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White smoke over Nejmeh Square

After a years-long power vacuum, Lebanon's parliament has elected a new president. Can the army chief bring stability to the post-war country?

After 27 months of presidential vacuum and 12 unsuccessful attempts to elect a president, Lebanon's parliament has finally ended the impasse. In its 13th session, held on 9 January 2025, the parliament elected army commander Joseph Aoun with 99 votes, breaking the presidential deadlock that had paralysed Lebanese politics since 2022. Aoun failed to secure the necessary votes in the first round, but after Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri called for a two-hour break to allow deliberations among parliamentary blocs, he eventually succeeded.

Lebanon's political system is described as a consociational democracy, which allows for power-sharing among different religious communities. This system undermines true democratic practices, such as the dynamic that comes from having a ruling party and a clear opposition. The presidential elections mirror this dysfunction, which has been evident for the past 27 months when the political parties had been unable to agree on a candidate who stands at an equal distance from all parties.

The election follows the ceasefire agreement signed between Lebanon and Israel on 27 November 2024, ending the September war. A day after the signing of the agreement, Berri announced that the 13th round of the presidential elections would be held on 9 January and that the session would remain open until a president was elected. This decision marked a significant shift, likely driven by both internal and external pressures linked to the ceasefire agreement.

Shifting dynamics

The September 2024 war shifted the geopolitical winds and significantly altered Lebanon's domestic political landscape. Hezbollah, historically a dominant force in Lebanese politics, emerged weakened in the eyes of both the international community and Lebanese political factions. This shift affected its allies, including the Amal Movement led by Berri.

Berri, Hezbollah's main ally, likely called for the 9 January session under pressure from the ceasefire agreement to elect a president backed by the US and Saudi Arabia. Despite the importance and timeliness of this call, it actually shows Berri's weakness and endangers Lebanon's sovereignty.

After Berri announced the 9 January session, Walid Joumblatt, the leader of the Druze community and former president of the Progressive Socialist Party, became the first figure to endorse Aoun as a presidential candidate. The commander then garnered the support of Saudi Arabia, the United States, France, Egypt and Qatar — countries that are eager to put an end to the war and stabilise Lebanon in the post-war era.

This election reflects the strong influence of external dynamics on Lebanese politics, as the country remains a focal point for regional and international rivalries.

As army commander, Aoun is responsible for the implementation of UN resolution 1701, and he is in direct and constant coordination with the Americans and the Saudis. This is especially true in the recent period, as these two states are seen as the main influencers in Lebanese politics, given the decline of Iranian influence in the region and in Lebanon in particular, as well as the fall of the Syrian regime. The greater influence of the US and Saudi Arabia is also reflected in the growing influence of domestic parties closer to the two countries after the ceasefire and in the formation of a bloc that would nominate Aoun as its presidential candidate.

Aoun's stocks also rose after the ceasefire due to the diminishing power of the so-called Shiite duo — the Amal Movement and Hezbollah. In the first round of the elections, the 'Shiite duo' voted with a blank ballot. The Christian Free Patriotic Movement of former president Michel Aoun, on the other hand, voted for 'sovereignty and the constitution', as Aoun's election is seen by many as a clear international and regional intervention in Lebanese politics. When Berri called for a recess, two MPs from the 'duo' met with Aoun to reach a political agreement to cast their votes for him as well. In the second round, the election of Joseph Aoun was announced, meaning that he was able to reassure the 'Shiite duo' with the necessary guarantees to get some of their votes.

This election reflects the strong influence of external dynamics on Lebanese politics, as the country remains a focal point for regional and international rivalries. It also shows a renewed Arabian interest in Lebanon following the diminished role of Iran in the country. In addition, the country's ongoing economic crisis leaves Lebanon

dependent on external aid. These external forces are shaping Lebanese domestic politics through their Lebanese allies, raising concerns about sovereignty from any regional or international axis.

A new chapter for Lebanon

The election of a new president in Lebanon, after more than two years without a leader, offers a glimmer of hope in a country weighed down by challenges. The new president faces a monumental task: rebuilding infrastructure and institutions devastated by war and political vacuum, restoring trust in the Lebanese state after the 2019 revolution and securing Lebanon's position in a volatile region.

In his first speech, President Aoun called for the Lebanese army to be the sole armed force, indirectly challenging Hezbollah's role. This statement sheds light on the future of Hezbollah's arms and their integration into the political system. This stance is seen as a bold move, but it remains unclear to what extent it can be realised without the support of international powers such as the US and Saudi Arabia.

Aoun's election ended the 27 months of political deadlock, but it also exposed the fragility of the country and the powerful influence of foreign powers in Lebanese domestic affairs. It signals the end of Iranian-Syrian influence and the beginning of Saudi-American dominance, heralding the potential return of Gulf investments to Lebanon and offering hope for economic recovery. Nevertheless, the challenges ahead for the new Lebanese leadership are immense. Whether the new government can rise to the occasion remains to be seen.

For this government to succeed, international support for Lebanon should be increased to assist the government in achieving what the president promised to work on. The EU and any other international power with expertise in reforming judiciary systems, supporting independent media outlets and, most importantly, proliferating social protection policies should invest in aiding the current government to meet the challenges ahead.



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