



Lebanon's New PM Tries to Form Cabinet Amid Internal, U.S. Criticism

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(AP) -- Incoming Lebanese Prime Minister Omar Karami got down to forming a government Friday, facing accusations from politicians and the United States that neighboring Syria held too much sway over his selections.

Karami was named to the post Thursday by President Emil Lahoud -- both men are seen as close allies of Syria -- and the appointment quickly drew criticism from Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Powell told Abu Dhabi television that the choice "once again shows that Syria is playing an inappropriate role in political life and in the civic life of the Lebanese people."

"Syria should allow the Lebanese people to decide how they will be governed, and they should remove their military forces from Lebanon after all these years," Powell said Thursday.

Karami immediately ran into difficulties when the leader of the country's Druse community said he would not cooperate in the Cabinet selection process because of Syria's influence.

"He is not the one who is forming the new government," Druse leader Walid Jumblatt said of Karami in remarks published Friday. "If only he were the one forming it, and if only he had the freedom of movement to form it."

Also complicating the process, a political heavyweight from the Christian community demanded the Interior Ministry portfolio in Karami's government or else he would join the opposition.

Karami denied that Syria had told Lahoud who it wanted in the new Cabinet. The new government was not been preselected and the process of choosing ministers has "only just begun," Karami told Friday's As-Safir newspaper.

"I know the enormity of the external pressures against Lebanon and Syria, and I know the sensitive international situation and the crises the people are suffering from," Karami said after Lahoud asked him to form a government Thursday night. "But I am not overwhelmed or cowered by them."

Karami replaces billionaire Rafik Hariri, a longtime rival of Lahoud. Hariri, who resigned Wednesday, was prime minister for 10 of the 14 years since Lebanon's civil war ended in 1990 and was seen as less dependent on Syria than other Lebanese politicians.

Karami, 70, is a lawyer from the northern city of Tripoli who served as prime minister in 1990-92. An informal poll of legislators indicated that Karami had the support of at least 71 of the parliament's 128 members.

The outgoing minister of health, Suleiman Franjeh, said on television late Thursday he wanted the Interior Ministry portfolio in the new government or he would join the opposition.

The Interior Ministry will define the constituencies for legislative elections due in May.

Franjeh, one of the country's Christian leaders, is pro-Syrian, but he and Karami are old rivals competing for influence in northern Lebanon.

Syria's role in Lebanon has dominated political debate since September, when the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution effectively calling for Syria to withdraw its 14,000 soldiers, allow presidential elections and disarm the Hezbollah militant group backed by Syria and Iran.

Syria withdrew some troops, but parliament amended the constitution so Lahoud could serve another three years as president without elections and the government did not disarm Hezbollah.

Pro-Syrian politicians in Lebanon say their country needs Syria's military presence to ensure stability.

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But Jumblatt and several Christian politicians oppose Syria's domination and the process by which Lahoud's term was extended. Twenty-nine lawmakers boycotted Lahoud's consultations with the parliament Thursday on the selection of a prime minister-designate.

The change of government raised concern for Lebanon's economy, which is burdened by a huge public debt.

By Zeina Karam

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