Michel Aoun’s supporters revere him as a reforming hero, the only man able to repair a nation’s woes — and he agrees. Elias Muhanna on the overlooked core of Lebanon’s opposition

When General Michel Aoun, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), took to the stage at a campaign rally in south Beirut two Saturdays ago, a sea of citrus-coloured flags — the orange banners of his own party alongside the yellow standards of Hizbollah — churned before him. The choice of venue was strategic and symbolic. One kilometre to the west lay Haret Hreik, the mixed Christian and Shiite neighbourhood where Aoun was born in 1935. A kilometre to the east, perched on the foothills above Beirut, sat the presidential palace, the scene of his defeat at the hands of the Syrian Army during the civil war. And lying just to the south was al-Dahiya, the epicentre of Hizbollah’s military resistance, much of which was bombed to rubble by the Israeli Air Force in the summer of 2006.

The bespectacled general glared out over the lectern into the falling dusk. “Why do they reject the Third Republic?” he bellowed, referring to his rivals and invoking his party’s ambitiously-titled electoral platform. “Is the strengthening of democracy and the creation of a secular state that safeguards equal rights for all of its citizens the reason for their rejection?”

Like his electoral ally Hassan Nasrallah, Michel Aoun is a deeply polarising figure in Lebanon. A Christian general who led the Lebanese Army against various adversaries during the civil war — including the PLO, Lebanese Christian militias and the Syrian Army — he has, since 2005, locked horns repeatedly with the March 14 coalition, an alliance of several parties backed by the United States that holds a slim majority in parliament. Now Aoun — whose career in politics stretches from his days as the leader of the resistance to Syria’s occupation of Lebanon to his rapprochement with Damascus two decades later — is at the helm of an opposition campaign that vows to replace the corrupt structures of a troubled republic with a new order.

To his supporters, Aoun is a larger-than-life figure who has come to lead Lebanon’s Christians — weak and divided since the end of the civil war — back to their former prominence, and to set the country on a path to national reconciliation and economic sustainability. To his detractors, “Napolaoun” is a power-obsessed megalomaniac who will do anything — even join forces with his former arch-nemesis Syria and its Lebanese allies — in order to fight his way to the top of Lebanon’s political hierarchy.

If the opposition prevails on June 7, headlines around the world will read “HIZBOLLAH WINS” even though the Shiite party is likely to hold no more seats in parliament than the dozen or so it occupies today. It will, in fact, be the gains of the Free Patriotic Movement — and the affiliated parties of its Change and Reform Bloc — that will push the opposition into the majority, giving Aoun and his allies control of the largest block of seats in parliament.

Analysts and commentators have produced millions of words in an attempt to understand Hizbollah and its intentions, but Aoun and his movement have been overlooked. The FPM’s ambitious and sweeping reform agenda, but the party — which sent representatives to parliament for the first time in 2005 — has only a few months to present a plan to the electorate. And if the FPM wins, it will be impossible to ignore it. But it is clear that Michel Aoun and the Free Patriotic Movement are poised to play a major role — one that will test the sincerity and determination of the parties who regard a weak and ineffectual state.

Bring it Aoun
The princess died

In the latest UAE-based novel, Anastasia Romanov avoids assassination by dashing off to Dubai

By Tom Gara

In March of 1917, Tsar Nicholas Romanov II of Russia gave up his throne, handing over power to a provisional government meant to facilitate Russia's transition to democracy. And throughout it all, in October the Bolsheviks took power by force, Russia descended into civil war. The Romanov family - the last family under house arrest in Yekaterinburg - a city in central Russia. On July 17, 1918, as loyalist forces were gathering outside Yekaterinburg, Rasputin took the Romanovs into a subterranean tunnel and had their corpses dug out and disposed of.

And there has been a long-standing claim that not every Russian royal was处置ed. One of the most dramatic examples of this was the claim that Rasputin himself was not disposed of. This claim has been supported by the discovery of Rasputin's remains, which have been found in a box in the basement of the Rasputin family home.

In August 2007, a Russian archaeologist published a report that had been kept secret for years. The report claimed that Rasputin was not disposed of at all. Instead, he was buried alive. The archaeologist had discovered evidence of this in the form of a letter written by Rasputin himself. The letter was found in a box under the Rasputin family home.

In the latest UAE-based novel, Anastasia Romanov avoids assassination by dashing off to Dubai. This is a work of science-fiction, not history. However, the story is based on a true event: the assassination of Rasputin in 1916. In August 2007, a Russian archaeologist published a report that had been kept secret for years. The report claimed that Rasputin was not disposed of at all. Instead, he was buried alive. The archaeologist had discovered evidence of this in the form of a letter written by Rasputin himself. The letter was found in a box under the Rasputin family home.

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Rare bumblebee coming back to UK

A bumblebee which is extinct in the UK is to be reintroduced from New Zealand as part of a conservation effort.

The short-haired bumblebee was exported from the UK to New Zealand in the 1930s to help with the pollination of lamb's lettuce in the late 19th Century for pollinate crops. It was last recorded in the UK in 1913.

Researchers from the Royal Zoological Society of Edinburgh in Scotland and the University of Canterbury in New Zealand have launched a scheme to bring the species home. The project aims to reintroduce a species that has become extinct in the wild in the UK, with the hope that it may also be possible to reintroduce it to New Zealand in the future.

The short-haired bumblebee is a rare species, with only around 100 colonies remaining in the wild in the UK. It is listed as a critically endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The project will involve the release of bumblebees at a series of sites in the UK, including the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh and the National Forest in the West Midlands.

It is hoped that the reintroduction will help to increase the population of the short-haired bumblebee in the UK and that it will eventually become established in the wild.

Bumblebees are important pollinators and play a vital role in the health of many plant species. The reintroduction of the short-haired bumblebee will help to ensure that this important species continues to thrive in the UK.
Alain Aoun, the nephew of Michel Aoun and a candidate for Parliament, at his campaign office. Brian Clark for The National


To west Beirut, the campaign relies on slick visuals and fancy slogans to build up anticipated success. This is that easy to forget how largely uncharted this is.
The FPM, with its roots in the Shi'ite community, has been a key player in Lebanese politics. The election of the new president, Michel Aoun, who was a strong advocate of the Syrian presence, marked a significant shift in the political landscape. Aoun's ascendancy has led to a new era in Lebanese politics, characterized by increased pressure on Hizbollah to disengage from its military activities and seek political solutions to the country's problems.

The FPM's victory in the election was not just a triumph for Aoun and his family, but also a symbol of the growing dissatisfaction with the Amal movement's control over the political system. This has opened up a space for new political forces to emerge and challenge the traditional power dynamics in Lebanon.

The FPM's platform is based on a commitment to territorial integrity, national unity, and the protection of Lebanon's sovereignty. It has also called for the withdrawal of external forces, including Hizbollah's armed wing, and for the establishment of a genuine democratic government that can represent the interests of all Lebanese citizens.

The FPM's success in the election was seen as a turning point in Lebanon's political history, marking the end of the Amal era and the beginning of a new era of political change. The FPM's victory has also led to increased expectations for political reform and accountability, as well as for the disengagement of Hizbollah's armed wing from the country's political affairs.

However, the FPM's victory has also sparked debate about the future of Hizbollah, which remains a key player in Lebanese politics. Many Lebanese are concerned about the potential for the FPM's success to lead to increased pressure on Hizbollah to disengage from its military activities, which could have serious implications for Lebanon's stability.

The FPM's victory has also raised questions about the future of Lebanon's political system, as well as about the role of the West in shaping the country's political landscape. The FPM's success has led to increased pressure on Western governments to re-examine their policies towards Lebanon, and to consider the implications of their support for Hizbollah and other political forces in the country.

In summary, the FPM's victory in the election has marked a significant shift in Lebanon's political landscape, but it has also raised a number of important questions about the future of Hizbollah, the role of the West in shaping the country's political system, and the need for political reform in Lebanon.
In February, 2003, about a month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, former American diplomatic chief to Baghdad, Donald Rumsfeld, was sent to meet with Saddam Hussein's deputy prime minister. The meeting was to discuss the situation in Iraq, but the discussions quickly turned to other matters, including the relationship between Iraq and the United States. It is claimed that Rumsfeld warned Hussein about the forthcoming war and the danger it posed to his government. However, Hussein denied any knowledge of the meeting and insisted that it had been a merely formal visit.

In March, 2003, the United States launched a military campaign against Iraq, which resulted in the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The Iraq Museum, which housed thousands of ancient artifacts, was targeted by looters. According to the Museum's deputy director, some 15,000 objects were stolen, among them some of the most famous artifacts in the world, such as the Mesopotamian tablets, the Rosetta Stone, and the Sumerian cylinder seals. The theft was a result of the chaos and confusion that followed the fall of Hussein's regime, and it was caused by the lack of coordination and planning by the coalition forces.

After the looting, the Iraq Museum was closed and remained closed for several months. During this time, the museum was protected by a small group of museum staff and volunteers. In late March, the museum was reopened, but it remained closed to the public until the summer of 2003. During this time, the museum was kept open with the help of international donors and the efforts of a few dedicated museum staff.

In the summer of 2003, about half of the museum's collection was recovered, but some artifacts were still missing. In 2004, an international team of experts was dispatched to the museum to assess the damage and to start the process of reassembling the objects. The team worked for several months, and by 2005, the museum was able to reopen to the public.

The looting of the Iraq Museum was a major blow to the global community, which had been working for decades to protect and preserve the world's cultural heritage. The theft of the artifacts was a tragic event, but it also highlighted the importance of international cooperation and the need for better planning and coordination in the future.

In conclusion, the looting of the Iraq Museum was a result of the chaos and confusion that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The theft of the artifacts was a tragedy, but it also served as a reminder of the importance of international cooperation and the need for better planning and coordination in the future to protect and preserve the world's cultural heritage.
The Nobel Prize-winning biologist Harold Varmus is a master researcher and a canny politician. Daniel Kevles considers the Obama adviser’s vision for restoring the dignity of public science

The presidency of George W. Bush was, on the whole, an unimpressive time for public science in America. Focusing was part of the problem: the Bush administration’s devotion to tax cuts and purchase of expensive wars look away from the need to fund research and development, especially in areas not labeled as “national security” or “national con- dition.” But what distressed scientists most was the regressive, aggressive, anti-science bias of the White House that was the result of the Newt Gingrich-inspired, overtly anti-science political consensus. The Bush administration refract science advice through political filters. What the Bush administration used to call “co-chair” and “managing director.”

The election campaign, as co-chair

the story of his experiences in sci

ience, policy and the intersection of same) when making science-re

cientific consensus that it is caused by the disruption of normal genes. It was just such an idea that became a key principle of Varmus’s personal and professional life. The disease is caused by the insertion of a normal gene from an animal virus into a human cell. Because the virus is an infectious agent, it can infect others, who can in turn infect others, and so on. This is what is called self-sustaining infection.

One of the tragedies of the Bush years was that the politics of science—outside the ups and downs of the funding nat- ure of the art of science helped make it

Aid for AIDS relief (one of his administration’s few scientific priorities) was a $15 billion appropriation to the NIH by 2012 for fighting Aids. He added this to the NIH’s $11 billion budget, making it the largest single federal agency. Varmus explained, to place budgetary bets on research programs that might give people hope in the future, he was named Montgomery County Commis sioner of the Year.

The Art and Politics of Science

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Beirut's new cultural centre just a receptacle for impossible dreams? Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reports

On the southern edge of downtown Beirut lies a time capsule of empty land known as Plot 128-4. On one side, it huddles up against the elevated highway that runs parallel to the cornice and6.6kWh links traffic between East Beirut and West. On the other, it slope down to a small street, beyond which is a public square aranged around an enormous old fig tree.

For many years this area was a suburb. Fifty years ago it was a sprawling hinterland. The city has neither a modern material expression to a notion the town Beirut. There was a strong argument against it, and I was not thrilled to it. But I am to be an advocate of downtown because the art world in Beirut is not accessible to all, north, south, east and west. Symbolically, downtown is the meeting place par excellence. It is a model of an urban development that took over the whole location. The museum is empty, and as silent as a long-forsaken stage set. En engagement. Consider the case of an urban cultural building? It's not conducive to mourning. It will be an unexpected afterthought. It will be an empty shell but the House of Arts and Culture is the vehicule for bringing them into line with the culture ministry's regulations.

Among Beirut's community of artists and cultural figures, however, there is little enthusiasm for the project. Few believe it will ever happen, and even fewer understand why the Oman donation including from the building itself rather than func

tions as a blank canvas. The museum is empty, and as silent as a long-forsaken stage set. At the moment, there may be no cultural event in Beirut, but there are several hands in the proverbial pot. One is the National Museum – the building itself rather than functional. The museum is empty, and as silent as a long-forsaken stage set. At the moment, there may be no cultural event in Beirut, but there are several hands in the proverbial pot. One is the National Museum – the building itself rather than functional. The museum is empty, and as silent as a long-forsaken stage set. At the moment, there may be no cultural event in Beirut, but there are several hands in the proverbial pot. One is the National Museum – the building itself rather than functional.
Nathan Deuel watches the would-be famous queue up for the Kingdom's first open casting call

"You ready to rock?" asks Todd Albert Nino, his electric, American grin putting a week's worth of fashionable beard to shame. We're arrayed in a70-inch-out conference room. Looking nervous but resigned, the sad-eyed Somali national, the story Filipino tech trio don the long sleeves, and I sit back and hold my breath.

For the first time in its modern history, Saudi Arabia is sitting in the site of an open casting call. Standard in Los Angeles, Berlin, London, Mumbai and other cultural capitals, the auditions were being held at a Holiday Inn Hotel converted from a compound that once housed the staff of British Airways, which suspended operations in Saudi during the troubles from 2003 to 2006, when dozens of Saudis were killed in bombings and punished executions.

But it's 2009, and things have changed. British Airways resumed flights to Saudi Arabia at the end of May; the tourism ministry is making noises about increasing visitors, the religious police recently apologized for cuffing a man who allegedly kissed his wife, and every day, women at a small in downtown Riyadh samaritans the halls to unveil their hair.

Not only is Riyadh the site of an open audition, the casting agents, such as they are, struggle with the concept of standardised preparation, and instead seem bizarro worlds. There are fly-overs for cuff-entrance of Youssef, a slick-haired Saudi from Gulf Casting, the just-founded talent company running its first casting call. He's simply outside. He's seen stage right, Ali fumes. This is the first audition! The American is missing you too! "I was getting excited," Todd admits.

Tentatives smoking, Ali and Todd air back for round two. But something is wrong. I witness the panicked entrance of Youssef, a slick-haired Saudi from Gulf Casting, the just-founded talent company running its first casting call. He's introducing to Ali, whose face turns white.

"I don't have to do it again, in a compound," says Todd.

Moments later, the first audition of the morning gets underway. Todd and Ali have never met Khalid, a barrel-chested, 33-year-old Saudi in a smart polo shirt, crisp jeans and expensive leather shoes. He's simply responded to the call, which was spread via Facebook, email and fliers.

"Can you do impressions?" Todd asks.

Khalid begins to personify "Merits man," a Saudi stereotype referring to a sun young mall walker courting for female attention whose awkwardness is so stiff he can hardly turn his head.

"That's just great," Todd says, guffawing. "I think we're gonna give you the part. You're in." As Khalid sips stage right, Ali fumes. This is the first audition! The American's missing you too! "I was getting excited," Todd admits.

Tentatives smoking, Ali and Todd air back for round two. But something is wrong. I witness the panicked entrance of Youssef, a slick-haired Saudi from Gulf Casting, the just-founded talent company running its first casting call. He's introducing to Ali, whose face turns white.

"We'll have to do it again, in a compound," I hear Todd admit.

As the candidates stream through over the next few hours – a 29-year-old Moroccan chattering with fright, two 25-year-old Saudis who paint-sweetheart a scene of sitting in the other room, undistributed. Youssef makes the entrance of Youssef, a slick-haired Saudi from Gulf Casting, the just-founded talent company running its first casting call. He's introducing to Ali, whose face turns white.

The next candidate is Daoud, a 36-year-old advertising executive. He's half-Saudi, half-American and carries himself like a teetotal gentry boy. His great brown thobe barely concealing his grit and mirth. He makes eye contact with every one of us as he strides the room, acting out the bizarre antics of a teacher he once had.

"I'm not positive I'm a genius," he says by way of conclusion. "But everyone tells me that I'm a genius. I just need to be comforted to show it."

After Daoud comes 17-year-old Ali, a diminutive borough showed faced blobby jeans and the bearing of a skatedown. Sitting there dressed and confident, he's got so much attitude he can barely get his words out of a marble-lined car. "What can you do for us?" asks Ali. "I don't know," the young Ali says.

Next is Piraz, a 25, an articulate Indian national with bold eyebrows and the square shoulders of an athlete. "I'm very good at mathematics," he deadpans.

"Nobody told you what the film was about," says Todd, scratching. He glares at Youssef, who grins sheepishly. The potential actors keep coming in not really knowing why they're here, other than to get famous. The potential actors keep coming in not really knowing why they're here, other than to get famous. The potential actors keep coming in not really knowing why they're here, other than to get famous. The potential actors keep coming in not really knowing why they're here, other than to get famous.

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