

MIDDLE EAST

Lebanon's Political Standoff Leaves Leadership Vacancy

By BEN HUBBARD MAY 24, 2014

BEIRUT, Lebanon — Waving to television cameras and assembled dignitaries, President Michel Suleiman departed the presidential palace on Saturday, the last day of his six-year term, leaving behind a political vacuum caused by the failure of the country's political powers to agree on a successor.

The vacancy in the president's office is the most recent crisis in Lebanon's fragile political system, which relies on agreements among the country's myriad political parties and religious sects — and often their foreign backers — in order to function.

Reaching such agreements has become more difficult in recent years, as the country's politicians have lined up on opposite sides of the civil war in neighboring Syria, with some expressing support for President Bashar al-Assad and others supporting the rebels who seek to oust him.

Further divisions have spread over the decision of Hezbollah, the Shiite militant group, to send fighters to support Mr. Assad and to help secure the border between the two countries. Its foes have said this increases sectarian tensions and could endanger Lebanon's internal stability.

Mr. Suleiman alluded to this issue in a televised farewell speech to the nation, in which he suggested a series of political reforms and called on the Lebanese to stick together and stay out of other countries' problems.

Preserving national unity “forces us not to interfere in the issues of the neighbor, no matter how dear that neighbor is,” he said, adding that the Lebanese should “pull out without any hesitation from anything that could divide our ranks.”

Mr. Suleiman had previously called on Hezbollah to be more flexible about its maintenance of a standing militia, calling on Lebanon not to hang onto “wooden equations.”

Hezbollah struck back with a statement saying Mr. Suleiman “cannot differentiate anymore between wood and gold.”

No Hezbollah officials attended his departure ceremony on Saturday, nor did a number of their political allies.

Mr. Suleiman’s duties will fall to the cabinet, whose own formation in February had been held up for nearly a year because of similar bickering. The cabinet was supposed to organize parliamentary elections later this year, but the country first needs a new electoral law to govern the vote.

It is not known how long this will take. Lebanon has gone months without a president in the past.

The lack of a president also leaves Lebanon’s Maronite Christians without their most prominent political official. Under the agreement that ended the 15-year civil war in 1990, the president must be a Maronite Christian, the speaker of Parliament a Shiite Muslim, and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim.

Correction: May 28, 2014

An article on Sunday about a political vacuum in Lebanon, created when President Michel Suleiman left office at the end of his term without the country’s political factions having agreed on a successor, misstated the year that the Lebanese civil war ended. It was 1990, not 2000.

Hwaida Saad contributed reporting.

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