

SYRIAN INFLUENCE TAKES ON A NEW LOOK AFTER LEBANON'S 'HALF REVOLUTION'

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THE ramshackle buses that rumbled across the Lebanese border on April 26, ferrying the last Syrian soldiers back home, marked the end of Syria's 29-year domination of Lebanon and a chance to reshape ties between the two neighbours.

But an escalating border crisis and continued political violence in Lebanon are keeping tensions high between the countries, five months after the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri precipitated an anti-Syria backlash that forced Damascus to beat a hasty retreat out of Beirut.

Anti-Syrian sentiment had been bubbling since last September, when Syria pressured Lebanese parliamentarians to amend the constitution to enable Syria's staunchest ally, President Emile Lahoud, to stay in office beyond term limits, despite fierce local opposition and international disapproval.

But now, with the troops gone and Lebanese parliamentary elections out of the way, the new, anti-Syrian-dominated legislature re-elected one of Syria's staunchest allies, Nabih Berri, as Speaker and picked the late Hariri's right-hand man, Fouad Siniora, as Prime Minister.

An increasingly comfortable Lahoud is also still at the helm, suggesting that little appears to have changed at the top of Lebanon's political structure.

As for the rest of it, the elections produced a three-way split in parliament: the anti-Syria bloc headed by Walid Jumblatt and Saad

Hariri, the son of the slain former prime minister, cemented 72 seats in the 128-member assembly, clinching an absolute majority.

The pro-Syrian Shi'ite partnership between the militant Hezbollah group and Berri's Amal Movement secured 35 seats, while an unlikely alliance between pro-Syrians and former army general Michel Aoun, who was one of Syria's staunchest foes, grabbed 21 seats.

Although at first glance the strong showing of pro-Syrian elements and Berri's re-election might suggest that Syrian influence in the legislature is far from over, Lebanon's perennially complex political stage is once again changing, as politicians reinvent themselves and remold their alliances, discarding the old labels of pro- and anti-Syrian.

"We cannot afford to stay, or be nominated as anti-Syrians. We've got to open a new phase of history with Syria," said Jumblatt, the wily Druze chieftain who was in the Syrian fold during much of Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war before falling out with Damascus.

"You know in Lebanon the alliances shift always, you never know. I was one of the basic, major allies of Syria but when Syria told us to renew Lahoud's mandate I told them 'no, it's enough'," he said from his palatial ancestral home in Mukhtara, deep in the soaring Chouf Mountains above Beirut.

"So what if Berri is pro-Syrian? You cannot accuse somebody because of his past. Things are changing now. Where does Mr Lahoud stand anyway now that the Syrians are out? Who knows?"

Jumblatt and all the other major players in Lebanon's political arena -- Hariri, Aoun, Berri, Hezbollah and the Qornet Shehwan Christian grouping -- agree on the need for strong, friendly bilateral ties with Syria.

But as usual, the devil is in the details and the topics to be discussed, including the establishment of diplomatic relations, the delineation of borders and the revision of bilateral agreements signed over the past 15 years, are a lot more controversial. For the

time being, however, the "big picture" issues have taken a back seat to more pressing concerns, including the continued political violence against leading anti-Syria figures.

A string of bombings this year have killed or wounded prominent critics of Damascus -- although the most recent assassination attempt last week targeted Deputy Prime Minister Elias Murr, a nominal pro-Syrian and Lahoud's son-in-law.

"The truth is that this should not be viewed as an attack against one of Lahoud's allies," said Fares Khachan, political editor of Hariri's Al-Mustaqbal newspaper and a close friend of Murr.

Khachan, along with a number of other key Lebanese personalities including Jumblatt, believe Murr was targeted because of information he allegedly possesses about Hariri's murder, which was widely blamed on Damascus.

At any rate, the bombings have strained ties that have been further tested by Syria's recent decision to impose tight new security checks at its border on Lebanese trucks ferrying agricultural produce and other goods for export.

Syrian Customs officials began the inspections more than three weeks ago, allowing only a few dozen trucks to pass per day while hundreds of others, many carrying perishable produce, stood idly at the border for weeks, clogging Lebanon's only land route to the Arab world and effectively cutting it off.

The delays are causing estimated losses of US\$300,000 (\$400,000) a day, according to Lebanese agricultural syndicates, and are widely being viewed as a punitive response to the anti-Syrian demonstrations in Lebanon that followed Hariri's murder.

Syrian officials have brushed aside such claims and said that the delays are similar to those experienced by Syrian trucks at Syria's borders with Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan.

How the border row plays out will be a test for the new dynamic between Syria and Lebanon. The direct bilateral relationship will obviously also be shaped by the outcome of internal power plays

between pro- and anti-Syrian elements in the legislature, which makes the current remolding of alliances key to future ties.

Aoun, who returned to Lebanon in May after nearly 15 years in exile in France, is the newest and in many ways most volatile addition to the new parliament.

The former Lebanese army commander, who fled the country in 1990 after his "war of liberation" against Damascus was crushed by Syria, split from the anti-Syria camp shortly after his return and forged alliances with pro-Syrians.

He has rejected demands for Lahoud's removal, and changed his position on whether he will join the new government at least four times in recent weeks.

"The Government will be responsible for rebuilding bilateral ties," Aoun said from his three-storey villa in the leafy suburb of Rabieh, carved into the hills east of Beirut. "The power of the president is very limited. He can govern through the ministers, but he no longer has any. He's looking for allies because all of the power is organised in the cabinet."

Lahoud, however, can veto cabinet nominations and has exercised this right twice already, demanding the prime minister-designate make changes to his proposed list of ministers. Given that Aoun has questioned calls for Lahoud's removal, he might be just the ally the pro-Syrian president will insist on having in an otherwise hostile Cabinet packed with Hariri's people.

"In history, there are no half-revolutions except in Lebanon, the country of so-called compromise," said Jumblatt. "It would have been better to have a new president, to open up a new phase in internal relations between the Lebanese and between Lebanon and Syria, but we've missed that chance."