

# Lebanese resistance leads boycott of Syrian-run election farce

by Christine Bierre

Over the Aug. 30 weekend, the vast majority of Lebanon's voting population, following the appeal of the national resistance leaders, boycotted the electoral charade organized and imposed on the country by its occupier, Syria. In the capital city of Beirut, voter turnout was only 10%, and the national average did not go over 15%. A Lebanese source estimates that, while the boycott was respected by nearly 95% of all Christians, a full 75% of the Muslims also abstained.

The elections had been organized hastily and against the wishes of the Lebanese, and so the boycott was an insult both to President Elias Hrawi and his Syrian controllers. It was a total victory for the national resistance.

The election proceeded according to the usual corrupt methods of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, a man whose pragmatism has won Henry Kissinger's public admiration. Stuffed ballot boxes, voting corpses, forged voter registration cards, armed coercion, and bought votes characterized the first two stages of the elections. How is it possible to talk about free elections, when the country is occupied by 40,000 foreign soldiers—mostly Syrian, but also the Israelis in the south, and the Iranians in certain Syrian-controlled areas?

## Will Syria make annexations?

Why was the decision made to hold elections now, when the 1989 Taif Accords never made plans for them? These accords, which became law in Lebanon, were negotiated in Taif, Saudi Arabia by the western powers, and imposed on the Lebanese people. They gave Syria a free rein in Lebanon, imposing a puppet government under Elias Hrawi, and giving Syria the green light to wipe out the resistance forces led by Gen. Michel Aoun. Aoun was driven into exile abroad. In formal terms, Lebanon's members of parliament were in Taif and ratified the accords, but these deputies were elected before the Lebanese civil war, and most of them were well paid for the occasion. The Taif Accords say nothing about elections, but they did prolong the life-span of this parliament up to Dec. 21, 1994, planning to fill vacant seats simply by government cooptation.

Clearly, Syria's Hafez al-Assad wants to have a new Lebanese parliament, more solidly in his camp than that elected 20 years ago, whose leading members died during the civil war. Syria, which, according to the terms of Taif,

has to redeploy its troops to the north and east of Lebanon this month, probably expects to find a way to stay put, and make use of long-standing confusion (destruction of free schooling, annexation, elimination of the Lebanese system of government), to have a puppet parliament elected, which would then "ask" the Syrians to stay. The next parliament, whose mandate will last until 1996, would guarantee that Hrawi's replacement would also be completely loyal to Syria (his term expires at the end of 1995).

By organizing the fraudulent elections, adding some 20 deputies to those specified at Taif, and by remaining in Lebanon after the end of September, Syria is actually signing the death warrant for the evil accords signed at Taif.

These violations are not the first. Like all illegitimate agreements, the Taif Accords were designed to be violated. They planned the creation of a Constitutional Council, a sort of juridical last resort against any reach of the law, including the election laws. This council never saw the light of day. There was also the matter of electoral redistricting, which was supposed to base districts on the departments, or *mohafazat*, rather than the cantons, or *casa*. The departmental districts would have increased the pro-Syrian vote, being much larger than the cantons, where the vote tends to be along religious lines. In fact, wherever the *casas* were predominantly pro-Syrian, they were retained. Taif also planned to increase the number of deputies from 99 to 108. But now it has been decided to increase the number to 128, obviously in order to provide seats for the pro-Syrian "court deputies," but also, probably, to consolidate Syria's total control over the Assembly, in a situation where national resistance is persistently gaining ground.

## The dead 'vote'

Even for participants in the Syrian fraud, the electoral charade has gone too far. There were attempts to use registration lists that had not been updated since the war. In the town of Zahle, in the Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley, out of 625 registered voters, 70 were born between 1850 and 1900; elsewhere, voters have been found on the registration rolls who were born in 1840! The birth, death, and related civil records were often burned during the hostilities, making the reconstruction of valid lists nearly impossible. We should

also mention the fact that a large number of foreigners have found refuge in the country over the last few years—Palestinians, Iranians, Syrian Alawites—who hold forged Lebanese papers.

Moreover, the war dispersed a large number of people throughout the country. According to Lebanese law, citizens vote in the town where they were born, and exemptions are accorded only after a drawn-out process. Seeking maximum voter participation, however, the Hrawi government agreed to let all displaced persons vote where they live. But voters have rejected this, not wishing to ratify the present situation, and for the most part wishing to return as soon as possible to their home towns. To the 750,000 displaced persons who did not go to the polls, we must add another 750,000 who are overseas, in exile, who also did not vote. The Hrawi government wants to prevent the exiles from voting; for the most part they are supporters of the opposition. The government invoked the pre-war law which had no provisions for absentee balloting by Lebanese abroad. Thus, even if all the Lebanese had wanted to vote, only half of them would have made it to the polling places.

As if this were not enough to assure total control of the country, the toadies of the Lebanese government used widespread fraud and pressure tactics. For example, they delivered the files of civil state records without photos, allowing whoever showed up first to vote.

Occasionally the government used machine guns to get its favorites elected. In Zahle, the story is told that an emissary of the President came to visit Eli Skaff, an influential Christian. Accompanied by armed members of the Syrian security services, the emissary let Skaff know that he could head the election lists, but he had to put the President's son, Roye Hrawi, as well as the latter's attorney, in a winning position. In Tripoli, the Shiite Omar Karame was put under the same pressure.

### **A victory for the national resistance**

There are many who are now, finally, disgusted by the crisis sweeping the country, who had been earlier unmoved by the bad smell that war and the Syrian occupation had left. Just in order to survive in Lebanon today, one must either have family abroad, be involved in illegal business, or be close to the authorities. For the rest, there is more poverty now than during the war. The population lives with three hours of electricity each day. There has been a chain reaction of business failures following the devaluation of the Lebanese pound, which went from 2.5 to the dollar in 1975 down to 3,000 to the dollar today. Even the Christian quarter, at one time wealthy, is today dilapidated, its streets filled with piles of garbage.

This was the context in which the national resistance—the friends of Gen. Michel Aoun who have rallied around national figures such as Raymond Eddé and the Maronite Patriarch Monsignor Sfeir—organized the election boycott

which took place on three dates: the north and Bekaa on Aug. 23; Beirut and Mount Lebanon on Aug. 30; and finally the south on Sept. 6. The boycott started with three days of general strikes beginning on Aug. 21. The strike was largely respected: In the capital, as elsewhere in the country, only a few stores opened and the streets were empty.

We should underline that, while the boycott started among the Christians, a large number of Muslims joined shortly after. The Muslims were far more vulnerable than their Christian brothers—the Syrians imposed death on any perceived defectors—and so their language was far more moderated. They did not call directly for a boycott of the elections, but rather put out statements that they understood the position of those opposed to elections. In spite of this, large numbers were in open revolt against the charade. Among these were Saëb Salem, a major Sunni leader, as well as his son, who headed his party's list, and ended by withdrawing and calling on the people of Beirut to join the boycott.

The marching orders were largely followed. Everywhere candidates, including some of the most respected leaders in the country, withdrew; with the exception of a few respectable figures such as Salim Hoss and Najah Wakim who had specific reasons for not withdrawing, the electoral slates included only Syrian agents, pro-Iranian Hezbollah members, and other, generally mistrusted individuals. In the very center of Mount Lebanon, in the Christian Kesrouan, not one candidate remained!

### **Flunkies were rejected**

Not only was the boycott a success, but the very symbols of the regime were rejected. Roye Hrawi and his family attorney, who were put into office with the Eli Skaff slate, were badly beaten, while Skaff himself won a mandate. Hussein Husseini, the president of the outgoing parliament, was elected by a fluke: Two slots were left open on the Hezbollah slate, allowing him to win from whichever gained the higher vote total. Husseini nonetheless felt compelled to resign as president of parliament in protest over the election fraud, and called for the nullification of the very process he had helped set up. The same was true for Prime Minister Rashid Solh, who won his post because his opponent, Salim Hoss, had withdrawn. Even as a non-candidate, Hoss won 30,990 votes, to Solh's 11,438.

From the international champions of "human rights" such as George Bush, John Major, or François Mitterrand, the silence has been deafening, and their inaction threatens to leave the Syrians a clear field. Already, there is a move afoot—we don't know how big—against the Armed Forces. Ten high-ranking officers, claimed to be friends of General Aoun, have been arrested and accused of having been mixed up in bombing cars in order to disrupt the elections. Clearly this was a provocation mounted by the pro-Syrian authorities to create an excuse to move against the Armed Forces.