



Limiting the Damage of Lebanon's Looming Presidential Vacuum

Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°88

Beirut/Brussels, 27 October 2022

What's new? Time is running out for Lebanon's politicians to choose a new president. Should they fail to do so by 31 October, when the incumbent's term ends, the resulting void could endure for months or even years. Political leaders are especially divided over Hizbollah's role in government and its weapons stockpiles.

Why does it matter? Such a vacuum could leave the government's hands tied, since under Lebanon's system the president must approve any new cabinet that forms, and the outgoing incumbent has not done so. In a void, caretaker ministers will struggle to make reforms the country needs to obtain rescue from its economic woes.

What should be done? The country's political elites should work to find a compromise president sooner rather than later, while outside actors should discourage the incumbent from overstaying his term. Lebanese leaders should also arrive at an arrangement to unfetter the caretaker government so it can proceed with reforms required to unlock economic assistance.

I. Overview

On 1 November, the Lebanese people will likely awake to an all-too-familiar scenario: an empty chair where the head of state should be. The six-year term of incumbent Michel Aoun expires on 31 October, and thus far, Lebanon's parliament has not elected a successor. A presidential vacuum threatens to paralyse governance, leaving a weak caretaker government holding the reins of power, and further stalling the economic reforms on which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has conditioned desperately needed assistance. Prolonged wrangling over the presidency can only compound these problems at a moment when Lebanon desperately needs to turn a corner on three years of political, economic and social crises that create a risk of violent instability. With a nudge from external partners, the country's politicians should do all they can to avert this outcome by reaching a pragmatic compromise on a new president and, in the meantime, agreeing to protocols that will allow the caretaker government to move ahead with economic reforms.

Lebanon's politics are increasingly polarised. Politicians remain sharply divided over the role of Hizbollah, the Shiite party-cum-militia. The party's rivals worry that

it wields far too much clout. They say President Aoun further strengthened Hizbollah's grip on state institutions, and they are determined to stop any presidential candidate who may do more of the same. For its part, the pro-Hizbollah camp will not accept a candidate who is opposed to the party's alignment with Iran and its stance of "resistance" toward Israel and its allies. With little appetite for compromise on either side, a confrontation appears preordained.

The stalemate could well be protracted. The legislature, which is responsible for electing the new president, is highly fragmented following the May parliamentary elections, with no clear majority for either camp. The "sovereignists", Hizbollah's most strident opponents, cannot realistically muster a majority to elect their preferred candidate. They may, however, manage to block any Hizbollah-backed option by rallying enough MPs to frustrate parliamentary quorum requirements. Hizbollah's alliance is larger and apparently more cohesive than the opposition factions, but internal divisions may still prevent it from imposing a candidate of its choice. Meanwhile, outside powers are – for the most part – watching the proceedings dispassionately. While some in Lebanon are banking that a reduction in regional tensions may make it easier for the parties to bridge the domestic divide, it remains unclear how that would happen.

Lebanon can ill afford the price of another extended vacancy in the presidential palace. The presidency is not the most active position in the Lebanese executive branch: it is the prime minister who is primarily responsible for the government's day-to-day functioning. But the president does have the capacity to block the formation of new cabinets – a power that Aoun has used several times – and plays other roles integral to Lebanese governance. When the presidency is vacant, its powers devolve to the government, but the government is constrained as to how it can use them. The practice (which some view as reflecting a legal requirement) has been to require the government to act by consensus of all 24 ministers during periods when the presidency is vacant.

That unanimity requirement could create significant challenges at present. The country faces a debilitating economic crisis that demands immediate attention – chiefly, through reforms the IMF has mandated before it will release a much-needed bailout package. Those reforms require, in some cases, government approval. But it may not be in the cards to attract 24 yes votes for all these contentious initiatives. The voting convention could thus wind up putting another impediment in the way of Lebanon's stalled economic recovery – causing further hardship and heightening the risk of social unrest.

The best way to avoid a deeper crisis would be for Lebanon's political elites to set aside their narrow interests and work toward a pragmatic compromise on President Aoun's replacement that fits within the traditions of the country's post-civil war power-sharing arrangements. Opposition groups should use their leverage to push for a genuine compromise candidate, while eschewing moves that turn the presidential contest into a hopeless quest to rein in Hizbollah. The pro-Hizbollah camp should not attempt to impose a president in the teeth of strong opposition, which would risk destabilising political friction. In the background, international actors should support compromise efforts and be careful to avoid intensifying the rivalry between the two camps. They should also make clear that Aoun must not overstay his term in the

presidency – an idea he has reportedly entertained – as such a move could only make Lebanon's impending constitutional crisis yet more difficult to manage.

Should 31 October come and go without the selection of a new president, Lebanon's political leaders should explore steps to limit the damage, including by putting in place a new arrangement that allows the caretaker government greater freedom to agree to needed economic reforms absent consensus. But no one should think that such a deal will be a stable substitute for the compromises required to settle on a new president, kickstart an economic recovery and help the country emerge from its protracted crisis – all priorities that should supersede political intrigues among Lebanon's elites.

II. The Power of the President

Presidential elections continue to divide Lebanon, despite the largely ceremonial role reserved for the head of state. The prime minister and speaker of parliament hold more day-to-day control over the levers of power. Nevertheless, under the constitution adopted at the end of the 1975-1990 civil war, the president, who is selected by secret parliamentary ballot every six years, does have one key legal prerogative: no government can be formed without his or her signature.¹ In practical terms, the president can thus have considerable sway over who sits in the cabinet and runs the country. Until the incumbent Michel Aoun took power, no president serving since Lebanon's civil war ended had wielded this influence. But Aoun's exercise of the veto over government formation demonstrates just how consequential the power can be.²

Since Lebanon's economic crisis erupted in late 2019, Aoun has repeatedly refused to sign off on cabinet line-ups submitted to him by Prime Minister-designates Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati, leading to extended stalemates around who would run the government.³ He has been boosted in his obstinacy by the strong parliamentary representation enjoyed by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), the Christian party he

¹ Lebanese Constitution, Article 53(4). Until the constitutional reforms adopted as part of the Taif agreement that ended the civil war, the president's prerogatives included appointing the prime minister, presiding over and voting in cabinet meetings, and dissolving parliament. These sweeping powers gave the president a "hegemonic" grip on the executive. See Joseph Bahout, "The Unravelling of Lebanon's Taif Agreement: Limits of Sect-based Power-sharing", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 May 2016. The Taif agreement transferred most of the president's prerogatives to the prime minister, the council of ministers, the parliament and its speaker. See Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London, 2007), p. 251.

² From the end of the civil war until 2005, the ultimate decision-making power in Lebanon rested with Syria, which kept some 20,000 troops and a sprawling network of intelligence personnel in the country. President Michel Suleiman (2008-2014) nominated ministers to the governments formed during his tenure, but he refrained from exerting significant influence through them. Aoun, by contrast, set out with the explicit objective of restoring the presidency to some of its previous influence.

³ See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°214, *Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit*, 8 June 2020; and N°228, *Managing Lebanon's Compounding Crises*, 28 October 2021. Ever since he was appointed head of a military government in 1988, Aoun has cultivated a reputation as a firebrand who aims to shake up the Lebanese political system. See Heiko Wimmen, "Rallying Around the Renegade", *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 27 August 2007.

founded in 2005, as well as by his longstanding alliance with Hezbollah.⁴ At the time of writing, Aoun had yet to approve a new cabinet in the aftermath of the May parliamentary elections. If the parties cannot agree on a presidential successor by 31 October, the country will most likely enter a presidential vacuum with a caretaker government in place.⁵

Politicians offer clashing explanations for Aoun's insistence on using his presidential veto power in this way. Aoun and his supporters argue that he has used his power to fight corruption, restore the integrity of state institutions, and preserve the political representation of the Christian community. His detractors, by contrast, accuse him of enabling the interests of Gebran Bassil – his son-in-law, whom he has anointed to succeed him as FPM leader – and providing cover for what they argue has been Hezbollah's de facto takeover of the Lebanese state. These critics hold that Aoun offered Hezbollah unprecedented access to power in return for political and material benefits.⁶

Partisanship with or against Hezbollah remains the primary dividing line in Lebanese politics – even as the country enters the fourth year of a debilitating economic crisis. On one side of the line, Hezbollah's supporters want a president who will accept the group's current level of influence, which they argue is crucial to Lebanon's stability and national security. On the other side are those who fear that another such president would provide legitimacy for the Shiite party's private arsenal of weapons, its regional ambitions, its alleged domination of state institutions and the sway that Iran holds through it. These fears drive Hezbollah's staunchest opponents, the sovereignist camp, to push for a candidate who will take a clear stand against the party and the right it claims to maintain its own store of arms outside state control.⁷ Not surprisingly, Hezbollah and its allies reject any candidate who fits that bill.⁸

⁴ In February 2006, the FPM and Hezbollah established a strategic alliance, known as the Mar Mikhail Agreement (after the church where it was signed), which has stood to this day. "Memorandum of understanding by Hezbollah and Free Patriotic Movement", Voltaire Network, 6 February 2006. Between 2009 and 2018, the FPM had some twenty members in parliament. After the 2018 elections, that share rose to nearly 30, including independents elected on its ticket. In the most recent parliamentary elections, held in May, the FPM's bloc shrank to 21 seats, including the three MPs of Tashnag, its Armenian partner.

⁵ "Mikati fears concessions will lead to more concessions", *Nida al-Watan*, 15 September 2022 (Arabic). Even within Aoun's own party there are misgivings about how his obstinacy has held back government formation. An FPM member of parliament said: "Aoun ... might push this approach right until the end. Within the party, I am not alone in believing that Aoun should not get involved in this kind of adventure". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 5 September 2022.

⁶ Hezbollah's support was instrumental in Aoun's election as president in 2016, which opponents saw as a major win for the party. Scott Mastic, "Lebanon's Presidential Elections: How Shifting Power Dynamics Delivered a Win for Iran", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 18 November 2016. Aoun has since consistently defended Hezbollah's inclusion in the political process, "Michel Aoun: Isolating Hezbollah will lead to civil war in Lebanon", *Middle East Monitor*, 22 February 2022. Corruption allegations against FPM leader Bassil focus on the party's control of the Ministry of Energy and Water since 2009, when it achieved government participation for the first time, thanks to its alliance with Hezbollah. "Treasury Targets Corruption in Lebanon", U.S. Department of the Treasury, 6 November 2020; "Rifi accuses Basil of corruption and holds him responsible for theft of \$26 billion", *Ya Libnan*, 27 December 2017.

⁷ Parties opposed to Hezbollah claim the moniker "sovereignist" (*siyadi* in Arabic) for themselves to denounce the infringement upon Lebanon's sovereignty they see in Hezbollah's links to Iran, and in the party's military assets, which are beyond the state's purview. "Would the Lebanese people prefer

Beyond presiding over government formation, the new president will also play an important symbolic role as an indicator of the balance of power in the country. Which camp succeeds in imposing its candidate – or at least prevents its rivals from pushing through theirs – could well foreshadow which side will shape Lebanon's political agenda and orientation for the new president's six-year term, if not longer.⁹ For these reasons, the bitter schism that has characterised Lebanese politics for the past two decades could generate an extended stalemate over the presidential succession, just as occurred when Aoun's two predecessors left office.¹⁰

III. Into the Vacuum?

Amid Lebanon's political polarisation, President Aoun's term could well come to an end without a timely replacement having been selected. Parties on both sides of the political divide have the capacity to block the other side's preferred candidates. To date, although two leading prospects have emerged, it is not clear whether a compromise is feasible with respect to either.

A. Systemic Stalemate

The rules for electing Lebanese presidents are complex. A candidate can succeed in the first round of voting if he or she obtains 86 votes, or a two-thirds majority of the 128 sitting members of parliament. Should the first round fail to yield a victor, parliament can hold subsequent votes in the same session where only an absolute majority (65 votes) is required.¹¹ Convention, however, also requires a quorum of two thirds of MPs to hold a presidential ballot; parliament has observed this rule so far in 2022, and there is little reason to believe that it will change course.¹² Therefore, a determined

a vacuum or another [president aligned with Hizbollah, like] Michel Aoun?", asked one sovereignist party official. "I believe that 60 per cent of Lebanese would prefer a vacuum. It returns to the argument of there being 'a gun on the table'. In this case, Hizbollah is holding the gun and threatening us, so we cannot submit under those circumstances". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 September 2022.

⁸ Hizbollah representatives still recall their experience with President Suleiman, who set out to be a consensus candidate but then positioned himself against the party's intervention in Syria in late 2012. Crisis Group interview, senior Hizbollah party official, Beirut, 21 September 2022. Sami Nader, "Dispute between Lebanese president, Hezbollah heats up", *Al-Monitor*, 4 March 2014.

⁹ "The presidential battle is [...] important to all political factions", said a Hizbollah official. "It is a battle to determine Lebanon's future over the next six years". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 21 September 2022.

¹⁰ When the term of President Emile Lahoud ended in late 2007, the ensuing vacuum lasted for more than five months and was resolved only after several days of armed confrontation in early May 2008. The term of Lahoud's successor, Suleiman, was followed by a vacuum of nearly two and a half years, until a broad compromise allowed for Aoun's election on 31 October 2016. "Majority of presidential terms in Lebanon end in conflicts, wars or vacuum", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 28 August 2022.

¹¹ Lebanese Constitution, Article 49.

¹² Parliament has settled on the necessity of reaching a two-thirds quorum for all electoral rounds. Nevertheless, legal experts hold diverging views on whether this interpretation is correct. "The electoral session quandary of an 86-member or 65-member quorum", *al-Nahar*, 13 October 2022 (Arabic). While the constitution is unclear about the two-thirds quorum for subsequent sessions, no presidential vote has ever been held without it. See Ali Mourad, "Caught between the Constitution and Politics: The

opposition can block the election of a candidate who appears poised to achieve majority support, by having at least 43 MPs boycott the relevant parliamentary sessions or rounds indefinitely.

Divisions in parliament complicate matters further. Since the May parliamentary elections, Lebanon has had a hung legislature, with no single bloc or alliance able to claim the majority.¹³ Hizbollah and its allies (chiefly, the Shiite Amal Movement and the FPM) command 60 seats, meaning that at least on paper they have the most powerful bloc in parliament, but not an absolute majority.¹⁴ The remaining 68 seats fall to the so-called opposition parties, a fissiparous group that includes the FPM's Christian rivals, the Lebanese Forces (LF) and Kataeb, as well as thirteen representatives of the civil society "change" movement and a scattering of independents.

Against this backdrop, the path to the presidency looks rocky for opposition-backed candidates. First, the opposition parliamentarians enjoy far less unity than Hizbollah and its allies. Some try to project optimism nevertheless: in an interview, a senior LF official suggested that his party could marshal an absolute majority of 65 votes for a candidate willing to "confront" Hizbollah and bring its military assets under state control – the key policy issue for sovereignist groups.¹⁵ Doing so, however, would require rallying almost every MP not aligned with Hizbollah, overcoming difficult obstacles in the process.¹⁶ According to a sovereignist party official, the "reliable" sovereignist MPs number 31, drawn from the LF, Kataeb and Independents and Sovereignists blocs, plus three independents who are stridently opposed to Hizbollah.¹⁷ Reaching an absolute majority would require enlisting at least 34 more legislators – many of whom have different political priorities.

Presidential Vacuum in Lebanon", Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 4 July 2014. A constitutional lawyer interviewed by Crisis Group confirmed it as an "implicit" requirement. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 27 September 2022. The speaker of parliament, Nabih Berri, has the authority to hold or call off a vote, and he has consistently upheld the two-thirds quorum for every round of voting. Under this rule, parliament cannot proceed to a subsequent round if fewer than 86 MPs remain present. "13 October, a fateful day for Aoun: Could coincidence lead to a president's election?", *al-Nahar*, 7 October 2022 (Arabic).

¹³ David Wood, "Lebanon's Elections Portend Protracted Political Vacuum", Crisis Group Commentary, 23 May 2022.

¹⁴ The total of 60 seats includes the parliamentary blocs of the Amal Movement (fifteen), Hizbollah (fifteen), the FPM (eighteen), the Marada Movement (four), Tashnag (three), Ahabash (two), and three independent MPs considered aligned with the bloc: Jamil al-Sayed, Jihad al-Samad and Hassan Mrad. Tashnag, an Armenian party, is an FPM partner. FPM head Bassil claims Tashnag's seats for his party in order to argue that the FPM commands the largest parliamentary bloc at 21, eclipsing the twenty-member bloc of its Christian rival, the LF. "Bassil calls for a speedy new government with a clear program, holding an internal dialogue table", National News Agency, 21 May 2022.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Zouq Mosbeh, 6 September 2022.

¹⁶ For example, several independent Sunni MPs from northern Lebanon retain cordial ties with Hizbollah and/or Syria, a key Hizbollah ally. Separately, the sovereignist party official argued that the parliament's thirteen MPs belonging to the "change" movement come from various political backgrounds and do not form a truly cohesive bloc. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 September 2022.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 September 2022. In June, a new Independents and Sovereignists bloc was formed by MPs Michel Moawad, Ashraf Rifi, Adib Abdelmassih and Fouad Makhzoumi. "MP Michel Moawad announces parliamentary bloc, 'Independents and Sovereignists'", *L'Orient Today*, 22 June 2022.

Moreover, Hizbollah and its allies have ample capacity to take advantage of quorum requirements to form a blocking coalition. Hizbollah and Amal – the “Shiite duo”, in local parlance – hold 30 seats combined. The FPM controls up to 21 seats, and several aligned independents and smaller parties hold more still. With these numbers, the pro-Hizbollah camp can easily mobilise the 43 MPs needed to thwart the quorum indefinitely.

Finally, since the Shiite duo in effect controls all the parliamentary seats reserved for the country's Shiites, electing a president over their unanimous objection would amount to a frontal assault on the basic principles of Lebanese power sharing grounded in the Taif agreement, which ended the civil war and created the architecture for post-war governance.¹⁸ This move would be impossibly confrontational.¹⁹

Despite these towering hurdles to assembling a majority, opposition groups have thus far chosen to put forward their own candidate. During the three rounds of voting that occurred to date, they have rallied behind sovereignist Michel Moawad, a firmly anti-Hizbollah candidate. Moawad received the support of 42 MPs in the third session on 20 October – his best showing so far – which amounts to less than half of the support needed in the first round. On all three occasions, enough MPs of the Hizbollah-led camp then walked out of parliament to prevent a quorum for a second round, thus ending the very unlikely prospect that Moawad could get anywhere near the necessary 65 votes.²⁰

Some opposition actors like the Kataeb hope that they can create an impasse that will eventually compel the other side to agree to a compromise candidate.²¹ Under this approach, the opposition would reciprocate the pro-Hizbollah camp's obstruction tactics by recruiting enough MPs to frustrate the quorum from their end, blocking the other side from pushing through their candidate. A senior LF official expressed his party's preparedness to go even further by maintaining obstruction tactics until

¹⁸ See discussion of Taif agreement in footnote 1. Article (J) of the preamble to the 1990 constitution stipulates that “there shall be no constitutional legitimacy for any authority which contradicts the ‘pact of mutual existence’”. Since 2006, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri has put forward an interpretation whereby this provision requires substantial support from all major communities for key political appointments. Nicolas Nassif, “The principle of mutual existence from Berri to Hizbollah”, *al-Akhabar*, 12 April 2022. Hizbollah and Amal hold 26 of the 27 seats allocated to Shiite Muslims in parliament. The remaining seat is held by an independent, Jamil al-Sayed, who, despite having close ties with the party, does not sit with Hizbollah's bloc.

¹⁹ An academic with ties to the LF emphasised that the sovereignist camp would expect Hizbollah to resort to violence if its rivals tried to force a presidential candidate upon them, citing the precedent of 2008, when the party responded to government decisions it deemed unacceptable by occupying western Beirut. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 16 September 2022. For background on the 2008 events, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, 15 May 2008.

²⁰ “Still no president elected after fourth dedicated parliamentary session”, *L'Orient Today*, 24 October 2022. The second session scheduled on 13 October failed to achieve a quorum even for a first round and no voting occurred. “Lebanon's MPs again fail to elect new president as quorum not met”, *The National*, 13 October 2022.

²¹ During the last presidential standoff in 2014-2016, the use of blank votes and failure to attend parliamentary sessions stretched the vacuum to 29 months, Lebanon's longest-ever void. Eventually, the impasse ended in a compromise agreement to elect Aoun, Hizbollah's preferred candidate. “Lebanon's Aoun wins presidency to end two-year political vacuum”, Reuters, 31 October 2016.

the election of a candidate who will adopt a firm stance against Hizbollah's weapons and political project.²²

But the obstruction gambit is hardly guaranteed to succeed. While assembling a blocking coalition requires fewer supporters than electing a president – 43 as opposed to 65 MPs –, the lack of coherence among the opposition looms large. With 31 reliable backers, the sovereignist camp would need to rally at least an additional twelve MPs of different persuasions. Whether it will be able to hold together such a motley gathering over an extended period of time is uncertain.²³

Yet even if the opposition's efforts are for naught, and the Shiite duo and their allies achieve a quorum, a Hizbollah-aligned candidate is not guaranteed to become president. To get anywhere near 65 votes, as required for a second-round victory, the Shiite duo will need the support of FPM head Bassil and his party's 21-seat parliamentary bloc.²⁴ Bassil has reportedly long coveted the presidency for himself, despite his abrasive political style and subjection to U.S. economic sanctions on corruption allegations. While he has publicly stated that he does not plan to seek the office, Bassil has also refused to endorse Hizbollah's reported favourite for the job, Marada Movement leader Suleiman Frangieh.²⁵ Barring a change in Bassil's position, that leaves the Shiite duo without a viable candidate as well.²⁶ Reflecting this reality, MPs from Hizbollah, Amal and the FPM cast blank ballots in the first rounds of each electoral session held since 29 September.²⁷

²² When asked about the potentially adverse consequences of an extended presidential vacuum, the senior LF official argued that Lebanon faces an inevitable demise unless Hizbollah's role changes. Another sovereignist party official expressed similar sentiments. Crisis Group interviews, Zouq Mosbeh and Beirut, 7 September 2022.

²³ See footnote 16. Already, one potential ally appears to be out. Two senior PSP officials reiterated that the group's nine MPs will not support obstruction efforts. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 21 September 2022. Instead, the PSP invokes the need for compromise, while noting that any new president should be strong on economic and reform matters. In August, PSP leader Walid Jumblatt made headlines by receiving a delegation from Hizbollah, his long-time foe. A senior PSP official cited Jumblatt's meeting with a Hizbollah delegation as evidence that he is being more "pragmatic" than other opposition figures. In the PSP official's view, Jumblatt's approach "reflects the current reality that you can't get anyone elected [...] without Hizbollah". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 21 September 2022.

²⁴ "How Gebran Bassil escaped political survival mode", *L'Orient Today*, 16 June 2022.

²⁵ On 15 October, Bassil publicly told his supporters that he was still not running for president, before adding: "Be careful, I might change my mind". In the same address, Bassil reiterated that he would not accept a president "who does not have popular or parliamentary representation", almost certainly in reference to Frangieh. "Bassil menace de changer la donne: Ma candidature est toujours sur la table", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 17 October 2022.

²⁶ On 23 September, Bassil asserted that Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah "cannot force me to vote for Frangieh". "Bassil: Nasrallah can't force me to vote for Frangieh", *L'Orient Today*, 23 September 2022.

²⁷ "Still no president elected after fourth dedicated parliamentary session", op. cit. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri refrained from scheduling another session before the expiration of Aoun's term and called the election process "a failed piece of theatre". "Lebanon enters a de facto presidential vacuum one week before the end of Aoun's term", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 October 2022.

B. Who Can Get the Job?

Two men are mentioned as possible presidential candidates, but the road is clear for neither. Suleiman Frangieh, scion of a powerful Maronite family from the north, is reportedly the Shiite parties' choice.²⁸ The affable Frangieh has strong personal bonds with many politicians, including among those opposed to the Hizbollah camp.²⁹ Yet his candidacy faces widespread opposition among the sovereignists on the basis that Hizbollah could use him as a proxy in the presidential palace, replicating what it allegedly did in the Aoun years. Frangieh has emphasised that he is "not Hizbollah's candidate" and instead tried to position himself as a compromise figure between the main political factions – a stance that appears unlikely to convince many.³⁰

Frangieh's aspirations suffer from other weaknesses. First, he is close to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whose regime is an international pariah due to its brutal repression during Syria's civil war. The regime, and potentially its economic partners, are subject to international sanctions. "Frangieh is 100 times worse than [FPM head] Bassil because he would align Lebanon 100 per cent with Syria", said a senior sovereignist party official. "This scenario [Frangieh's selection] means that we become [an economically isolated nation like] Venezuela [...] for the next six years".³¹

Secondly, Frangieh must overcome Bassil's objection to his candidacy, because he will need the FPM's bloc of up to 21 MPs to reach 65 votes. Moreover, Bassil's voting power aside, electing a candidate without the support of at least one sizeable Christian party – Frangieh himself has a bloc of only four MPs – would again upend Lebanese power-sharing conventions that have been in place since the Taif agreement.³² Frangieh and Hizbollah may attempt to sway Bassil by pledging to give the FPM prominent posts in the new cabinet to be formed once the new president assumes office, but it remains unclear whether the FPM chief would accept promises with such uncertain prospects.³³ "Bassil will want to be like Dick Cheney during the Bush years ... not a

²⁸ "Hizbollah promotes Frangieh as consensual president: Will it convince Bassil?", *Nida al-Watan*, 20 September 2022 (Arabic). According to conventions of the Lebanese power-sharing system, the president is supposed to be a Maronite Christian.

²⁹ In September, even ardent sovereignist and LF leader Samir Geagea acknowledged his "personal relationship" with Frangieh, his former civil war foe. Nevertheless, Geagea opposes Frangieh's candidacy because he represents Hizbollah's camp. "Geagea: If the 'opposition' agrees on my name for presidency, I am ready", *L'Orient Today*, 27 September 2022.

³⁰ "I am not Hezbollah's candidate," Frangieh says", *L'Orient Today*, 23 September 2022. In fact, several figures connected with the civil society "change" movement plan to block Frangieh's candidacy. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, 3 August and 9 September 2022.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 September 2022. Frangieh's grandfather (also named Suleiman) was president of Lebanon from 1970 to 1976, as well as a political ally and personal friend of Bashar's father, former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. As a child, the younger Suleiman took several trips to Damascus with his grandfather to visit the Assad family. "In unexpected twist, Assad ally might be Lebanon's next president", Reuters, 1 December 2015. Since entering politics, the younger Suleiman has described Bashar as his "friend" and "brother". "Frangieh: Assad is a friend and brother; if I become president, I will represent 8 March", *al-Joumhouria*, 27 March 2014 (Arabic).

³² See fn 18 above.

³³ Even if Frangieh sought to make good on such a commitment to Bassil, he would still need to secure the approval of the prime minister, who must also sign off on the proposed government. Lebanese Constitution, Article 53(4). Under the constitution, a new government must be formed when a new president's term begins. Lebanese Constitution, Article 69(d).

vice president, but a co-president”, a Lebanese political scientist told Crisis Group. “Nevertheless, Frangieh’s election is more or less guaranteed if he and Bassil can reach a deal”.³⁴

If Frangieh cannot break the impasse, a viable alternative might be Joseph Aoun (no relation to Michel), the army commander. There are precedents for Lebanese military leaders stepping into the presidency in times of crisis.³⁵ Aoun may find acceptance across the political spectrum, even though he has reportedly denied any interest in becoming president to close associates.³⁶ Unaligned with a political party, the general remains untarnished by impressions of corruption and incompetence that plague the country’s political elites.³⁷ For these reasons, Lebanon’s various political factions may see Aoun as representing a safe option, especially to end a vacuum that becomes protracted. Given Aoun’s military credentials, a security incident – such as street clashes or a terrorist attack – could bolster his yet-to-be-declared candidacy.³⁸

Questions linger about Aoun as a candidate, however. First and foremost, little is known about his political outlook, as most of his speeches have covered only military matters, making him an unknown quantity for the competing camps. While previously some observers suspected that Hizbollah would be hostile to an Aoun candidacy, others now say the army leader takes a pragmatic stance on Hizbollah’s weapons cache, reducing the party’s opposition.³⁹ On the other hand, this position could make Aoun unpalatable to the sovereignist camp. Separately, other Christian leaders may stand in Aoun’s way simply out of personal ambition.⁴⁰ There is also a constitutional

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 15 September 2022.

³⁵ In 1958, army commander Fuad Chehab assumed the post after three months of fighting and a direct intervention by U.S. forces. The incumbent Michel Aoun was appointed head of a military government in 1988 by outgoing President Amine Gemayel after attempts to elect a president had failed. After the violent clashes of May 2008, a reconciliation conference in the Qatari capital Doha brought army commander Suleiman to power. The armed forces enjoy higher levels of public confidence than any other state security institution. Carmen Geha, “Citizens’ Perceptions of Security Institutions in Lebanon”, *International Alert*, February 2015.

³⁶ “Can Joseph Aoun walk the line?”, *L’Orient Today*, 18 October 2022. A Lebanese political scientist indicated that Aoun has shown willingness to work with technocrats, while also being capable of building bridges to the protest and civil society movements. “Frangieh would be harder for these [opposition] actors to swallow”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 15 September 2022. See also “Joseph Aoun, l’équilibriste qui peut faire consensus”, *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 15 October 2022.

³⁷ For these reasons, most politicians have been careful to avoid criticising Aoun, even in relation to his as-yet-unannounced presidential aspirations. In a September interview, Geagea stated that he is “not against” Aoun’s candidacy, but he would “prefer a political president”. “Geagea: If the ‘opposition’ agrees on my name for presidency, I am ready”, *op. cit.*

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 15 September 2022. Regional media outlets have made the same point. “Long-term presidential vacancy boosts Lebanese army commander’s lead over other candidates”, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 10 October 2022 (Arabic).

³⁹ Hanin Ghaddar, “Reasons behind Hezbollah’s new campaign against the LAF”, *Al Arabiya*, 27 January 2021; Michael Young, “The Impending Void”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 30 May 2022; “Can Joseph Aoun walk the line?”, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Among Christian politicians, Bassil has come out against a candidacy of the army chief. “Bassil rejects army chief’s nomination, warns of chaos if govt. not formed”, *Naharnet*, 19 October 2022; the pro-Hizbollah newspaper *al-Akhbar* recently claimed that the LF also tacitly oppose Aoun’s candidacy, despite Geagea’s apparent support. “A triple Christian veto on Aoun”, *al-Akhbar*, 21 October 2022 (Arabic).

provision that bans serving and recent army chiefs from assuming the presidency, though precedent suggests that should the parties settle on Aoun, the seemingly drastic step of amending the constitution would be a mere formality.⁴¹

C. *No Help from Outside?*

As Lebanon grapples with deadlock over a new president, eyes may once again turn beyond the country's borders for a solution. Ever since 2005, when Syria officially withdrew from Lebanon, ending its period of direct political control, the country has lacked an external arbiter that can resolve blockages stemming from its power-sharing system.⁴² International actors have only sporadically inserted themselves to overcome political deadlocks since then.⁴³

But Lebanon's stalemate is apparently not a major preoccupation for the foreign countries that could have the most influence. As the 2022 election drew near, various Lebanese politicians expressed hope that developments such as talks about reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, improved Saudi-Iranian relations and progress toward demarcating Lebanon's maritime border with Israel would help engender compromise on the domestic scene.⁴⁴ When probed, however, these figures could not explain precisely how this shift would work in practice – likely because such regional events have no bearing on the fundamental disagreement over Hizbollah's role in the Lebanese state. But in any case, the impasse in Lebanon reportedly did not feature prominently in the summertime talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁵ Nor have the United States and France shown interest in becoming deeply involved, mainly limiting themselves to encouraging Lebanon's politicians to elect a new president before Aoun's term ends.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Under Article 49, Grade 1 civil servants – including the army commander – must resign their posts at least two years before becoming president. Lebanese Constitution, Article 49. In 1995 and again in 2004, parliament amended the constitution to extend the terms of the incumbents Elias Hrawi and Emile Lahoud by half-terms (three years). In 1998, the constitution was amended to allow Lahoud, then the serving army chief, to assume the presidency (“exceptionally and for one time only”). When Suleiman was elected president in 2008, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri adopted the position that Article 49 does not apply during a presidential vacuum, potentially creating a precedent for the current situation. “A triple Christian veto on Aoun”, op. cit.

⁴² Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, op. cit.

⁴³ In May 2008, Qatari mediation resolved an eighteen-month standoff between Hizbollah and its opponents that had turned violent. See Young, “The Impending Void”, op. cit. The formation of a national unity government another eighteen months later was helped by a temporary rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia. Sobhi Zeitar, “Lebanon and the S-S formula”, *Elaph*, 31 July 2010 (Arabic). The 2016 election of Michel Aoun, after an impasse of two and a half years, occurred during a phase of regional détente after the Iran nuclear deal was signed a year earlier. Reportedly, the U.S. prevailed upon Saudi Arabia to drop its previous veto of Aoun. Joe Macaron, “Lebanon's Elections to Rearrange the Country's Political Landscape”, Arab Center (Washington), 3 May 2018.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, analysts and officials of various political orientations, Beirut, September 2022.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, expert in Saudi foreign relations, 7 October 2022. See also “Biden's Middle East tour did little to aid Lebanon's crises”, *Al Arabiya*, 20 July 2022.

⁴⁶ “Joint Statement of Support for Lebanon from the United States, France and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”, U.S. Department of State, 21 September 2022.

That said, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated some interest in influencing the presidential appointment. Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Walid Bukhari met with a wide range of politicians ahead of the presidential election, amid reports that Riyadh was worried about whether the new president will have a worldview it finds acceptable.⁴⁷ An expert in Saudi foreign relations explained that the kingdom is keen to avoid another head of state like Michel Aoun, who it believes allowed Hizbollah's clout to grow and with it the influence of Riyadh's regional arch-rival, Iran.⁴⁸ Riyadh enjoys a close relationship with the LF and could – if it decided to – exert pressure on Lebanon's Sunni MPs to support (or oppose) a candidate based on that presidential hopeful's stance on Hizbollah.⁴⁹ Whether Riyadh would be ready to endorse a compromise candidate also acceptable to Hizbollah remains to be seen.⁵⁰

Domestic stakeholders have suggested holding a conference with international backing, at which Lebanon's competing factions could renegotiate the political system's terms, with sponsors possibly helping to mediate and guarantee whatever deal is struck. Yet countries mentioned as potential sponsors of such events have expressed scepticism about their utility in the circumstances.⁵¹

IV. The Price of the Vacuum

If Lebanon enters another presidential vacuum, the country will pay a hefty price. Constitutional disputes about the executive and legislature's legitimacy could further weaken state functions and jeopardise important agreements with international partners, including the IMF and World Bank. Lebanon's desperate economic situa-

⁴⁷ Bukhari met with Jumblatt, figures of varying political persuasions in Tripoli and Sunni MPs from Akkar. "Within days, demarcation reaches 'final stage' and government receives confidence?", *al-Nahar*, 20 September 2022 (Arabic); "Baarini: close to reaching proposal to nominate Moawad", *Nida al-Watan*, 9 October 2022 (Arabic); "Confusion' about Bukhari's visit to Jabal Mohsen", *al-Diyar*, 10 October 2022 (Arabic). According to Lebanese media reports, it became apparent at a September meeting between high-ranking French and Saudi officials in Paris that the former emphasises the need for Lebanon's new president to be elected on time. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, reportedly argued that it would be important to identify a preferred candidate in advance. "Behind the scenes of Saudi-French meeting in Lebanon", *al-Nahar*, 19 September 2022 (Arabic); "Riyadh to Paris: We will not cooperate in Lebanon while Hizbollah is present", *al-Akhbar*, 13 September 2022 (Arabic).

⁴⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, 7 October 2022.

⁴⁹ "Until now, the Saudi veto is the most important one", said a Hizbollah party official. "They could indirectly veto Frangieh or even other candidates". The same interviewee argued that Saudi Arabia would be crucial to any opposition attempt to obstruct presidential candidates in parliament, mainly through its influence over Sunni MPs. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2022. A representative of a sovereignist party concurred with the notion that the kingdom could sway a number of Sunni MPs if it so chose. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 7 September 2022.

⁵⁰ In the first presidential election session, Saudi Arabia reportedly backed MPs voting for the sovereignist candidate Moawad, who is considered tough on Hizbollah. "French-Saudi gulf increasing over presidency; self-destruction besets the Sunnis", *al-Modon*, 1 October 2022 (Arabic). An expert in Saudi foreign relations indicated that, as of early October, Saudi Arabia had shown no indication of supporting obstruction efforts. Crisis Group telephone interview, 7 October 2022.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats in Beirut, May and September 2022.

tion will continue to deteriorate, as the tug of war over the presidency consumes the attention of an already dysfunctional political system.

A. *Constitutional Uncertainty*

Should Aoun's successor not be appointed before 31 October, questions about the caretaker government's legitimacy under the constitution will grow louder. Article 62 of Lebanon's constitution stipulates that should the presidency fall vacant, its authorities are delegated to the council of ministers as a collective body.⁵² For months, constitutional experts and politicians have debated whether the caretaker cabinet headed by Prime Minister Najib Mikati could assume the president's powers when it has not received a vote of confidence from the parliament elected in May. Most political parties accept that it can take on this role, but Bassil, other FPM members and Aoun himself have repeatedly insisted that it cannot.⁵³ Aoun has even alluded to the possibility that he would overstay his term rather than allow this perceived injustice, saying he will step down on 31 October "if the situation is normal".⁵⁴ Aoun's rivals immediately denounced the hint that he might remain in power, which would be a provocative move.⁵⁵

Reaching a deal on a new government just before Aoun's term ends – the chances of which diminish with each passing day – may not suffice to address the dilemma. The constitution requires that the parliament meet automatically ten days before Aoun's time is up, 21 October, to elect his successor.⁵⁶ Most politicians agree that, during these final ten days, parliament becomes an electoral body and ceases to function as a legislative assembly. Under this reading, even if Aoun and Prime Minister Mikati were to come to a last-minute agreement, parliament would have no capacity to vote confidence in a new government.⁵⁷

⁵² Lebanese Constitution, Article 62.

⁵³ Representatives from almost all the major political parties supported the caretaker government assuming the president's powers. These groups included Hizbollah, Amal, Marada, Mikati's Azm Movement, the LF, the PSP and the Kataeb. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut and Zouq Mosbeh, September 2022. One sovereigntist party official dismissed the purported constitutional crisis as an "Aounist creation", a sentiment shared by several counterparts. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 21 September 2022. A senior FPM official and a current FPM MP both asserted that a caretaker government could not assume the president's powers during a vacuum. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut and Zalqa, 9 and 13 September 2022. Another FPM MP took a more moderate position, suggesting that Aoun should avoid sparking confrontation over the caretaker government's validity during a vacuum. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 5 September 2022.

⁵⁴ "Aoun: 'I will leave Baabda if nobody means ill will'", *L'Orient Today*, 13 September 2022.

⁵⁵ Following Aoun's comments, Nadim Gemayel, an MP for the FPM's Christian rival Kataeb, told a gathering of supporters that "if he [Aoun] does not want to leave, then we will uproot him". "Nadim Gemayel on possibility of Aoun remaining in the presidency", *al-Jadeed*, 14 September 2022 (Arabic). In interviews, an FPM senior official and a current MP both insisted that Aoun will vacate the presidency at the end of his term, even without a new government (or president) in place. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut and Zalqa, 9 and 13 September 2022.

⁵⁶ Lebanese Constitution, Article 73.

⁵⁷ Figures close to both Berri and Mikati conceded that the parliament could only conduct a presidential election during this period. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut and by telephone, 8 September and 7 October 2022. By contrast, a sovereigntist party official suggested that parliament could arguably justify granting confidence at this time as a necessary institutional function, as opposed to ordinary

In either scenario, the caretaker or newly appointed cabinet will likely provide even weaker governance during a presidential vacuum period than in normal times. Political, and arguably legal, convention suggests that when the government has assumed presidential powers it can act only with the ministers' unanimous consent.⁵⁸ During the 2014-2016 presidential vacuum, Tammam Salam's government followed this practice, with the premier himself emphasising the importance of consensus-based decision-making to dispel any doubt about the legitimacy of the cabinet exercising executive authority without a president in place.⁵⁹

Several politicians – including backers of the caretaker government – say they accept the need for ministerial consensus during a presidential vacuum.⁶⁰ Under Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system, delegating the president's prerogatives means relocating, even if temporarily, the highest powers reserved for Maronite Christians. While these prerogatives are mostly inconsequential for hard politics – for instance, the president can hold up laws but only briefly – having them discharged by another executive body will rub in the fact that the Christians' highest office is void while the posts held by Shiites and Sunnis (speaker of parliament and prime minister, respectively) are functional. The contested legitimacy of Mikati's caretaker government is liable to exacerbate that impression. A consensus approach, by contrast, reduces the potential for allegations that the Christian president's entitlements have been usurped. At the same time, it in effect gives each minister, regardless of sect, veto power over each and every government decision – a power far exceeding the writ of the presidency itself.

Even if Lebanese politicians were to achieve consensus behind a convenient interpretation of the constitutional fine print, key external actors might not be so flexible. At present, Lebanon aims to secure important funding commitments, including an IMF financial rescue package and World Bank loans to support increased access to wheat, natural gas and electricity.⁶¹ A senior World Bank official noted that this insti-

legislative activity. Crisis Group telephone interview, 7 October 2022. One constitutional reading even holds that the parliament remains an electoral body for as long as it takes to appoint a new president and would be unable to legislate as long as the vacuum persists. Most political parties reject this interpretation, asserting that parliament can hold normal legislative sessions during a presidential vacuum, as occurred during the 2014-2016 void. No law enacted during this period has faced a challenge before the Constitutional Council. Crisis Group telephone interview, legal expert, 7 October 2022.

⁵⁸ A Lebanese constitutional expert confirmed that, in his legal opinion, Article 62 implicitly requires unanimous approval from all ministers. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 27 September 2022.

⁵⁹ This precedent aside, the Lebanese constitution does not provide explicit guidance on the matter. Some analysts argue that the constitution does not require that the cabinet – or any other actor – take any decision unanimously, which casts doubt over inferring such a requirement. Ahmed Zein, "A Parliamentary Extension ... or Security for Lebanon?", Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 15 October 2014.

⁶⁰ A key exception was a senior LF official, who argued that the Salam government obtained unanimous ministerial consent by choice, not out of legal obligation. Crisis Group interview, Zouq Mosbeh, 6 September 2022.

⁶¹ "Lebanon parliament approves \$150m World Bank loan for wheat imports", *The National*, 26 July 2022; "Lebanon, Syria, Egypt sign gas import agreement", Reuters, 21 June 2022; "Lebanon inks deal with Syria, Jordan to address power crisis", Al Jazeera, 26 Jan 2022. As of mid-October, Lebanon had still not satisfied the World Bank's conditions for unlocking the proposed loan facilities.

tution could not disburse any loan without a judicial opinion confirming that Lebanese state institutions can enter into the relevant agreement under domestic laws.⁶²

B. *More State Paralysis and Reform Blockage*

Irrespective of legal niceties, constitutional uncertainty will likely result in even deeper institutional paralysis. For now, the Mikati cabinet is accepted as a legitimate caretaker government, albeit with restricted powers, and Aoun as president. Without a successor for Aoun, those basic conditions will fall away on 31 October, plunging Lebanon's executive branch into uncharted territory.

Salam's cabinet during the 2014-2016 presidential vacuum is not a precedent because it had the parliament's undisputed confidence, but nevertheless it is instructive to consider what happened to Lebanese governance during this period. Even with a clearly empowered cabinet, state institutions ground to a halt. The stasis culminated in 2015's garbage crisis, when thousands angrily demonstrated against the state's protracted failure to collect rubbish, a precursor to the 2019 mass protests.⁶³ In August 2015, at the height of the crisis, ministers representing Hizbollah refused to approve garbage collection contracts, which prevented any bid from being accepted.⁶⁴ "In 2014-2016, we saw that all 24 ministers needed to sign before anything could get done", an FPM parliamentarian recalled. "You can imagine the consequences of this approach in today's circumstances".⁶⁵

Even without a presidential vacuum, Lebanese politicians have dithered in making reforms, including those required by the IMF to unlock a financial rescue package. In April, the Mikati government (before entering caretaker mode following the parliamentary elections in May) and the IMF signed a staff-level agreement, which set out eight conditions for Lebanon to meet before the IMF would consider an application for the rescue package. In the intervening six months, Lebanon has completed – at best – just two of these mandatory reforms.⁶⁶ In September, the IMF bemoaned this "very slow" pace.⁶⁷

⁶² According to the official, particular concern exists about a caretaker government's capacity to enter a World Bank agreement, given that Lebanese law generally prohibits an interim cabinet from assuming financial obligations on the state's behalf. Crisis Group telephone interview, 5 October 2022. The Shura Council, Lebanon's administrative judiciary, has repeatedly ruled that it has the authority to determine whether specific acts or decisions fall within the limited mandate of a caretaker government. See Decision No. 478 dated 30 November 1977, Joseph Gabr / State and Municipality of Hammana; Decision No. 341 dated 19 January 1979, Ajaj Gerges Yaghi / State; Decision No. 194 dated 12 May 2013, Antoine Zoghbi / State. See also "Caretaker government: From constitutional imperative to political arbitrariness", *The Legal Agenda*, 18 July 2022 (Arabic). The IMF did not respond to a request for comment on these issues.

⁶³ "Lebanese protest against waste disposal crisis", Al Jazeera, 26 July 2015.

⁶⁴ Hizbollah's ministerial representatives denounced the bids presented to the cabinet as a "farce", claiming they were too expensive. "Lebanon's garbage crisis underscores government's disarray", *The New York Times*, 25 August 2015.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 5 September 2022.

⁶⁶ At the time of writing, Lebanon had enacted banking secrecy law amendments and passed the 2022 state budget, both required conditions under the staff-level agreement. But the IMF deems both measures to have flaws, meaning that neither satisfies its requirements. "IMF reaches staff-level agreement with Lebanon for a four-year extended fund facility", press release, International Monetary Fund, 7 April 2022; "Lebanon banking secrecy law retains key problems", Reuters, 1 Sep-

A prolonged presidential vacuum will be a wholly unneeded distraction from the stagnating reform efforts, which require action both by the government and by parliament. As Lebanese politicians continue scheming against each other and vying for control of the presidency, the country's economic situation will deteriorate even further. "Life does not stop for the presidential election", said an opposition party official. "Things will keep getting worse".⁶⁸

V. Avoiding the Void

The timely appointment of a new president will not solve Lebanon's overlapping economic, political and social crises, but it will spare the country another time-consuming spectacle, deeper paralysis and institutional disintegration. This truism is unlikely to sway politicians who, since the beginning of the crisis almost exactly three years ago, have consistently subordinated the common good to their own narrow interests. Yet, even in terms of these interests, settling for a compromise candidate will serve them far better than insisting on a confrontational course.

The opposition parties need to accept that they simply lack the numbers to elect a president without the Shiite parties' consent. Rallying around an explicitly anti-Hizbollah candidate, as they have done so far, makes the political point that there is substantial opposition to Hizbollah's overbearing posture, but it has no horizon of success beyond that. Moreover, while preventing the election of a Hizbollah-aligned candidate by thwarting the quorum may be possible, sustaining the blocking coalition will become harder over time. Rather than doubling down on explicitly anti-Hizbollah candidates who have no chance of winning, or committing to a strategy of unending obstruction, the opposition should try to leverage its blocking capacity to achieve the election of a candidate who is acceptable to, but genuinely independent from, Hizbollah and committed to supporting the reform agenda.

As for Hizbollah and its allies, they might be able to rally enough support to impose a candidate of their choice, or to wait out the opposition's obstruction strategy, but they should consider the costs of such an approach. Ramming through a president over opponents' objections will make the prospects for cooperation on the reform agenda even more remote, and further alienate significant segments of the population that these parties represent. In this scenario, the push for federalisation or even partition of the country that has been gaining traction over the past three years, in particular among Christians, will grow even stronger.⁶⁹ By contrast, settling for a non-aligned

tember 2022; "Lebanon parliament passes 2022 budget that falls short of IMF reform", Reuters, 26 September 2022.

⁶⁷ "IMF staff conclude visit to Lebanon", press release, International Monetary Fund, 21 September 2022.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 9 September 2022.

⁶⁹ While evoking what they consider significant cultural differences between Lebanese sects, proponents of federalism often argue that the only way to escape Hizbollah's domination of the political system is separation, either by establishing political sub-units with far-reaching autonomy, or by outright partition of the country. See Joseph A. Kéchichian, "Partition is the only solution to Lebanon's woes", *Foreign Policy*, 18 September 2020; and Khaled Abu Zahr, "Only a federal system can break Lebanon's vicious circle", *Arab News*, 3 February 2022. A detailed proposal for a federalist

candidate would not amount to a tangible setback for these parties; indeed, such a compromise would burnish the pragmatist credentials they have recently won through striking a maritime border demarcation agreement, now near final, with Israel.⁷⁰

Though it should go without saying, one key to preventing further destabilisation as Lebanon navigates this perilous period will be for all political parties to maintain respect for state institutions, starting with the presidency. President Aoun needs to vacate his office when his term ends on 31 October rather than trying to remain in power or resorting to some other extrajudicial option to maintain his movement's level of political influence. Adding a post-term or otherwise disputed president to the brewing constitutional crisis can only deepen institutional paralysis and chaos. It also risks leading to civil unrest. External actors with influence in Lebanon – starting with Saudi Arabia, France and the U.S. – should deliver this message unequivocally to Aoun and his circle.

The same actors, particularly the Saudis, will need to play their hands carefully as the process for selecting a replacement unfolds. While Riyadh may well have the capacity, through the influence it wields with certain Lebanese communities, to block candidates it disfavours, this tactic could backfire if it prevents the parties from reaching a compromise that they could otherwise live with. The longer the process is drawn out, the greater the risk that Hizbollah will develop the edge it needs to impose its own candidate – an outcome that would serve neither Saudi Arabia's interests nor Lebanon's. For their part, Washington and Paris should steer clear of trying to put a thumb on the scale for a specific candidate, but they should otherwise work through the channels they have to nudge the parties toward compromise.

Finally, should attempts to replace Aoun by 31 October fail, then the political elites and international actors must explore measures for damage control. In particular, Lebanon's politicians need to find ways for the reform process to continue, even in the absence of a president. Parties involved in the government should consider the damage that would result, in today's exceptional situation, from insisting on procedural requirements, and instead move toward arrangements that enable a minimum level of functioning governance. For instance, extending the requirement of a two-thirds majority that Article 65 (5) of the constitution stipulates for weighty decisions (eg, related to long-term development plans or matters of war and peace) to all government decisions would signal an effort at inclusiveness that remains below the level of unanimity and its potentially paralysing consequences. Given that the vacuum could last for quite some time, the caretaker government should approach counterparties – chiefly, the IMF – to try coming to terms on a *modus vivendi* for concluding valid agreements under the circumstances.

constitution was developed by the Lebanese finance manager Iyad Boustany. For positions critical of the federalist proposition, see Fadi Twaini, "The federal republic of sects", *Daraj*, 21 April 2021; and Alexandre Khouri, "Le fédéralisme, panacée ou trompe-l'œil?", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 21 June 2021.
⁷⁰ "Hezbollah shows pragmatic side in Lebanon-Israel deal", *Middle East Online*, 19 October 2022.

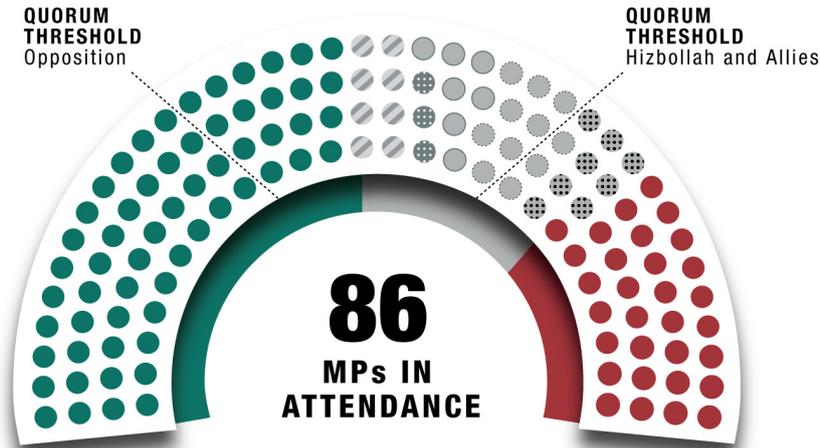
VI. Conclusion

Lebanon has stared into presidential voids before. This time around, however, the stakes are even higher, as the country's unprecedented economic woes can only get more severe the longer the impasse continues. Making matters worse, presidential powers will most likely devolve to a caretaker government that has never won a parliamentary confidence vote. Even if a new cabinet is formed, convention holds that it will have to agree unanimously on stalled reforms needed for Lebanon to emerge from its dire economic situation. Arriving at an exceptional arrangement that will allow the government to move forward with these reforms absent unanimity should be a priority for Lebanon's political leadership. Yet any such arrangement will likely be fraught, and no one should look at it as a long-term solution. Though their past behaviour augurs ill for an expeditious resolution, Lebanon's political elites must hammer out a compromise on a new president sooner rather than later. The damage that could be done by a protracted dispute – during which many Lebanese will sink even further into destitution – is simply too great.

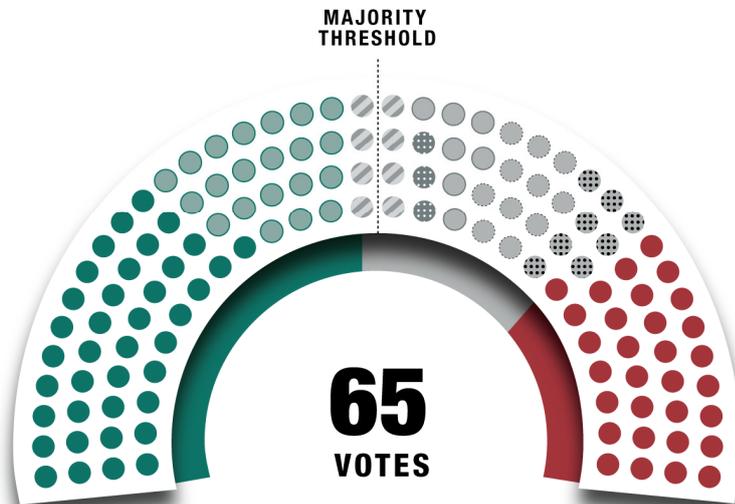
Beirut/Brussels, 27 October 2022

Appendix A: The Two Steps for Electing a Lebanese President

STEP ONE: MEETING THE QUORUM



STEP TWO: OBTAINING A MAJORITY VOTE



PARTY RELIABILITY

- **Reliable to support own side**
- **FPM and Tashnag may support Hizbollah and allies depending on candidate**
- **Unaligned, could support either side**

Caretaker government MPs (60)

HIZBOLLAH AND ALLIES

- Hizbollah (15)
- Amal Movement (15)
- Ahabash (2)
- Marada Movement (4)
- March 8-leaning Independents (3)
- Free Patriotic Movement (18)
- Tashnag (3)

Opposition MPs (68)

UNALIGNED

- Independents (8)
- Saida-Jezzine (3)
- National Moderation (7)
- Change MPs (11)
- Progressive Socialist Party (8)

SOVEREIGNISTS

- March 14-leaning Independents (3)
- Kataeb (4)
- Independents and Sovereignists (4)
- Lebanese Forces (20)



International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 235, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

Regional Offices and Field Representation

Crisis Group also operates out of over 25 locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.

See www.crisisgroup.org for details

PREVENTING WAR. SHAPING PEACE.