

[Submit Query](#)

MONOCLE



AFFAIRS REPORT

MEDIA FACE-OFF —*Lebanon*

Preface

On 7 June, Lebanon holds the most hotly contested general election in its history. But this time the fiercest fights are not on the streets but in the media. We meet the key players from Hezbollah to the westward-looking Future party battling it out on the airwaves.

[Issue 24](#) . [volume 3](#) . [June 2009](#)

Credits

Writer: [Carole Corm](#)

Photographer: [Dalia Khamissy](#)

The Lebanese election timeline

New man

May 2008

After months without a head of state, Lebanon's politicians agree in Doha to appoint Michel Sleiman (below), head of the army, as the new president. A electoral reform commission is set up to report in time for elections in June 2009.

Divide and rule

30 September 2008

Most of the proposed electoral reforms are killed by parliament (see below) - the excuse is that MPs didn't have enough time to study them. Lebanon keeps for the most part an antiquated electoral system, imposed in 2000, by the then Syrian de facto power brokers in Lebanon.

Keeping track

23 December 2008

Parliament votes for the creation of a Supervisory Commission for Election Campaigning (SCEC). In

theory, no more crazy spending from the candidates or hateful coverage in the media. In practice, it seems little will be done.

Let's talk

1 March 2009

Hezbollah kick starts its electoral campaign with a "resist with your vote" slogan (see billboard, below). The party's number two, Sheikh Naim Qassem says the elections will be important, but not fateful. In case of victory, he assures that all countries - except Israel and the US - are prepared to engage with the Party of God.

Our 14 points

17 March 2009

The March 14 Cedar coalition launches its campaign with a 14-point programme that includes staple goals such as defending Lebanon against Israel and supporting the Palestinian right of return but also pushes for a bigger role for women in civil society and commits to protecting the environment.

Meet the candidates

7 April 2009

More than 700 candidates register for June's parliamentary elections running for one of the 128 parliamentary seats allocated along religious lines. Fifteen out of the 30 cabinet ministers are running, including Prime Minister Fuad Siniora (below, third from left). Only eight women are in the battle. M TV, a television station closed down under Syrian rule, is symbolically re-opened. It is the only station in Lebanon "not being used as a propaganda tool for a political party" insists its main shareholder.

It's going to be fine

9 April 2009

Interior Minister Ziad Baroud (below) reassures citizens that the elections will not be postponed. Some 30,000 soldiers are requested to ensure security on election day and international monitors are invited to Lebanon.

Attacks from outside

10 April 2009

Egypt accuses Hezbollah of fomenting attacks on its soil. The following day, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader makes an impromptu televised speech (below) assuring the only reason members of the party are in Egypt is to help Palestinians in Gaza.

Temptations, temptations

11 April 2009

The three main religious leaders, representing Shiites, Sunnis and Maronite Christians urge their followers to vote without "succumbing to temptations". Political blocs have always been accused of buying votes, either by handing hard cash to voters or offering services in kind - this election is no different.

Behave!

13 April 2009

To mark the 34th anniversary of the civil war, a local NGO has sent 100 children across the country (below) asking politicians to pledge good conduct during the elections.

Surprise!

26 April 2009

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton makes a surprise stop in Beirut (below, with the Lebanese president), and says the US will support the voices of moderation in the upcoming elections. She also assures the president no deal with Syria will be made at the expense of Lebanon.

Getting there

29 April 2009

March 14 accuses Hezbollah of trying to dissuade independent candidates from siding with the pro-western coalition. Amid the electoral build up, four Lebanese generals believed to be linked to the assassination of Rafik Hariri are released by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

2009 electoral reform laws

- One-day national election.
- Transparent ballot boxes, and indelible ink used on ballot papers.
- 10-day moratorium on polling before election day.
- 24-hour moratorium on TV campaigning before election day.
- Creation of a supervisory commission for election campaigning (SCEC).
- International monitoring is now welcome.
- Mandatory voting education programmes on all Lebanese TV stations.
- The Lebanese TV stations and who they support NBN (Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri - Shiite March 8)
- O TV (Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement - Christian March 8)
- Al Manar (Hezbollah - Shiite March 8)
- New TV "Al Jadid" (Tahssin Khayat - Sunni anti March 14)
- Future & Future News "Al Moustaqbal" (Hariri - Sunni March 14)
- M TV (Gabriel Murr - Christian Independent)
- LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Network - pro March 14 Christian)
- Télé Lumiere (Christian religious television)
- Télé Liban (state-owned - neutral)



In May 2008 Lebanon seemed to be on the verge of returning to civil war after tensions between the pro-western government and Iranian-supported Hezbollah opposition led to gun battles across the country. A peace deal brokered by Qatar pulled the country back from the brink and set the parties on the course to a general election which is being held on 7 June. As the elections have neared, the various factions have left their guns at home, perhaps because outside forces - Saudi Arabia and Iran in particular - have refrained from meddling.

But the old grievances have not been forgotten. Instead they are being played out on TV screens and billboards across this nation of four million people.

Depending on which of Lebanon's nine television channels you watch, the country is either the biblical home to a minority of Christian souls, the launch pad of the Islamic resistance or the bearer of Arab nationalism.

Television, however, is by no means the only platform. Everywhere you turn in Beirut there are posters printed with divisive slogans. Emails are circulated with doctored photos of politicians and prankster campaign slogans. Militants knock at people's doors to "check" who they plan to vote for.

The Lebanese diaspora is also enrolled in the battle with travel costs - from as far away as Canada - covered by the parties for those willing to cast their vote in the right direction.

Politicians are playing out a kind of Lebanese clash of civilizations. On one side, the pro-western March 14 bloc hopes to keep its parliamentary majority and steer Lebanon towards full sovereignty, free of Syrian or Iranian meddling. On the other, the March 8 bloc, which brings together Iranian-backed Shiite Hezbollah and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement of General Michael Aoun, believes Lebanon should stop looking only to the West and uphold the armed resistance against Israel.

Monocle meets the players on each team - and also those who believe it's time to abandon divide-and-rule politics.

March 14 coalition

Who they are: group, led by the Future party, who want a pro-western Lebanon.

Main leader: Saad Hariri.

Working for the 38-year-old Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and leader of the Future Movement Sunni party, is Asma Andraos, a bubbly thirtysomething event planner. In 2005, she was named citizen of the year by Time magazine for her involvement in the Cedar Revolution (the date of which gives its name to the party).

In April, she organised the Future party's flashy inaugural campaign. Replaying some of the key moments on her laptop, Andraos talks about Hariri and his inclination for modern PR - he uses the Rocky score as his musical theme track. This punchy approach is exactly what Saad, who many believe lacks the charisma of his father, needs right now.

Andraos agrees the TV channels will play a pivotal election role - well, except for one: "Every channel is important in this campaign except the state owned Télé Liban, which no one watches."

At the bloc's General Secretariat, in the heart of the upmarket Beirut neighbourhood of Ashrafieh, Manale Boulos, a former PR manager for the fashion designer Elie Saab, tries to explain that "March 14 is not a movement or a party but a concept."

Gathering Christian and Druze anti-Syrian parties along with Hariri's Future movement, the bloc is asking for full Lebanese sovereignty - free from Syrian interference - and calls for the recently set up Special Tribunal for Lebanon in the Hague to judge the people behind Rafik Hariri's murder. "We are humanists, not fanatics," Boulos insists.

Elie Fawaz works for Quantum, the only advertising agency in the country that is devoted to political communication, created by the chairman of Saatchi & Saatchi Lebanon. Fawaz is adamant that the March 14 campaign never slides into tit-for-tat slogans. "As the majority, we want to see fairplay," he stresses.

March 8 coalition

Who they are: group, dominated by Hezbollah and Free Patriotic Movement, who want Lebanon to continue the armed struggle against Israel and change the country's economic course.

Main leaders: Hassan Nasrallah and Michel Aoun.

Sami Saab is the creative director for Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, one of the main parties attached to the March 8 bloc (they take their name from the day Hezbollah rallied against the Cedar revolution). Unlike March 14, there is no coordination or common campaigns between the various parties. Creatives working for Hezbollah tend to work in house and keep a low profile.

That might explain why 50 per cent of Saab's campaign ideas are inspired not by his allies but by March 14 slogans, as he concedes. An ex-Impact BBDO and Publicis manager, he is credited with branding Aoun's movement orange. A colour that he also borrowed - this time from the Ukrainian Orange Revolution - and is now banned in the wardrobes of many Lebanese who are allergic to Le Général. "I

could have an orange poster, with no text, and people would know what it represents. At the end of the day we are a brand and each brand has a colour coding. 021 Pantone is ours," says Saab.

Saab believes everything relating to the political party should have the same visual identity. Driving to Orange TV, or O TV as it is known, in one of Beirut's industrial suburbs, there is no mistaking which political force the station is attached to. The new, rather modest station was created last year to air the comings and goings of Aoun. Recently accused of slandering March 14 politicians, Chadi el Hachem, the station's PR, justifies the heavy-handed coverage by the audience's appetite for controversial news. "We are a country politicised to the bone, objective media does not exist."

A former political consultant for Hezbollah's general secretary, Mohammad Afif, is the news director of the party's Al Manar TV station. He shares O TV's stance but insists on a higher standard professionalism, citing the example of the BBC's Gaza war coverage: "Everybody knows we are with Hezbollah, that doesn't mean we are not credible."

But how do you stay credible when numerous candidates refuse to appear on your talk shows? A problem Hezbollah's Al Manar, as well as Hariri's Future News TV, concede they are running into.

Intriguingly, Hezbollah - the Party of God - has been trying to tone things down recently, by calling for an end to religious sectarianism and fading its signature Kalashnikov from some of its campaign material.

The independents

Who they are: moderate media players opposed to sectarian coverage

Main leaders: Gabriel Murr, NGOs.

MTV thinks its coverage is hitting the right mark. The channel was shut down in 2002 for speaking out against the then pro-Syrian authorities and has just been revived in time for the elections. Funded by Gabriel Murr, a politician and businessman, it claims to represent the silent majority who refuse to take sides with either bloc. Its news director Ghayath Yazbek is monitoring campaign excesses with the help of local NGOs and a new team of investigative journalists. He's also encouraging people to vote. "We need to rekindle a democratic tradition which has been suffocated for 30 years."

At Print Works, an imposing printing press in the outskirts of Beirut, the managers insist they print posters for all political parties. "We print every colour here," says Robert Naccache. In the past two weeks before election day, up to 50 per cent of the output is related to politics. When we visit, they have also received an order (sent by a Lebanese emissary) to print 30,000 posters for Congo's president.

The reformers

Who they are: a group of NGOs and one minister.

Main leader: Ziad Baroud, the current interior minister.

Transparency and electoral monitoring is supported by a handful of grass roots civil society groups. The International Foundation for Electoral Reforms (IFES) and its programme manager Chantal Sarkis are assisting the government with the flurry of international observers. They stand behind Ziad Baroud, the 39-year-old interior minister. Though many of the electoral reforms that he has promoted have been thwarted by the old political class, Baroud has gained some ground.

Lebanon's TV stations must devote the same amount of time to each of the 586 candidates vying for one of the 128 parliament seats. In theory, political posters must be carefully vetted before being exhibited and candidates must abide by campaign spending rules. Some TV directors admit privately that they will disregard the law, while candidates are finding loopholes in a country famed for its banking secrecy. "It is the first time we're implementing something of this kind in this country," says Rabih Chaer, Baroud's political and legal adviser. "From now on, no more lies or defamation."

Local NGOs such as the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections are also supporting the government's initiative by sending volunteers, mostly students recruited via Facebook and in Beirut's bars, to monitor campaigning in their district.

Irrespective of who wins on 7 June, the actors will be largely the same, leading to cynicism among ordinary Lebanese. It will be a great step forward though, if some of the reforms Baroud is defending survive beyond this election. Whether the political class, which has much to lose, will allow for more changes, in one of the rare Arab nations that has a parliamentary democracy, remains to be seen.