

GENERAL CLAIMS THE OPPOSITION'S HIGH GROUND

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Michel Aoun's return to Lebanon has energised elections, with more in store on Sunday, writes Rania Abouzeid in Beirut

CHRISTIAN leader Michel Aoun hung up his military fatigues after being booted out of Lebanon by the Syrians 15 years ago, but there's still plenty of fight in the former Lebanese army general, most of it aimed at his old allies in the anti-Syria opposition.

Aoun, Lebanon's last political exile, returned triumphant last month after spending 15 years in France.

His much-anticipated homecoming, less than two weeks after the last Syrian soldiers left Lebanon on April 26, was widely hailed as a fitting epilogue to the pullout and fuelled the hopes of many Lebanese that a new, united front of reformers would emerge.

Instead, the 70-year-old known simply as "The General" has split from the anti-Syria coalition and allied himself with remnants of the old pro-Syrian government.

That regime -- and Syria's 29-year domination of Lebanon -- crumbled in the face of massive street protests and intense Western pressure following the murder of former prime minister Rafik Hariri on February 14. The opposition blamed the assassination on Damascus and its local allies.

But Aoun has upset the anti-Syria camp by insisting that he was responsible for freeing Lebanon from Syria's grip. Hariri's killing accelerated the pullout, he said, but was not the cause.

"They were never the opposition," Aoun said of the disparate group of Sunni Muslims, Christians and Druze that spearheaded the country's "uprising for independence".

"They stood at the last moment after Rafik Hariri's assassination against Syrian occupation, but before they accepted everything," he said from his three-storey villa in the leafy Christian suburb of Rabieh, carved into the coastal mountains overlooking the Mediterranean east of Beirut.

"They were in the opposition for about two or three months and they became 'the great opposition'. We are the only group that fought against Syria since 1990."

Aoun, a Maronite Christian, was appointed as caretaker prime minister of a military government in September 1988, while he was serving as army commander.

In 1989, he waged a "war of liberation" against Syrian troops, and also fought his one-time Christian allies before his campaign was crushed by Syrian forces in October 1990, forcing him into exile.

The defeat marked the end of Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war. But Aoun continued his long and lonely campaign from abroad to oust Syria from Lebanon.

Now the fiery, straight-talking general is back, holding court in his home, which serves as the headquarters of his secular Free Patriotic Movement, and shaking up a political scene populated by ageing warlords and tribal chieftains.

Although his support base is largely Christian, he has managed to straddle the country's static sectarian divides, and attract some Muslims and Druze as well.

He is known as an anti-corruption crusader and his calls for wide-ranging reform of ministries, security agencies and the judiciary appeal to a large number of Lebanese.

He wants an audit of the financial system over the past 15 years and has promised to set up a shadow parliament and government to introduce the notion of accountability into a system long bereft of it.

"When I said the word 'audit', that's when the attacks against me started," the balding, bespectacled general said.

He has described opposition members as "traditionalists", but his decision to field joint electoral tickets with key pro-Syrian figureheads for Sunday's third round of staggered four-part parliamentary polls has puzzled his supporters and detractors alike.

"It's like he's gone mad," said Zeina Haddad, a 37-year-old teacher who described herself as a former Aoun supporter. "I don't understand what he's doing -- how can he work with the same people we kicked out because of their ties to Syria?"

Aoun, however, does not apologise for his alliances.

"All of them are pro-Syrian," he said of both the opposition and loyalist politicians. "Even the Hariris were pro-Syrians. Who in Lebanon wasn't?" he retorted in his characteristically frank, but often abrasive, manner.

If nothing else, his return has energised a poll that was shaping into a process of appointments rather than elections.

As expected, the first two rounds of polling in Beirut and the Shi'ite-dominated south produced clean sweeps for Hariri's ticket in the capital and for the joint pro-Syrian parties of Hezbollah and Amal in the south.

But Sunday's poll in the districts of Mount Lebanon and the Bekaa will be hotly contested and will pit Aoun, who is seeking a parliamentary seat, against most of the rest of the opposition camp.

Aoun is confident of victory. "We have the people with us," he said. Only Sunday will tell whether the firebrand returnee is correct.