



# Power struggles in Lebanon

Mon, 04/12/2006 - 23:00

In mid-November, 400 delegates from every continent met in Beirut to demonstrate their solidarity with resistance against US imperialism and Israel and to discuss future perspectives for the anti-imperialist struggle.

Michael Proebsting reports.\n\nLebanese politics has always been a complicated affair, based as it is on a sectarian distribution of seats to religious groupings, none of which has an absolute majority. The state itself was cut out of Syria at the end of the First World War by French imperialism, which received it in a League of Nations Mandate. Their purpose was to provide a substantial social basis for holding on to this mercantile and banking centre of the eastern Mediterranean. For this purpose they gave the Maronite Christians (eastern rite Catholics) a politically privileged position in terms of numbers of seats in the parliament, and the key positions in the government, despite the fact that they are a minority of the population.

The Shia Muslims, which are now the largest minority amongst Lebanese religious groups, have been the most underrepresented and marginalised in terms of their political representation. They are based largely in the poorer working class districts and so amongst them political oppression also took on a class a character as well.

However with the recent military victory of the Shia-dominated organisation Hizbollah against Israel in the summer of 2006, this has changed. Hezbollah defended the country successfully and so their leaders are demanding an end to many years of political marginalisation. Over the last few days thousands of Hizbollah and their supporters have set up a permanent protest camp in Beirut city centre, and they are refusing to leave until the government resigns.

The protest on the street follows moves in November by the Hizbollah ministers in the Lebanese cabinet to obtain more posts for Shia members of Parliament. The two Hizbollah members, along with four other cabinet members resigned in protest at the refusal by Fouad Siniora to give more positions to Shia MPs and the Hizbollah party. Nasrallah has followed this boycott of the cabinet up with an organised mass demonstration and a display of strength on the streets of Beirut. Emile Lahoud, a Maronite and president of Lebanon who is pro Syrian, declared the government unconstitutional after the resignations, further weakening the US backed Siniora and adding fuel to Hizbollah's fire.

However it is not only Hizbollah that is demonstrating. Many people from all across the country and from several different political and religious backgrounds are also joining the protest that is pitched as a sit in against the corruption and the pro Western policies of the Siniora administration. This movement aims to reverse the effect of the Cedar revolution of 2 years ago when a mass Christian led protest movement secured the withdrawal of the occupying Syrian forces - in the sense of getting rid of a government that is pro-US and capitulationist to Israel. Hizbollah opposed the expulsion of Syrian troops, not least because through close ties with the Syrian government and Iran where they get their arms including the rockets which proved so devastating to the Israelis' tanks. This time Maronite Christians from Michel Aoun's party, the Free Patriotic Movement are joining the demonstrations.

## **Siniora on the ropes**

Siniora is an increasingly weakened prime minister who is unable to establish any strong line of march against Syria. He is politically contaminated in Lebanon for two major reasons; firstly he is supported by Bush and the Neo Cons in Washington, his position was not helped by the arrival last week of the foreign minister from Germany and Margaret Beckett from the UK to 'offer their support', in the eyes of those camped outside of Siniora's offices another example of the kind of friends that they could well do with out.

Siniora was not ineffective during the Israeli invasion of his country. He no doubt hoped that Israel would succeed in

destroying Hizbollah sufficiently to remove them as political force in the country. Hizbollahs resounding success in organising the defence of their country and the historic defeat of the Imperialist backed Zionist forces meant that Siniora's position was seriously undermined. Since November he has been operating with an unconstitutional cabinet, when the Shia ministers resigned from it.

His attempt to set up a tribunal to investigate those allegedly involved with the 2005 assassination of the previous Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri had set Lebanon and the UN on a collision course with Syria, which fiercely denies any involvement in his assassination. However both the President and the speaker of the house are pro Syria and the chances of Siniora's tribunal plans getting through the government machinery are slim to none.

In that sense, the movement on the streets represents a further strengthening of Hizbollahs position in Lebanese politics. However the left in Lebanon must be clear of the political pitfalls of the strategy pursued by them. Having more Shia in the government or electing a new Prime Minister cannot end Lebanon's dependence on the Imperialists. Instead they will replace their current domination by Washington and Paris and their armed gangs in UNIFIL based in the south of the country by tying the country further to Damascus and Tehran. Whilst this would create a nominal anti imperialist bloc in the region, and no doubt tie Lebanon to the 'Axis of Evil', it would be a unstable totally unreliable and unstable one at best.

The desperation of the Imperialists and their Zionist allies can be sensed in the recent murder of Pierre Gemayel, to try and stock up further sectarian divisions by killing a member of an important ruling family in Lebanon, and an openly anti Syrian MP who it would be very easy to point the finger of blame down the road to Damascus. However based on the principle of 'who gains?' it would be hard to imagine Syria gaining anything from such a high profile assassination, instead the major force in the region that has anything from Gemayel's death - an the anti-Syrian, anti-Hezbollah upsurge it was aimed to provoke is Israel.

[b]Build a revolutionary party[/B]

The working masses and urban poor in Lebanon need a new form of political organisation that is much more democratic than the horse-trading and sectarian division of the Lebanese parliament. A constituent assembly should be convened, elected on the political principle of one person one vote. This would allow a much more democratic government to be created that can help to overcome the religious divisions in the country. However for the working class itself to make progress it must break from religious affiliation and cross class collaborationism and establish a genuine workers party. Many trade unions exist in the country, but nearly all of them are tied to sectarian religious parties and organisations which ameliorate their roles as workers organisations that should be fighting for their members class interests. A real working class movement in Lebanon can only be constructed when workers organise outside of their political parties and establish independent, secular trade unions.

The recent international solidarity conference that was held in Beirut shows that small countries like Lebanon play a very important role in the fight back against imperialism. But organisations like Hizbollah, which do not seek to change the fundamental property relations in the country, which do not expropriate the capitalist industries and remove the country from the world imperialist market, which remain tied to the religious confessional politics imposed on the country by imperialism, can never provide a consistent anti imperialist leadership. A compromise between the US and these regional powers, or political privileges for Hizbollah in Lebanon could lead to them abandoning the struggle against imperialism.

A working class party in Lebanon as part of a new international party could seriously challenge the stranglehold of imperialism in the region, but also provide a strong political challenge to the domination by other forces, such as the Ba'athist government in Damascus and the Islamists in Tehran. Neither government is a friend of the workers and poor in Lebanon, no matter how many weapons and cash they send there. Hizbollahs star may be the ascent, and the recent redeeming of Syria and Iran by the US to curry their support for an Arab and Persian led occupation force of Iraq may seem to demonstrate their credentials as serious opponents of the Imperialists in Washington.

Instead socialists must be clear that only working class solidarity and a progressive movement across the region that is led by the working class forces in a fight not just against the military aspects of Imperialism and Zionism, but also the economic mechanisms of the world system. That means removing the Middle East and all of its oil resources from the world markets and instead basing production and distribution on an organised and democratic plan. Only this can really meet the political and economic needs of the impoverished and oppressed masses in the region.

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/power-struggles-lebanon>