

Political

update:– Hezbollah defeated in Lebanese elections; British prime minister calls for full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 – 11 June

Key points:

- Lebanon’s pro-Western ‘March 14 Alliance’ wins the Lebanese general election and calls for an end to Hezbollah’s militia and cabinet veto
- The pro-Syrian ‘March 8 Alliance,’ containing the militant group Hezbollah, remains in opposition after failing to win in Christian areas
- Hezbollah leader Nasrallah stresses the importance of his organisation’s militia for fighting Israel; British prime minister and foreign secretary call for disarmament of all Lebanese militias

Latest developments

- The final results for Sunday’s (7 June) general election in Lebanon, published on Monday (8 June), show a victory for Saad Hariri, with his pro-Western ‘March 14 Alliance’ winning 71 of the legislature’s 128 seats. Turnout, at 54 percent, was its highest since the 1975-91 civil war. After winning one more seat than in the 2005 general election, Hariri addressed a large crowd of supporters in the Lebanese capital, saying:

“Congratulations to you, congratulations to freedom, congratulations to democracy... There is no winner and loser in these elections, the only winner is democracy and Lebanon.” (07/06/09)

- In an interview with Lebanon’s Rai Uno television channel on Wednesday (10 June), Hariri said that he was no longer “afraid to become prime minister.” Hariri is the son of assassinated former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Fouad Siniora, ally of both Rafik and Saad Hariri, has held the post of prime minister since 2005.
- The March 8 Alliance, containing the pro-Syrian militant group Hezbollah, received 57 seats. Despite doing well in Muslim districts, the opposition coalition failed to win in the country’s Christian areas. In a televised speech on Sunday night (7 June), Hezbollah Secretary-General Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah said that “we accept these results.” However, Nasrallah also emphasised that Hezbollah’s arsenal will continue to be used for “facing the Israelis and defending the country.” In addition, Hezbollah Member of Parliament Mohamed Raad told the French AFP news agency on Monday (8 June) that:

“The majority must commit not to question our role as a resistance party, the legitimacy of our weapons arsenal and the fact that Israel is an enemy state.” (08/06/09)

- British Prime Minister Gordon Brown wrote to Lebanese President Michel Suleiman on Tuesday (9 June) to congratulate him for “holding the parliamentary elections in a safe and organised way.” He also said that the UK looks forward to:

“Cooperating with the new government to overcome major challenges facing Lebanon, in particular political and economic reforms and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.” (09/06/09)

- UN Security Council Resolution 1701 demands the disarmament of “all armed groups in Lebanon.” British Foreign Secretary David Miliband also welcomed the peaceful way in which the general election was conducted and urged the full implementation of UNSCR 1701. US Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, George Mitchell, will visit Lebanon on Friday (12 June) as part of a regional tour to push forward the Middle East peace process.
- The next stage for the Lebanese political system is for a cabinet to be formed and for the parliament to elect a new speaker who, under the rules of the constitution, must be a Shi’a Muslim. Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said on Wednesday (10 June) that he hoped that the new Lebanese cabinet would be formed quickly. He also said the experience of Hezbollah having veto power over all cabinet decisions “wasn’t successful.” Marwan Hamadeh of the ‘March 14 Alliance’ said on Wednesday (10 June) that his colleagues were “adamant” that no group would have a veto in the new cabinet and that a “national dialogue” is required to “progressively unify... [Hezbollah’s weapons] under the army’s control.”
- Former editor of the Beirut Daily Star newspaper and Chatham House Visiting Fellow, Hussain Abdul-Hussain, told LFI on Tuesday (9 June) that it may be possible for Hezbollah to be persuaded to give up its current cabinet veto in return for the position of speaker. He also said that Hezbollah had repeatedly pursued tactics of intimidation against voters during the election campaign.

Background

- The ‘March 14 Alliance’ came to power in June 2005. Sunday’s (7 June) general election was the second since Syria withdrew its military forces from the country on 26 April 2005, after 29 years of occupation. Syria’s withdrawal followed the popular Cedar Revolution, which was a reaction to the assassination of Rafik Hariri on 14 February 2005. It is widely suspected that Hariri’s death was perpetrated by pro-Syrian forces, with Hezbollah recently directly implicated in the plot. Germany’s Der Spiegel newspaper claimed on 23 May that the UN’s Special Tribunal for Lebanon, established to investigate the assassination, had traced all the mobile phones used in the planning of the attack to Hezbollah militants.
- Hezbollah joined the government in 2005, but since 2008’s Arab-brokered Doha accord has controlled a blocking third of the cabinet seats (11 out of 30). The Doha accord also gives Hezbollah permission to maintain a large weapons arsenal for use against all but internal targets. Doha was introduced to end a violent standoff between the Syrian-backed militant group and the Lebanese state. It is unclear, after Sunday’s (7 June) elections, whether the agreement will continue to stand.

- UN Security Council Resolution 1701, unanimously approved by the Security Council on 11 August 2006, brought about the end of the 2006 Lebanon war between Israel and Hezbollah. The Lebanese cabinet, which included two members of Hezbollah at the time, unanimously approved the resolution on 12 August 2006. However, Israel has continually voiced its concern to the UN over Hezbollah's weapons arsenal, estimating in July 2008 that Hezbollah had amassed approximately 40,000 rockets.
- UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon accused Hezbollah on 27 April of creating "an atmosphere of intimidation in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections." Ban and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak also criticised Hezbollah in April for allegedly operating terrorist cells in Egypt.
- The UK government announced on 5 March that it would explore establishing contacts with Hezbollah parliamentarians, to "encourage them to move away from violence and play a constructive, democratic and peaceful role in Lebanese politics." However, according to Hezbollah's founding manifesto of 1985, the organisation's military, social and political wings are all controlled by the Shura Council and all share the same goal of carrying out "the Holy War." In response to the British shift, Hezbollah senior activist Omar al-Moussawi said:

"Britain has announced a new openness toward Hezbollah and a dialogue with it... despite the fact that Hezbollah has not changed and still resists and refuses to recognise Israel." (30/03/09)

- Lebanon's parliament operates as a consociational system whereby the 128 seats are confessionally distributed and elected by universal suffrage. Each religious community has an allotted number of seats, with candidates in each multi-member constituency opposed only by co-religionists. The National Pact, an unwritten agreement negotiated on Lebanon's independence in 1943, stated that parliamentary seats would be distributed on a 6:5 Christian to Muslim ratio. The 1990 Taif accords, which brought about the end of the Lebanese Civil War, changed the ratio to an even split of Christian and Muslim seats. In practice, the complex demographic realities of Lebanon mean that each candidate must receive the support of more than their co-religionists to stand a chance of being elected.