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Presidential elections in Lebanon: A battle for sovereignty or foreign control?

Lebanon's presidential elections reveal a troubling yet familiar reality. While leaders speak of sovereignty, foreign powers control the presidency, with ambassadors and threats dictating the outcome – leaving the Lebanese people to bear the consequences.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

After over two years of political paralysis, the Republic of Lebanon finally [elected](#) its 14th president – former commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Joseph Aoun – on 9 January; however, this victory was not for the Lebanese people. Instead, it was a product of international pressures, with namely the United States, Saudi Arabia, and France pulling the strings.

Lebanon is perhaps the only country where a president is elected without actually running for office. Here, presidential candidates are not required to present electoral programs or articulate an economic, social, or political vision.

Beginning with the Ottoman era, through the French mandate, during the Syrian presence, and now under the influence of western and Arab envoys, the country's presidency has often been determined by external powers rather than its people.

The process is a stark paradox: while [Lebanese sovereignty](#) – or the lack of it – is a frequent topic in public discourse, the outcome of presidential elections is dictated by foreign ambassadors, whether American, French, Saudi, or Qatari, against the backdrop of accusations of Beirut's submission to Iran.

Armed with threats of sanctions, blockades, and delays in reconstruction, these envoys impose candidates without room for debate, reducing Lebanon's democratic process to little more than scripted theater.

As long-time Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri once quipped, perhaps it would be simpler to let ambassadors sit in the seats of MPs, as they are the ones truly deciding the president.

The role of external powers

Tellingly, the Lebanese [National News Agency](#) (NNA) reported that “A parliament session devoted to electing the 14th president of the Republic has kicked off in the presence of French envoy Jean-Yves Le Drian, Saudi envoy Yazid bin Farhan, the ambassadors of the Quint committee and a panel of diplomats.”

During each presidential election cycle, the focus is not on who the Lebanese people want but on which candidate Saudi Arabia supports, who Qatar backs, and which contender aligns with US and French interests.

In 1989, Elias Hrawi was elected president of Lebanon as a result of the [Taif Agreement](#), which was brokered by Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the US to end the Lebanese Civil War. The agreement not only ushered in a new president but also solidified the influence of foreign powers in Lebanon's political system, including Iran through its support of Hezbollah – the only faction permitted to retain its arms under the justification of Israel's lingering threat and occupation of the Shebaa Farms.

Nearly a decade later, in 1998, former Lebanese army commander General Emile Lahoud was elected president with explicit support from Syria. His term was extended in 2004 for an additional three years, again with the blessing of Damascus. This extension exemplified the deep influence of Syrian interests in Lebanon's political affairs during that era.

In 2008, the Lebanese parties reached a settlement known as the [Doha Agreement](#), which ended an 18-month political deadlock. Under Arab auspices, this agreement led to the election of another army commander, General Michel Suleiman, as president. While this marked a temporary resolution to Lebanon's internal conflict, it also highlighted the persistent role of external mediation in determining the country's leadership.

A theater of candidates

This year, the race was no different. Although a handful of Lebanese figures, such as former minister Ziad Baroud and MP Neemat Frem, announced their candidacies, their efforts were futile without international backing.

Other names, including Army Commander General Joseph Aoun, former finance minister Jihad Azour, and General Security Director General Elias al-Bisri, have gained traction largely because of foreign support.

Among them, General [Joseph Aoun](#) stands out. Enjoying US, Saudi, and French approval despite lacking broad local support, Aoun was elected as the new president of Lebanon, putting an end to a more than two-year presidential vacuum and political stalemate. Ironically, his candidacy – requiring constitutional amendments – was opposed by major Christian political forces, including the Lebanese Forces (LF) headed by [Samir Geagea](#), the Free Patriotic Movement, and the Marada Movement, whose leader Suleiman Frangieh, is a close ally of Hezbollah. Yet, external pressure has forced many of these groups to fall in line, once again exposing the hollowness of Lebanon's sovereignty.

The irony lies in the fact that the Arab international candidate for Lebanon's presidency – which is the highest Christian position in the country – lacks the support of Lebanon's Christian political forces.

The price of sovereignty

The involvement of foreign envoys like Qatar's Jassim Al-Thani and Saudi Arabia's Yazid bin Farhan shows how much the Arab officials are better known among the Lebanese public than many MPs themselves. Riyadh's envoy, for example, has explicitly stated that Lebanon's reconstruction and economic stability hinge on electing their preferred candidate. This interference is not just political but financial. Reports suggest that MPs have been offered significant sums to secure their votes, as reported by Lebanese journalist Hassan Illaik on X. Prices for a single vote were reportedly reaching \$300,000, payable in installments. Such transactions only go to show the extent to which the presidency has become a commodity in a market dominated by foreign buyers.

For ordinary Lebanese citizens, the stakes could not be higher. While politicians and foreign envoys were haggling over the presidency, the country remains in a state of collapse. [Over 70 percent](#) of the population is experiencing multidimensional poverty, and billions of dollars in bank deposits have evaporated.

One of the presidential candidates informed *The Cradle* that during his meetings with MPs, rather than being asked about the pressing economic crisis, he was asked about his position on the issue of Hezbollah's weapons and his position on international resolutions.

The illusion of democracy

In Lebanon's political arena today, the Shia duo – Hezbollah and the Amal Movement – representing a core part of the Axis of Resistance, has centered its negotiations around the presidency of the Republic. This critical leverage is aimed at securing gains that might mitigate the impact of the Israeli war, which resulted in significant destruction in the Bekaa, south Lebanon, and the southern suburbs of Beirut.

The Shia duo's demands include guarantees for reconstruction, the appointment of the next army commander, and a commitment to long-term economic stability. However, as of late yesterday, international envoys have yet to provide concrete pledges on these issues.

In the first round of presidential elections, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement decided to cast [blank ballots](#), effectively delaying the election of a president. This move was a deliberate message: No president could be elected without their approval.

Following negotiations, the parties reportedly received assurances from Army Commander Joseph Aoun and the Saudi, US, and French envoys regarding their key demands. In the second round of voting, the duo cast their ballots for Aoun, resulting in his election as president.

The blank ballots in the first round served as a strategic display of their influence, asserting their veto power over the presidential election. Despite the heavy pressure from international envoys, who sought to impose their preferred candidate, negotiations with the Shia duo continued. Over four sessions with Saudi advisor Yazid bin Farhan, including a final meeting yesterday morning with Hezbollah deputy Ali Hassan Khalil, agreements were reached just two hours before the parliamentary session's second round.

Ultimately, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement dictated the outcome of the presidential election. The Ministry of Finance remains under their control, and Saudi Arabia has committed to the reconstruction efforts with firm guarantees.

For Lebanese citizens, the elections are a painful reminder that their democracy is little more than a façade, manipulated by foreign powers whose priorities rarely align with the country's needs.

Until Lebanon can reclaim its decision-making processes and prioritize the welfare of its people over external pressures, its presidency will remain a pawn in a much larger game of international power politics.

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