

HIZBULLAH AND THE 2009 ELECTIONS IN LEBANON

On 7 June, voters will go to the polls in Lebanon to elect a new parliament. These are the fifth legislative elections since the end of the civil war in 1990 and the first time they are held on one day. The Lebanese state is expected to deploy around 50,000 army and security forces, almost two-thirds of Lebanese military capabilities. The Hizbullah led-opposition might well win the majority of seats, thus gaining almost complete control of the country. One week before the elections, the Hizbullah leader delivered an empowering speech in which he promised to strengthen the Lebanese state by fortifying its army through acquiring Iranian weapons. How will this affect the domestic tug-of-war between the two opposing camps in Lebanon, and what bearing does it have on the regional dynamics in the Middle East, especially in light of the UN-backed internationalised tribunal investigating Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005?

Hizbullah's evolution

Hizbullah changes as circumstances change. Since its inception, the party has been keen to control the Lebanese political system, initially through a top-down revolutionary process aimed at obtaining power by military force. This radicalism proved futile in the 1980s. Opting for *realpolitik*, Hizbullah changed its political strategy and recognised the 1990 Ta'if Agreement, Lebanon's new constitution.

Benefiting from the Syrian influence that controlled Lebanon militarily, Hizbullah played its cards well and was able to extract an important concession from the Lebanese government by being classified as a resist-



Hizbullah supporters wave Lebanese and Hizbullah flags as they listen to a speech by Hizbullah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah during Resistance and Liberation Day celebrations, Beirut, 25 May 2009.

ance movement and not a militia. This meant that it was able to keep its arms and continue resisting the Israeli occupation, while the militias of all the Lebanese political parties – which had participated in the 15-year civil war – had to disband and surrender their weapons to the Lebanese army. This exception made Hizbullah the strongest military player in Lebanon, even more powerful than the Lebanese army and security forces.

From the early 1990s Hizbullah endeavoured to control the political system through a bottom-up process of a gradual participation in the democratic system, starting with the parliament, the municipal councils, and the Cabinet or Council of Ministers, the main executive body of the country. Thus, Hizbullah shifted to acceptance of, and engagement in, the democratic

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process under a sectarian-confessional political and administrative system. More dramatically, Hizbullah's political wing modified its demand from the abolishment of political sectarianism to the adoption of the political Maronite (Christian) discourse, which stresses abolishing political sectarianism in the mentality, before officially abolishing it in written laws. Based on its demographic strength, Hizbullah called for reducing the voting age from 21 to 18 and changing the electoral system to proportional representation, which the party believed would give the 18 ethno-confessional communities more equitable representation.

The Syrian withdrawal

A major shift in relations between Lebanon and Syria occurred after Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination on 14 February 2005. This incident polarised the country into two political groups. The 'March 8 Group' comprising Hizbullah, the Amal Movement, and other pro-Syrian groups, the majority of whom are Shi'ite, organised a demonstration in support of Syria. The other group, known as the 'Cedar Revolution' or the 'March 14 Trend', responded with a demonstration in downtown Beirut of an estimated one million people, spearheaded by the Sunni-majority 'Future Trend', to demand the withdrawal of the Syrian troops and the truth about Hariri's assassination. Under street pressure and UNSC Resolution 1559, Syria withdrew its military presence on 26 April 2005, after 29 years. While *March 14* hoped that Syrian influence in Lebanon would wane, Hizbullah's strategic-political relationship with the Syrian regime remained strong.

Changing alliances

Hizbullah contested the first parliamentary elections after the Syrian withdrawal, in June 2005, on the basis of a temporary four-way alliance – or marriage of convenience – between Sa'd Hariri's Future Trend, Amal, and the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). Hariri's Future Trend and his allies won 72 out of 128 seats. Hizbullah won 14 seats, adding two seats to its previous gains. Hizbullah's right to bear arms and resist the occupation, even after the Israeli withdrawal on 25 May 2000, was enshrined in the policy statements of the successive Lebanese Cabinets, including the two headed by the Western-backed Prime Minister Siniora after the Syrian withdrawal in April 2005.

The tide changed and the electoral marriage of convenience ended. Hizbullah intensified its engagement

in the democratic game through negotiations, bargaining, and alliances, most notably by striking a 10-point Understanding with the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) led by the Maronite ex-General Michel Aoun on 6 February 2006. This move was aimed at weakening *March 14* by allying the FPM with *March 8*, giving it more appeal to Christians.

Political deadlock

As a political remuneration for its acclaimed 'divine victory' in the July 2006 war with Israel, Hizbullah asked for the formation of a national unity Cabinet, where the party and its allies, most notably the FPM, wield veto power. This has allowed it to dominate the national political arena, after wielding its power over the legislature and the presidency. The tug of war between the Hizbullah-led opposition (*March 8*), on the one hand, and the Lebanese Cabinet and its supporters (*March 14*), on the other, led to a bitter polarisation, which plunged Lebanon into 537 days of stalemate and political deadlock, from 1 December 2006 to 21 May 2008.

In an interview with New TV in August 2006, Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, the Secretary General of the party, affirmed: Hizbullah 'with its huge military capabilities... could have staged a military coup and taken control of the country... We were capable of that and still are... My weapons are to defend the country, and all Lebanese... Have we ever used our weapons as a source of strength in municipal or parliamentary elections, or to impose certain shares and conditions? Never...'. In spite of all of these assurances and promises that Hizbullah would never effect change by military force, the party flexed its muscles on 8 May 2008 in the streets of West Beirut and the Shouf region – at the expense of killing around sixty Lebanese citizens – after the Cabinet threatened to shut down Hizbullah's telecommunications network and dismiss the head of security at Beirut Airport.

The situation was defused by the political agreement of 21 May – known as the 'Doha Accord' – between *March 14* and *March 8*, brokered by the Arab League. Hizbullah gained veto power in the next national unity 30-member Cabinet by a margin of 11 ministers, while *March 14* acquired 16 ministers and the President three. Hizbullah ended its sit-in in downtown Beirut and dismantled its tent city. After an unprecedented six months of vacuum in the seat of the presidency, a consensus president, Army Commander General Michael Sulayman, was elected on 25 May by 118 out of 127

MPs. The next day, Hizbullah celebrated the eighth anniversary of the nearly complete Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon with a fiery speech from Nasrallah, who stressed that Hizbullah continues to abide by the Ta'if Agreement and will honour the Doha Accord to the letter, that is participate in the political system as *it is*.

The run-up to the June elections

In this context, Hizbullah announced its 2009 election programme on 1 March, aimed at reaching out and allaying the fears of the other. Shaykh Na'im Qasim, Deputy Secretary General of the party, highlighted the most salient points based on the slogan 'we resist [Israel] together and together we build Lebanon'. The programme was divided into two parts: one on the resistance (Hizbullah's military wing), the other dealing with socio-economic development. The former included: (a) total independence and rejection of foreign tutelage in any form; (b) liberation of the land still under occupation and standing firm to 'Israeli dangers and aggression'; (c) development of a viable defence strategy with the Lebanese army to fend off any aggression against the country, and commitment to the principle of non-violence in respect to domestic rivalries: 'our central enemy is Israel... We do not have domestic foes and we will not respond to violence with violence.' The latter section included: (a) prioritisation of the economic situation, especially agriculture and industry; (b) social security and healthcare for everyone; (c) urban development concomitant with rural development; (d) the stamping out of corruption in all aspects of life; (e) a meritocratic approach to governmental institutions.

However, this upbeat programme contrasts sharply with political developments. Two international events weighed in. First, on 27 April 2009, the International Criminal Court (ICC) ordered the release of the four generals detained four years ago on suspicion of having a role in the 2005 Hariri assassination. Second, the UK resumed dialogue with the political wing of Hizbullah. Both events seem to have boosted the electoral prospects of the Hizbullah-led *March 8*. Mass firing of MK47s in the air to celebrate the former event contributed to an atmosphere of confrontation and defiance. Meanwhile, *March 14* was waiting for a balancing act from the international community to pressure Israel to withdraw from the border Ghajar village, which was occupied after the July 2006 war. Instead, there was another Israeli goodwill gesture, with the releasing of the cluster bomb maps as stipulated under UNSC resolution 1701. However, *March 14* considered this move insufficient to turn the tide to its side.

Meanwhile, on the domestic scene, on 13 May 2009, the supposedly neutral President of the Lebanese Republic entered the debate and announced that the *March 8* camp would win a narrow majority in the legislature. It is not clear if this was a tactical move aimed at calming the *March 8* camp so that the elections would pass without violence, or reflects his own opinion and preferences. Nasrallah's fiery 15 May 2009 mobilisation speech in celebration of the first anniversary of the May 8 2008 show of force further antagonised the situation. *March 14* interpreted this as the *March 8* camp's expectation of imminent power – either through electoral victory or another 'coup'.

According to the Doha Accord, the 2009 election law is based on an appended version of the 1960 election law, which divides the country according to small election districts (*aqdiya*) instead of the previous five election districts (*muhafazat*). *March 14* claim that the elections in all districts were scheduled on the same day (7 June), unprecedented since the Ta'if Agreement, in order to disadvantage Sa'd Hariri in his bid to win in both Beirut and Tripoli as he did in 2005. It is worth mentioning that in 2005 the Hariri-led *March 14* was able to secure the 28 seats in the North where Hizbullah has no constituency. This was conducive to obtaining a majority in the legislature after Hariri also secured Beirut, leaving only one seat vacant for Hizbullah. The prime minister was then inevitably selected from the *March 14* bloc, as the constitution requires that the legislature names the prime minister. Past practice and the situation on the ground make it doubtful that Hariri will be able to do the same in 2009.

In an interesting turn of events, a recent article in the German daily *Der Spiegel*, which implicated Hizbullah in the 2005 Hariri assassination, led indirectly to a diffusion of tensions. One of the most notable in a wave of domestic condemnations of the article was by the *March 14* leading cadre and head of the PSP, Druz MP Walid Jumblatt. Jumblatt's statement was well received by Nasrallah, who reiterated it to the letter in his 25 May speech, leading to rapprochement between the two parties after tensions erupted in violent military confrontations in May 2008. In a reconciliatory discourse – aimed, not only at defusing tensions with the Druz, but also with the Sunnis – Nasrallah reached out to the Sunnis of Beirut and explained what he meant when he termed 8 May a 'glorious day' in the sense of warding off Sunni-Shia discord (*fitna*). Nasrallah also conceded that it was also a 'sad and painful day' since people died and others lost their possessions.

Nevertheless, in the countdown to the 7 June 2009 elections, the war of words between the opposing



A campaign poster in support of the March 14 group.

parties has reached an unprecedented high, which run contrary to the détente presented in Hizbullah's election programme and agreed upon at the national dialogue sessions, headed by the president. But this is to be expected in Lebanese politics in such decisive elections, which might herald the inauguration of the 'third republic', namely. the Hizbullah-led opposition governing on its own. The *March 14* camp voiced this concern in the poster above that represents Hizbullah as holding the ministries of defence, foreign affairs, and labour.

Hizbullah's strategy and internal policy

There seems to be no tension between Hizbullah's domestic and regional ambitions, since the party has stuck its feet deep in the Lebanese domestic quagmire and flexed its military might in May 2008 in order 'to impose certain shares and conditions', in other words attaining veto power by force. This has tarnished Hizbullah's record of not having participated in the civil war, and also risks it being labelled as a militia, shattering the halo of the Resistance, all for short-term political gain. Nasrallah had promised in a speech that if the

Hizbullah-led opposition were to win a majority in the parliament, it would grant veto power in the Cabinet to *March 14*. More recently, Nasrallah extended a hand to *March 14* to join the *March 8* group in forming a national unity government. Will Nasrallah honour both promises or will he backtrack as was the case with his earlier assurance that the party would never use its weapons domestically, come what may? If so, then a real change in the status quo is unlikely since whichever scenario materialises, the political system will remain easy pray to Hizbullah's ambitions.

The US, Israel, Canada, and Australia label Hizbullah as a 'terrorist organisation', including the party's media affiliates, NGOs, and civil institutions. The Israeli government has made direct references to this election, with Ehud Barak, the Minister of Defence, warning the Lebanese of dire consequences if they voted for the Hizbullah-led opposition, while Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has called for an international arrest warrant against Nasrallah. These calls coincided with Israeli military drills and the charging, by the Lebanese military prosecutor, of 23 people for spying for Israel, a charge punishable by death according to the Lebanese penal code. The EU has so far declined to categorise Hizbullah as a terrorist organisation, with the exception of the UK, which had deemed Hizbullah's military wing a terrorist organisation and severed contact with it for a few years. The resumption of talks with Hizbullah's political wing caused a row in the British parliament, with Labour MP Andrew Gwynne questioning the foreign minister on the wisdom of such a move, which, according to him, not only affects domestic Lebanese dynamics but also has a bearing on the peace process since the 'British policy could undermine Arab moderates in the region who strive for peace through non-violent means'.

All these developments need to be taken into account when weighing up future EU policies towards Lebanon. What will the EU's reaction be if the Hizbullah-led opposition wins the legislative elections? How will the international community react to Hizbullah's electoral promise of acquiring Iranian weapons to strengthen the Lebanese army? How will the EU regard Hizbullah's strategic alliance with Syria and its ideological alliance with Iran in light of the two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iranian nuclear file? These elections have wide geopolitical implications, which need to be considered carefully.

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