



# Parliamentary Elections Delay Could Destabilize Lebanon

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A divisive debate over Lebanon's electoral law may delay parliamentary elections scheduled for June 9, stoking fears of instability in a country already rattled by the conflict in neighboring Syria.

Nominations opened on Monday but no candidate has yet been registered. Meanwhile, rival political groups have quibbled over how legislative power should be shared out in the multi-confessional country.

The same as in domestic politics, Lebanon is divided into two camps over the conflict in Syria.

One is led by Hizbullah that is backed by Syria and Iran. The other, the March 14 opposition alliance, is bitterly opposed to the Damascus regime.

The raging war in Syria has worsened tensions in Lebanon, which suffered its own civil war from 1975 to 1990. For nearly 30 years, Damascus dominated Lebanon politically and militarily until Syrian troops pulled out in 2005.

"Lebanon's main parties are all strategically linked to what is happening in Syria. Each of them is betting on the Damascus regime falling or staying in place," said Beirut-based analyst Fadia Kiwane of Universite Saint-Joseph.

But with the Syrian war entering its third year, pressure has increased on Lebanon's leaders to hold the vote on time.

"There is international pressure to meet the deadline" for the parliamentary elections, said Kiwane, amid fears that Lebanon could otherwise slide into a new civil war of its own.

In Beirut, Western ambassadors -- mainly the United States and France -- have stepped up calls for the vote to go ahead on schedule, for fear of a political vacuum.

Progressive Socialist Party leader and influential Druze chief Walid Jumblat said on Tuesday that any delay would amount to "a jump into the unknown".

For its part, Syria favors the status quo in Lebanon said Kiwane, since fresh elections could return the anti-Assad March 14 opposition back into power.

"But the status quo may become impossible to manage and the situation may degenerate at any moment," she warned.

With repeated cases of violent incidents along the border with Syria, sectarian tensions have grown in Lebanon, where the political system is based on a complex distribution of power along sectarian lines.

Every parliamentary vote has been held under a different law, following long and arduous negotiations as alliances shift. "The Lebanese are used to adapting laws to suit their circumstances," said Kiwane.

At least six draft electoral laws have been presented for the next elections, including a so-called Orthodox Gathering law under which voters select their candidates according to sect for the 128-member parliament.

Despite criticism of the law as a "project for a new civil war," it has gained the support of Christian parties.

Experts predict that the debate will end in a compromise, but that the ongoing talks would force a delay to allow candidates to organize their campaigns.

"We are probably heading towards a technical delay of three months," said Kiwane, with the vote likely to be rescheduled to "after the summer."

**Source: Agence France Presse, Naharnet**