



Lebanon in Search of New Identity

by Magda Abu-Fadil

Beirut - The juxtaposition of scenes was mesmerizing: Lebanese flag wavers by the tens of thousands in Beirut's Martyrs' Square calling for immediate Syrian troop withdrawal from their country, and Syrian cheerleaders with their flags egged on by apparatchiks outside parliament in Damascus supporting their leader's prevarication on his next moves.

Lebanon's LBCI TV aired Syrian President Bashar Assad's Saturday address to parliament announcing he would redeploy troops to the Syrian border, minus a fixed timetable and specification on which side of the frontier they would remain.

It also showed split-screen footage of thrilled crowds watching on giant monitors set up in Beirut's newly-named "Freedom Square" demanding that the pullout be complete and that it include countless security and intelligence operatives.

Excitement was palpable for Lebanese from all walks of life, representing a fair cross-section of the 18 religious/sectarian groups that make up the country's pluralistic mosaic. Absent were many Shiite and Sunni leaders and backers, traditionally allied with Syria.

The latter group met Sunday to plan counter-rallies, starting Tuesday, also in the name of sovereignty, freedom and independence. They were not about to be upstaged in defense of the country.

Although Lebanese had fought a bloody 15-year civil war, opposition forces found common ground in their desire to shed the Syrian yoke imposed by the Arab League and Lebanon's then-government in a bid to end the fratricide that many still feel was fueled by external players.

What began as a 40,000-troop peacekeeping mission in 1976 thinned out to about 14,000 soldiers, backed by an intrusive security apparatus that has infiltrated every walk of Lebanese life.

Presidents, usually elected by parliament, have since been selected following a nod from Damascus, and legislators could count on constituents' plus Syrian blessings.

But a vocal opposition began brewing over the years and reached fever pitch in recent months, with leaders demanding that the skewed ties between Lebanon and its larger neighbor, Syria, be rectified.

Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, one-time militia chieftain of the Socialist party, led the charge and became a potential assassination target like his late father. A key aide and former MP and minister in his bloc almost got blown up by a car bomb.

Not so lucky was former prime minister Rafik Hariri who was targeted on Valentine's Day by explosives thought equivalent to 400 kilograms of TNT. Hariri had been forced to resign when Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's non-renewable six-year term was extended last fall by another three years, in apparent violation of the country's constitution.

The pro-Syrian president and his parliamentary backers had rammed legislation to ensure the Pyrrhic victory leading to selection of a complacent premier with a lock-step cabinet to carry the country into spring parliamentary elections.

Hariri, the self-made billionaire entrepreneur largely credited with rebuilding war-torn downtown Beirut, was also a member of parliament and thought to be preparing for a fierce opposition election battle.

His strong connections to Saudi Arabia's royal family and world leaders, his international business interests, and his distaste for Syrian meddling in Lebanese internal affairs, plus an alliance with various opposition figures, made him a potential target.

But the brazen fashion in which Hariri was assassinated in broad daylight, along with bodyguards and innocent bystanders in the fashionable seaside hotel district he helped rejuvenate sent signals to Lebanese nay-sayers in an attempt to silence them.

The killers miscalculated. It had the opposite effect.

A groundswell of pent-up opposition and outrage swept through the country, with Hariri supporters thronging his home to pay respects and attend his emotional funeral and burial. Hariri's family declined the government's offer to make it a state funeral, instead turning it into a popular referendum on freedom.

Christian and Muslim Lebanese who had never participated in anything began taking to the streets, waving flags, holding vigils at Hariri's downtown tomb, organizing rallies, calling for strikes and defying the government's authority in a peaceful manner. Lebanon's youth found a cause.

Meanwhile, U.S. officials' chorus of support for freedom and democracy, echoed by European and international demands for implementation of U.N. Resolution 1559 that Syrian troops leave Lebanon without delay, added to the frenzy as world media turned their attention to the unfolding Lebanese story.

A historic milestone was crossed when the opposition-led protests called for an independent international investigation into Hariri's murder and accused the government of complicity. They also demanded that top Lebanese security and judicial officials be held accountable and resign.

On February 28, opposition members of parliament launched tirades against the government in a session carried live by local, Arab and international satellite channels. Although the prime minister had earlier said he was certain of mustering enough votes to keep him in power, he stunned the chamber and cheering crowds outside by submitting his resignation after a break.

The ensuing constitutional crisis meant a caretaker government was charged with handling affairs until President Lahoud tapped a new premier to form a transitional cabinet to serve for a couple of months through elections, if they are held.

In his speech, President Assad said Damascus did not defy international legitimacy and the Taif Accords that ended Lebanon's war and stipulated a gradual Syrian pullout. But his "half-full, half-empty" address left many questions unanswered.

Syria, the main power broker in Lebanon for three decades, hasn't had the last word and the opposition's momentum hasn't faded, which means level-headed navigation of the choppy seas will be needed to avoid sliding into uncharted waters.

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