

FROM EXILE AND CONFINEMENT ARISE LEBANON'S LOST CHRISTIAN LEADERS

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BEIRUT: The 15-year Lebanese civil war ended in 1990, but for the large anti-Syrian segment within Lebanon's minority Christian community, the unease continued even after the bullets stopped flying as key leaders were exiled or imprisoned, muffling the sector's voice.

Much has changed, however, in this tiny Mediterranean country since the end of Syria's decades-long domination and the withdrawal of its troops in April.

The re-emergence of Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea - two staunchly anti-Syrian, formerly sidelined Christian civil war leaders and one-time foes - has energized their supporters, strengthened their political presence and shifted the balance of power within the anti-Syrian Christian community.

Aoun, a former army general, returned in May from France, where he spent nearly 15 years in exile after being booted out of Lebanon by the Syrians following his failed military revolt against them.

Geagea, the only warlord held accountable for his actions during the 1975-90 civil conflict, was released from jail last week under an amnesty law passed by the newly elected, anti-Syrian dominated parliament.

A general amnesty was declared in 1990 after the end of hostilities but Geagea, who headed the Lebanese Forces, the most powerful Christian wartime militia, was arrested in 1994 charged with a bomb attack against a church and his war file was reopened.

He was later acquitted of the bombing, but had been serving several life sentences for assassinations during the civil war, including the 1987 killing of Prime Minister Rashid Karami. He spent 11 years in solitary confinement, mainly in an underground cell in the Defense Ministry with no access to news.

This year's political uprising against Syria paved the way for his release and Aoun's return.

"You have come out of the big prison which you had been put in and you have taken me out with the same act from the small prison which I have been put in," Geagea said, referring to the end of Syria's hold over Lebanon, in a nationally televised speech on July 26, the day of his release.

"If a people one day want to live (in freedom) then fate will definitely respond, and it did respond," he said at the airport before traveling to Europe for medical tests.

The February 14 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was the catalyst for change, sparking an unprecedented, multi-confessional outpouring of anger against Damascus for its widely perceived role in Hariri's death.

Although Syria denied the accusations, it pulled its troops out of Lebanon, where they had been a fixture for nearly three decades.

The subsequent return of the general and the release of the warlord have helped dispel the marginalization felt by many Christians, especially the Maronite Christian community of which both men are members, since the end of the war.

Geagea's Lebanese Forces party, which was banned after his imprisonment, returned from the political wilderness and contested recent parliamentary elections, winning six seats in the 128-member assembly.

The party forged electoral alliances with old wartime enemies and leading Muslim anti-Syrian figures like Druze chieftain Walid Jumblatt as well as Sunni leader Saad Hariri, the son of the slain former prime minister.

Unlike Geagea, Aoun broke ranks with other anti-Syrian leaders shortly after returning on May 7 and forged alliances with remnants of the pro-Syrian regime toppled after Hariri's murder.

Hence, the two men are now in opposing political camps. They also have a history of enmity between them, having fought bloody inter-Christian battles in the late 1980s that left thousands dead.

Aoun managed to secure a sizeable chunk of the new parliament, displacing the established anti-Syrian Christian MPs by winning almost every seat in the community's heartland north of Beirut and cementing his position as the main Christian political force in the country.

But that was before Geagea's release.

"During the elections Aoun came out as representing the majority of Christians," said Adib Farha, a political analyst. "That was partly a function of the fact that Aoun was free and newly returned from exile and people sympathized with him."

"If Geagea were free at the time, things would have been different," Farha added. "His release will change the balance of power among the Christians."