

## The importance of being Nabih Berri

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President Michel Sleiman (C), Prime Minister Najib Mikati (R) and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri agreeing on the new government (AFP photo/HO/Dalati and Nohra)

After 140 days of March 8 parties bickering over who should get what in the Lebanese cabinet - while Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati shuttled back and forth between discussions with President Michel Sleiman, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Lebanese party leaders, their aides, as well as foreign envoys - on Monday Speaker Berri offered a way out of what seemed would be an endless political crisis.

The government formation was stuck over one last point: whether or not to name former PM Omar Karami's son, Faisal, as a minister. PM Mikati's ally, MP Ahmad Karami, was against the appointment of Faisal Karami (his cousin) because of political rivalries in Tripoli, while both Hezbollah and Berri's Amal party insisted on him being part of the cabinet.

The long-awaited government formation came after a consultation meeting at the Presidential Palace in Baabda between PM Mikati, President Sleiman and Speaker Berri. It was the latter who had the ace up his sleeve.

According to *As-Safir* daily, which published on its front page the leaked conversation between the three highest-ranked men in the state, the idea of giving up a ministerial seat reserved for the Shia in favor of the Sunni Faisal Karami and "save the government" occurred to Berri while he was stuck in traffic in Hazmieh on his way to Baabda. The newspaper also reported that the head of the parliament told PM Mikati and President Sleiman that "both Karamis have to have portfolios," because "[Hezbollah chief] Nasrallah, [Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel] Aoun and I have agreed that Faisal Karami should have a ministry."

According to *As-Safir*, Berri also pointed out that he was risking his popularity in order to save the government. "I bore what was heavier and harder when I agreed with the civil marriage bill. I also want to test my leadership, and I will personally deal with the consequences of this test," he reportedly told the prime minister and president.

But while the parliament speaker and his aides insist that Berri made a sacrifice to give Lebanon a government, analysts say he was acting in accordance with the requirements of the political alliance he is part of and with his own ambitions to be seen as "the wise man" in a chaotic political scene, as well as to keep himself and his party in the spotlight.

Due to Berri's move, Lebanon has, since Monday, a 30-seat government, with five Shia ministers and seven Sunnis, the

first such distribution since the Taif Accord of 1989. Berri's chief political aide, Ali Hassan Khalil, said that Berri's move aimed to break traditions that are "handcuffing" Lebanese politics. "This move is approved by the Shia sect, and on the national level it is appreciated," he said.

But Ibrahim Bayram, political analyst who closely follows Hezbollah and Amal for Lebanese daily *An-Nahar*, says that Nabih Berri is the political face of Hezbollah. "He is part of a political axis whose interest right now is to have a government," he told NOW Lebanon. "The reasons are obvious: They want to support the Syrian regime against the uprising, they want to keep the Hariri family away from political power and keep under control the repercussions of the indictment made by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon," he added, referring to the court looking into the 2005 murder of former PM Rafik Hariri.

Berri's decision to give up a seat in favor of Faisal Karami was meant to reward a family that supported March 8. "It is important for Hezbollah to support the Sunni families that do not support the Hariris, such as Omar Karami's [in Tripoli], Osama Saad's [in Saida] or Abdul Rahman Mrad's [in the Bekaa]. Tripoli is a Sunni stronghold, and they need to keep their support there," Bayram explained.

Bayram said that there is also a personal aspect to Berri's sacrifice: It benefits his image as a seasoned politician and as a Shia leader. "He always tried to play a bigger role. Before the government was formed he was trying to hold a parliament meeting to reappoint [Riad] Salameh [as governor of the Central Bank] so that he can save the Lebanese Lira from crashing. Now he's a bigger hero: He saved the formation of the government," Bayram said.

But the analyst also points out that Nabih Berri has a large portion of the Shia community behind him and, "unlike Hezbollah, which has its own institutions to care for its supporters, Berri needs the government to provide care for his people."

*Nadine Elali contributed reporting to this article*

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