



Efforts to Resolve Lebanon Cabinet Crisis Stall Amid War of Words

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BEIRUT -- Regional initiatives to solve the Lebanese government crisis came to a sudden halt Thursday in fear of another failure, following the stalemate of talks between the Hizbullah-Amal coalition and the majority alliance and the clear indications that the Shiite ministers would resign from Cabinet.

Speaker Nabih Berri returned to Beirut directly from Cairo without making the expected visit to Saudi Arabia, or meeting with the leader of the Future Movement Saad Hariri.

Amal officials could not confirm or deny whether Berri had also suspended his initiative launched before his departure to Cairo and which he and his representatives promoted tirelessly, regionally and locally.

Arab League chief Amr Moussa said he suspended his mediation efforts between Syria and Lebanon due to "unfounded accusations" the pan-Arab body was working on an initiative whereby the international probe (into the killing of former Premier Rafik Hariri) would be closed in exchange for an end to the assassinations.

"We will have to wait some time, because our efforts have been thwarted by these false accusations; I will wait for a change in attitude from Lebanon," he added.

Meanwhile, Hizbullah officials and Premier Fouad Siniora exchanged accusations that reflected the depth of the differences separating the two parties and indicating a resignation of the Shiite ministers from the Cabinet.

On Thursday night, an expected and secret meeting between Hizbullah and Amal in Hizbullah's southern suburbs area was set to take place, after which a decision would be announced.

Before the meeting, the head of the Loyalty to the Resistance bloc Mohammad Raad strongly rejected Siniora's statements that referred to Hizbullah as a foreign force comparing the agreement sought by the resistance to the famed Cairo Agreement reached with the Palestinian organizations in 1969.

Raad refused to comment on the statement, saying: "We will respond later after we examine Siniora's statement carefully. However, we refuse any hints that link present events with those happening under different and exceptional circumstances."

Raad added that Siniora was dragging Lebanon "into a Lebanese Camp David."

But Siniora's information office issued a statement denying that the premier does not seek an agreement to solve the government crisis with Hizbullah and Amal, refusing to consider the talks had reached a deadlock.

"Deadlocks do not exist in politics," the statement said. "On the contrary, all the roads are open for dialogue, consultations and understanding."

As to the question of a Lebanese Camp David, Siniora said: "Now is not the time for jokes."

The statement concentrated on calls for a general dialogue over "bigger national issues," which have been suspended since the government crisis.

It did not comment directly on the agreement reached last week in Riyadh between Amal representatives and Saad Hariri to solve the government crisis.

"The premier did not take decisions without consulting with his allies in the government," the statement said, in clear reference to March 14 forces of who refused to accept any deal without their approval.

Raad said the majority wants to exclude the two major communities in Lebanon, the Christians and the Muslim Shiites. "The government cannot rule under these conditions."

Meanwhile leaders of the March 14 forces, including Walid Jumblatt and Social

Affairs Minister Nayla Mouawad and others raised the tone of their attack against Syrian officials, challenging Hizbullah to take a similar stance in the interests of Lebanon.

Raad was asked about dialogue between Hizbullah and Jumblatt, to which he replied: "Dialogue is nonexistent at the moment with Walid Jumblatt."

After his meeting with the former Minister Salim al-Hoss and Grand Mufti Mohammad Qabbani separately, Raad said the talks had put Hizbullah-Amal alliance before thorny choices.

He added: "We will interpret these choices in the position that we will take in the leadership meeting tonight."

He added that it was necessary to inform Qabbani of where the crisis was heading. "We are still committed to keep Lebanon in the position of the resistance against the Israeli occupation and the United States' regional schemes that conform to the Israeli interests."

Asked about the point of disagreement, Raad said the other party "simply does not want to reach an agreement."

"The other party does seem to agree on the main issues concerning the country's future; they want to decide Lebanon's destiny by voting," he added.

In the meantime, the political dialogue between the various concerned parties turned into a process of political polarization with each party trying to promote its views and interpretation to the reasons behind the stalemate, and intensifying efforts to win the support of other forces inside and outside the Parliament.

Several politicians, including Environment Minister Yacoub Sarraf, former Minister Suleiman Franjeh and others, met with Hizbullah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah to demonstrate their support to the resistance in its dispute with the majority.

After meeting Nasrallah, Franjeh said: "The country cannot be ruled through the majority-minority concept; this concept runs against the interests of the Christian community."

Franjeh defended his support of Syria and Hizbullah, saying: "Our opponents say our stances resemble those of the Syrian President Bashar Assad, if we resemble Assad's position in the ratio of 30 percent, then the majority's talk is 100 percent like (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon."

Michel Aoun met with the Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir on Wednesday and discussed the current crisis in addition to other national issues.

Gebran Basil, of the Free Patriotic Movement, told The Daily Star the talks covered the presidency issue, the principle of the reconciliatory democracy and the resistance arms. "The two figures were in complete harmony regarding most of these issues."

By Adnan El-Ghoul
Daily Star, Lebanon