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## Back-room deal-making begins



As Lebanon's political brass scurries from closed-door meeting to closed-door meeting before official consultations on naming a

new premier begin, the complex range of options for what comes next is beginning to come into focus.

Press reports indicate that the president wants a national dialogue session this Thursday before consultations begin, but some parties, like the Lebanese Forces, have refused to attend. News leaks also indicate speaker Nabih Berri wants a parliament session early next week to discuss “[abolishing] the 1960 law,” a reference to the electoral law currently on the books and theoretically set to govern the June polls.

What that means, however, is unclear. The only ways to “abolish” the law would be to pass a new law or extend the current parliament’s mandate and scrap the current election law, leaving Lebanon with no election law.

Free Patriotic Movement MP Alain Aoun told NOW that Berri’s proposal is still in its infancy.

“We have to discuss it,” he said, adding the idea is to “legally abolish” the current law. He noted that parliament would have to discuss if abolishing the law is itself legal, given that doing so without replacing it would leave Lebanon without an election law until new legislation is passed.

In the pre-official consultation negotiations currently underway, the first issue to be resolved is the shelf-life of the new cabinet, Free Patriotic Movement parliamentarian Alain Aoun told NOW. If a new government is only expected to sit for the ever-diminishing time between now and the scheduled June elections, Aoun said “I think all parties would be more flexible.”

If the parties decide to extend the mandate of the current parliament more than one or two months – i.e., if the next government is actually expected to govern – Aoun said he does not see a quick solution in store. He refused to say who the FPM wants as the next prime minister but was adamant about his party wanting elections to be held on time.

Aoun said the FPM is talking directly with the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party. As for consultation between the FPM and the Future Movement, Aoun said talks were not taking place, “not officially, at least.”

Aoun added that Speaker Nabih Berri is handling communications between the FPM and perennial kingmaker Walid Jumblatt – who controls the swing votes in parliament needed to elect the next prime minister. A source close to the Progressive Socialist Party, who asked not to be quoted because of the sensitivity of these back-room dealings, told NOW that Jumblatt “wants a guy

who's acceptable to all.”

A source close to March 14, who is not authorized to speak with the press, echoed the PSP source, saying Jumblatt will not vote for a candidate fully supported by Hezbollah, nor will he vote for a candidate diametrically opposed to the party.

The PSP source added that President Michel Suleiman, Berri, the PSP, and the Future Movement are tentatively on board for proposing a neutral candidate to oversee elections this year.

Local press reports have suggested a variety of potential candidates who run the gamut from pro-March 14 to neutral to pro-March 8, but the four sources NOW spoke with for this article discounted all of them.

On the March 14 side, there's Khaled Qabbani, head of the Civil Service Board. On the March 8 side, there's former minister Abdul Rahim Mrad. Bahish Tabarra, a former close ally to Rafiq Hariri who has chilly relations with Saad, has also been floated as a somewhat neutral candidate, while Adnan Kassar, head of the Economic Committees – a powerful business lobbying group that vehemently opposed a public-sector wage hike Miqati sent to parliament the day before he quit – announced himself as a potential neutral candidate.

However, everyone interviewed for this article said the potential candidates currently being named are dead on arrival.

“They're just burning names,” a source close to March 14, who asked for anonymity to speak more candidly, told NOW. The same source has now twice told NOW that “for sure” the elections will be postponed for at least two years.

That said, if and when the country's main parties can agree on how long the next cabinet will reign, the next question becomes what sort of government it will be. Different parties are using standard Lebanese code words to hint at how large and how political they want the next government to be.

Some, including the Kataeb Party and Miqati, have called for national salvation governments. Twice in Lebanon's past, a ‘salvation’ cabinet has been very small and represented the country's top powers at the time (these cabinets were four- and six-man governments formed in 1958 and 1975, respectively).

Others figures, including Jumblatt, Berri, and Hezbollah, want a “national unity government.” In recent years, that has meant all major parties represented in a full, 30-member cabinet. Hezbollah MP Mohammad Raad, however, added the caveat that the next government must include the “people-army-resistance” formula in its policy statement.

Still others, including some in the Future Movement and the Lebanese Forces, variously support a government of technocrats. LF leader Samir Geagea, however, further stipulated that his party will only accept technocrats seen as close to March 14 or so-called “centrists” like Miqati, the president, or Jumblatt.

As for whether or not Miqati will return, no one to whom NOW spoke had a clear answer. Everyone said their respective parties had no specific veto against him, but the recently resigned PM himself has been vague about his future plans.

In early March, Miqati said he would resign as PM before the elections because he plans to run for re-election as a parliamentarian in his native Tripoli. He said at the time that a sitting prime minister should not run for elections. This, however, is an opinion without basis on actual law. The constitution says nothing about a sitting prime minister being barred from running for parliament, and former PMs have run as candidates while retaining their posts.

So, if Miqati is a man of his word, he seems to be the one vetoing his own return.