

# HARIRI'S HEIR SET TO CLAIM LEGACY

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FOUR months ago, Saad Hariri was a stranger to tumultuous Lebanese politics, but today the son of slain former prime minister Rafik Hariri is poised to sweep Beirut's elections, control the majority in parliament, and possibly become the country's next prime minister.

The 35-year-old was running his family's multi-billion-dollar business empire from Saudi Arabia until a massive bombing in February killed his father and plunged a nation into grief and turmoil, catapulting him into the limelight.

Chosen by his family to be his father's political heir, the young Hariri has assumed the mantle with gusto, and has been embraced by a bereaved nation still coming to terms with the loss of its larger-than-life billionaire leader. "I know that this election is about my father and that's a huge responsibility," Mr Hariri said at his family's Beirut mansion. "The people are emotional, what you're seeing is a kind of revenge at the ballot box from people who want him to be alive."

Lebanon's parliamentary elections began yesterday and will be held over the next three weekends in different regions of the country to elect a new 128-member legislature evenly divided between Christians and Muslims.

In Beirut, the first to vote, nine of the capital's 19 seats went uncontested to Mr Hariri's Future Movement, and he is expected to win the remaining 10 places at the ballot box.

Mr Hariri, a softly spoken father of two, is running for a seat, but he was coy as to whether he would seek the prime ministership.

"That's a big question mark and I prefer to keep it a question mark," he said. "I don't have the experience, one has to be honest, but I'm a hardworking person and if it comes to it, one should take up the challenge."

This year's polls are the first without direct Syrian influence in 29 years, after Damascus buckled to local and Western pressure to withdraw its 14,000 troops last month, in line with a UN resolution and widespread anti-Syrian sentiment in Lebanon following Hariri's murder.

But they are taking place under a controversial 2000 electoral law designed by Damascus to help its allies dominate the house.

Despite this, Mr Hariri is confident that the anti-Syria opposition will win 80 or 90 seats.

"The 2000 law was done against my father. It was supposed to be a magic potion to destroy the opposition ... but the magic has turned against the magician," he said.

Seated on a green leather couch in the office that was his father's, the entrepreneur with a degree in international business from Georgetown University outlined his priorities.

First on his list, he said, was a new electoral law, followed by reform of the judiciary and the security services to extricate them from the country's political life.

"Since my father's assassination till now it's been like a regime change in Lebanon," he said of the pro-Syrian security and political heads that have rolled.

"The security and intelligence services were running the country, but we want to bring democracy back to Lebanon.

"If we want the confidence of the international community, we need reform," he added, emphasising the importance of stimulating the economy and strengthening the private sector. "We don't need a security officer who comes in and tells ministers that they can't do this or that unless he gets a commission."

The multi-confessional opposition movement has been divided over the question of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's fate. Some have called for the immediate resignation of the Syrian-backed Maronite Christian, with others saying he should stay on for a while.

Lahoud was one of Rafik Hariri's most vehement critics and his bitter rival, but Mr Hariri said he would defer his views on the President's fate to the church, given Lebanon's "very sensitive" sectarian makeup.