among the others varied with the amount of time spent aboard. Virus antigenically similar to A/Texas/1/77 (H3N2) was isolated from eight of 31 passengers cultured, and 20 of 22 ill persons tested had serologic evidence of infection with this virus. The aeroplane ventilation system was inoperative during the delay and this may account for the high attack rate.

Effect Measure
scienceblogs.com/effectmeasure

Kilgore man faces ordeal on hunting trip

A Kilgore man's hunting trip to Pakistan turned into an ordeal when he was almost arrested along the way, but he wouldn't trade the experience for anything and says he would return in a heartbeat.

Dee Headley, whose company BASA Resources Inc. paid for his trip to hunt blue sheep and Himalayan ibex, was on his way to Pakistan when he was detained by officials in Dubai.

The problem: they apparently believed Headley might be an American assassin.

Dubai was scheduled as a stop on his aeroplane ride to Islamabad. Headley said his travel agent apparently neglected to get the proper documentation for his Browning 300 Winchester single mag rifle.

"That's my best gun," Headley said. With the state-of-the-art scope, the weapon is worth a pretty penny.

Headley was also sporting a set of walkie-talkies, a satellite telephone, a spotting scope (like a telescope) and a really good set of binoculars.

As Dubai officials grilled him for hours, Headley says became more and more worried he might end up in a foreign jail.

"I was met by two uniformed people who nearly arrested me," Headley said. "They said I didn't have the proper documents, which I didn't know I needed to have."

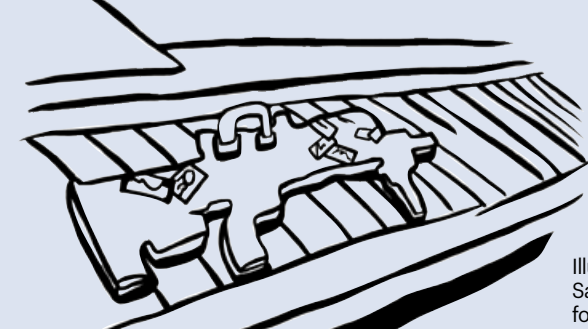
He narrowly escaped arrest but he didn't get away with his gun and accoutrements.

"I had to leave everything there – except my satellite phone – because there was no time for the paperwork without missing my whole trip," he explained.

Headley promptly called the outfitter in Pakistan and he got to work on borrowing a gun in Islamabad – a difficult task.

"There's not a lot of guns there. Believe it or not, private citizens don't have a lot of guns; people with money and government officials or people connected to government officials have the guns," Headley said.

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Illustrations by Sarah Lazarovic for The National