

Free Lebanon fights for survival

by Thierry Lalevée

Unfortunately, historical comparisons abound to describe what happened on Nov. 4, when a group of aging Lebanese parliamentarians, under the protection of Syrian intelligence, and claiming to represent Lebanon's national and sovereign interests, appointed one of their colleagues as Lebanon's new President. The best comparisons may be the elections held by the Soviet Union in occupied Eastern Europe in the late 1940s, or the discredited parliamentarians of the French Third Republic who gave power to Philippe Pétain to make peace with Hitler.

Completing the cynical farce is the person they chose, René Moawad. The most diplomatic among Lebanese observers have described him as an "affairist"; others have spoken bluntly of his swindles while he was chairman of the parliament's finance committee, and of his role in the drug-trafficking activities of former President Suleyman Franjeh.

This farce has received the political and spiritual blessings of all the major international powers, ranging from the United States to the Soviet Union and France, and even the Vatican. Each power had its own divergent reasons for doing so. Washington's message of congratulation to the newly elected President was the least surprising: It was the end-result of more than a decade-long policy guided by Henry Kissinger and aimed at courting Syria's favor, both within the context of the American-Soviet entente, as well as on the delusion that Syria could play a "constructive role" in solving the Israeli-Arab conflict. Likewise, Moscow's behavior does not require much explanation. Whatever tension may exist between Moscow and Damascus, Syria remains firmly in the Soviet camp, and Syria's victories strengthen Moscow's power and bargaining position.

What of France and of the Vatican? Certainly, its sudden turnabout has been felt more painfully by most Lebanese, who took it almost for granted that both powers would remain on their side. It seems that Lebanese Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir had a personal hand in influencing the Vatican hierarchy to support the agreement which the parliamentarians made in Taif, Saudi Arabia. Whether this was prompted by the fear that refusal to do so would mean further and devastating massacres, or by more sinister motivations, remains to be seen. In any event, Sfeir does not seem to have been able to master the events, and chose the route of compro-

mise, accepting life under Syrian control as the "lesser evil."

Not accidentally, the Vatican's turnabout coincided with most of the Vatican diplomats being hectically involved in talks with the Moscow regarding Mikhail Gorbachov's upcoming visit to Italy, to the end of negotiating a consensus over the Catholic communities in the East bloc countries. On the morning of Nov. 4, the Papal nuncio transmitted to Prime Minister Gen. Michel Aoun, a Papal message urging Lebanese Christian unity, and advocating that this was the time for "necessary concessions."

France's posture is no better, with both the ruling socialists and the conservative opposition supporting the Taif arrangements. Opposition leader Jacques Chirac went even further, calling on the French government to use all "means available to the state" to pressure Michel Aoun to submit to the Syrian puppet government. Such a posture smacks of double-dealing, and may be connected to the Gaullist party's contacts with Syria to obtain the release of the French hostages.

The French government seems to have acted from the same motivations, fed by fears that the bombing of a French passenger jet on Sept. 19 may be followed by additional terror activities on French territory directly.

Who will support a puppet?

However, events since the Taif agreement show that General Aoun has good reason to continue resisting Syrian occupation. Few Lebanese in their right mind consider René Moawad as a serious President. He is a Syrian puppet and nothing else. The first one to congratulate him was Syrian intelligence boss in Lebanon, General Ghazi Kana'an, the man who manipulated the Abdallah brothers during the 1986 terror wave in France. Moawad's first political consultations were held on Nov. 8 in Damascus, where he was not even considered important enough to meet with President Hafez al-Assad, but only with Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam.

Communiqués from the meeting indicate that Damascus is now waiting for an official appeal from the so-called "legitimate government" to launch a new military assault against East Beirut and the areas controlled by Michel Aoun.

Yet, there are several factors to consider. For their own tribal reasons, Syria's Druze and Shi'ite allies are opposed to the Taif agreement. In the final analysis, Syria is obviously concerned that the "political process" set in motion by the Taif agreement—i.e., a two-year deadline after which the Syrian presence will have to be questioned, does not reach maturation.

Hence, despite all odds, Michel Aoun and Lebanon do have a chance of survival, given their ability to play on these obvious divergences among Syria's so-called allies. The essence will be time, and Aoun's ability to survive both the immediate attempts at assassinating him, an upcoming military assault, and a period of siege and of blockade of the regions under his forces' control.