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## LEBANON: Which Way Lies Democracy

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**BEIRUT, Jan. 15 (IPS) - Anti-government demonstrations held in downtown Beirut since Dec. 1 have sparked debate about democracy in Lebanon.**

Protestors, largely Hezbollah supporters, have been calling on Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to give more cabinet posts to the opposition, or resign. Siniora has warned that the demonstrations are threatening democracy, but many demonstrators say they are actually working to strengthen it.

Siniora's government was formed in 2005 after massive demonstrations over the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. The demonstrations brought political pressure that forced Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon.

The Bush Administration held up what has been called the "Cedar Revolution" as a model for defeating extremism and spreading democracy in the Middle East. But Siniora says that democracy is now in danger.

Some Lebanese analysts, like Elie Fawaz, agree. The opposition is essentially staging a coup, he says.

"They are threatening the Lebanese way of democracy because democracy in Lebanon is built around consensus," he told IPS. "And all of sudden you have one group trying to impose its will on another group, which is not built into the Lebanese democratic system."

Lebanon is not a 'normal' democracy. Power is divided among the 18 religious sects -- all of them minorities.

"Lebanon certainly passes the first litmus test of democracy, in that it has free, regular and competitive elections," said Andrew Tabler, a fellow with the U.S.-based Institute of Current World Affairs, who specialises in Syrian and Lebanese affairs.

"It is different from Western democracies in that power is distributed according to Lebanon's 18 confessions. Inside each confession, powerful political figures often rule with an authoritarian hand, which undermines democracy."

Lebanon's prime minister is by tradition a Sunni Muslim. Siniora's allies include right-wing Christians, Druze and Sunni Muslims. Hezbollah, the main force behind the current protests, is a Shia Muslim militia and political party.

Hezbollah spokesman Ghassan Darwish said his group and its allies are not the ones threatening Lebanon's democracy.

"We are asking for a real democracy, not the kind America is backing," he told IPS. "We want a national unity government, a partnership, and a share in authority. We would like a peaceful solution to what's taking place. We will never sacrifice the idea of democracy."

Hezbollah's main ally, the Free Patriotic Movement, is the largest Christian party in Lebanon. However, no ministers from that block were included in the government.

"A democracy means all people are equal and that everyone is allowed to speak his opinion," said Emil Eshom, spokesman for the Free Patriotic Movement. "Everyone should have a share in the government."

"All we want is to have some ministers," he added. "That's all we want."

Siniora has resisted including ministers from the Free Patriotic Movement in his government partly because the group's leader, Michel Aoun, is seen as too headstrong.

The Prime Minister also worries, however, that a bigger opposition block in the cabinet would veto what he and his supporters see as key projects, such as disarming Hezbollah, and the approval of an international tribunal to try suspects in the assassination of former prime minister Hariri.

The future of Lebanon's democracy may also depend on the role of foreign powers in the country.

Some demonstrators accuse Siniora's coalition of doing the bidding of the United States and Israel. But government supporters say the opposition is trying to increase the influence of Syria and Iran in Lebanon, undermining Lebanese sovereignty and democracy.

Hezbollah spokesman Darwish said Syria and Iran only give his group "moral" support to help win back Lebanese land occupied by Israel.

"Our goal is a Lebanese goal," he said. "In other words, the goal is to resist Israel. If Syria and Iran want to help in achieving that goal, that's a good thing."

As the demonstrations continue, many Lebanese fear that the standoff could turn increasingly violent.

Some, like Jamal Baghdadi, are concerned about the protests' impact on the economy. "People have the right to protest," said Baghdadi, whose tourist shop in downtown Beirut has lost 90 percent of its business since the protests began. "That's very democratic, but occupying a place owned by others is not." (FIN/2007)

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