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The continuing crisis over the presidency succession in Lebanon and deep political and confessional polarisation in society, reflect a very volatile situation in Lebanese politics.

The parliament sessions to elect a new president have been continually postponed, since September 2007, due to a lack of agreement and a power struggle between the governing parties and the opposition.

The CWI in Lebanon looks in detail at the background to this ongoing crisis and charts a way forward for the working class, so long divided along confessional lines. socialistworld.net

The so-called “consensus candidate”, the army General Suleiman, has been agreed on by both opposition and pro-government forces.

In Lebanon, the election of the president is decided by members of parliament, and the election needs a two-thirds majority of MP's to vote during the election session. Therefore, there is a need for an agreement between opposing political forces on the president to be elected. Today, none of the opposing factions have a majority that enables any party alone to elect the president.

Volatile developments

Hezbollah leader, Nasrallah, made a speech in the days following the assassination of Hezbollah's military leader Moghniye (who was wanted by the CIA and 42 states, all over the globe), in which he accused Israel of being behind the assassination and stated he considered this action by Israel to be a declaration of open war, which Hezbollah is ready for. Following Nasrallah's speech, Israel declared a state of emergency for its citizens, across the world, and boosted its forces along its border with Lebanon. This means that, de facto, the July 2006 war is still ongoing in many forms.

A pro-government 14th February rally, in Beirut, which commemorated the third anniversary of the killing of the former prime minister, Rafiq al Harri, in central Beirut, took place on the morning of the Moughniye mass funeral, which was held in the Shiite populated Southern Beirut suburb. On this day, the wide polarisation in Lebanese society was once again starkly revealed, with 10,000s attending either event.

Previous to the protests, the pro-government Druze leader, Jumblatt, carried out a threatening sectarian speech, with the aim of mobilising for the Hariri commemoration rally. Saad El Hariri, the son of the late prime minister, donated over \$50 million to the north of the country, to boost government support amongst the

local population.

A couple of weeks earlier, in the Southern Beirut suburb of Mar Mkhayel, a protest, started by local Shiite youth over the unbearable long hours and sometimes days of power cuts, developed into riots against the Lebanese army and seven youth were shot.

Horrific living conditions - alienation, poverty and unemployment - faced by this part of the population and worsened under the current Seniora-led government, triggered the protests. The Mar Mkhayel events clearly showed that the army is not immune to the convulsions in society. As seen by the role played by army officers during the street violence, the army can be used as a reactionary force against the working masses. An investigation into the Mar Mkhayel events led to two high ranked army personnel being blamed, along with a number of soldiers, for the death of protestors, while a number of other protestors were arrested and accused of attacking the army.

Following this event, almost on a daily basis, there are street clashes, riots, sectarian battles and, in some cases, attacks on political activists and party headquarters. Videos have been shown on news channels depicting the armed bullying and intimidating of people in some areas in Beirut and other areas of Lebanon. News channels are all related to political parties and thus biased towards their sponsors.

As well this, bomb attacks targeting and assassinating figures in the army have made tensions even worse. There is widespread confusion about the unknown roles of those army officers during this period.

Threat of conflict

Political disagreements are escalating in the run up to the presidential elections, which keep being postponed. The threat of a slide towards renewed civil war appears in different ways, including through street riots, mass demonstrations and clashes between pro-government

forces and anti-government sides.

Meetings on the regional, national and international levels are continuously taking place over choosing the president of the Republic of Lebanon. Even the status of the president is disputed, with many Lebanese who consider he should 'represent' Christians and not the state!

It is clear that none of the options concerning electing a new president will make a difference to the majority of working people. In fact, careerism is a big factor in the rows over the presidential contest. None of the candidate presidents and nor the government can provide a way forward for working people and the poor, whose living conditions deteriorate each day, with high living costs, increasing prices and low wages.

Another War?

One and a half years after the Israeli war on Lebanon, arms are being shipped into the region by the US, with the aim to get regional support in the so-called "war on terror". A proof of this is the different types of weapons, advanced or less so, being sent to the Middle East.

US imperialism's economic interests in the region have meant the creation of puppet regimes, support for dictatorships (so-called "alliance of moderates") and war and occupation. As well as this, Israeli war-planes still fly over Lebanese territory, daily, and the Western-backed Israeli government carries out a neo-liberal agenda, which is part of US imperialism's "New Middle East" plans.

Throughout its existence, the reactionary Israeli capitalist class has depended on its military strength, backed by US imperialism. Despite being the world's fourth most powerful army, Israel is faced with the fact that it has been unable to defeat Hezbollah, whose standing in Lebanon and the wider Middle East was greatly boosted by its resistance to the Israeli onslaught in 2006.

While Lebanon was being mass bombarded by the Israeli Defence Forces, the United Nations, dominated by representatives of big imperialist powers, like the US and France and Britain, did not call a ceasefire but allowed Israel to continue its brutal offensive. As a result, over 1,000 people were killed and one million refugees fled their villages in south Lebanon and the southern suburb of Beirut. With Israeli forces still on the Lebanese scene, and international troops on Lebanese land, Hezbollah's armed struggle will continue.

Western-backed government

A previous Seniora-led Lebanese government was presented as a "quadric coalition", made up of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Forces, the Progressive Socialist Party and the Future Movement. After the withdrawal of the Shiite cabinet members from the government, Seniora led a '14th March government'. Seniora's regime is now considered to be the continuation of the former Prime Minister Rafiq al Harri's political and economic policies. After the assassination of Harri, in February 2005, a huge mass movement in his support culminated on 14th March 2005 and ended up creating a strange coalition following parliamentary elections. This gave the '14th March' political forces a majority of 72 MP's out of 128. During those elections, Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement was isolated, although it succeeded in getting 22 MPs elected.

The government elected, which included Hezbollah, pursued the same neo-liberal agenda which Rafik El Hariri introduced, and the marriage between the state apparatus and the banking system continued. Over the last few years, throughout the economic crisis, the only sector of the Lebanese economy that kept growing was banking.

A few months after the end of the 2006 Israeli war against Hezbollah, the opposition withdrew from the Seniora-led government. The government continued their neo-liberal agenda after this, adhering to the demands of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the IMF and the World Bank, which includes privatising the public sector and opening up the economy to the 'free market'.

Political Islam

When Hezbollah had representatives in the government they did not oppose privatisation and other neo-liberal measures. On many occasions, the Energy Minister - a Hezbollah leader, Mohammad Raed - publicly admitted that he did not oppose the sale of the energy state-owned sector to the private sector. Even in the past 15 years of Hariri governments, Hezbollah did not oppose neo-liberal policies, and they did not refuse Paris-1 or Paris-2, the imperialist dominated deals regarding Lebanon, which marked the introduction of neo-liberal policies.

In the run up to the Paris-3 conference, when trade union leaders in Lebanon made an empty call for a general strike, the opposition, including Hezbollah, took the opportunity to hijack the strike idea and imposed a 'national civil disobedience/ national shut-down' demand, which included blocking roads. The aim was to exploit the anger of the masses who were angered by an increase in VAT, on top of already

high living cost rises in the aftermath of the 2006 war. The opposition leaders only made it clear that they were opposed to the Paris-3 conference being held under the auspices of an “unconstitutional government”.

The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), led by Michel Aoun, is clear about their neo-liberal policies, with its leaders looking at the ‘Western model’ and referring to this model often in speeches. In essence, none of the two political/confessional sides, whether in the opposition or in power, oppose neo-liberalism.

Paris-3, coming soon after the Israeli war, exposed one of the key aims of the conflict. The reactionary Israeli ruling elite, via its brutal bombardment of mainly civilians, aimed to destroy or severely weaken Hezbollah, intended to bolster the Seniora government in Lebanon which is regarded as open to US imperialist interests. But the Israeli attacks, with imperialist backing, and Condoleezza Rice's provocative speech about a “new Middle East”, were counter productive for imperialist and Israeli interests, and led to a rise in support for Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's few thousand guerrilla fighters, with the help of a mass social network built across Lebanon during the war, were able to withstand one of the biggest armies in the world. This is considered an armed victory and therefore complicates US plans in the Middle East.

But whether it is a victory on the political level for Hezbollah is debatable. The Islamic Resistance - the armed section of Hezbollah - is mainly made up of poor Shiites who are subjected to the reactionary ideology of the Iranian Mullah regime. This sectarian Shiite ideology, the Iranian backing and arming of Hezbollah, and Hezbollah's lack of a working class programme, have blocked the movement from appealing to all workers in Lebanon. The Iranian support is popular among some Shiite workers but makes many other working people worried about Hezbollah's ‘religious goals’. These fears are understandable given the sectarian divisions that divide the working class in Lebanon.

By providing social services, Hezbollah has the ability to accomplish some significant improvements for the poor Shiite masses, but what is blocking and restricting the resistance from evolving into a mass movement is the fact that they only serve one religious grouping, the Shiites.

Religious sectarianism

Although small at this moment in time, the Christian far right enjoys influence in government, along with other sectarian leaders, such as Jumblatt, the head of the Druze, semi-feudal Progressive Socialist Party.

The Christian far right parties, the Lebanese Forces and the Phalange Party, are overwhelmingly disliked for the horrific role they played in the civil war. With twisted metaphors and with watered down ideologies, the leaders Geagea and Gemayel benefit from portraying themselves as representatives of the Christians, playing into this communities fears as a minority in Lebanon and the Arab world.

Lebanese society is the victim of struggles between regional powers, which back different political groups to serve own interests. The biggest political division – between the 8th and the 14th of March movements - reflects the regional struggle between the reactionary Iranian regime, with its ‘coalition’ with Syria, and the USA and its allies. Syria, which plays a key part in the Lebanon crisis, still does not accept the idea of losing its former political power in Lebanon, which long gave it a strong regional role. The US is trying to improve its image continuously, backing the Lebanese Seniora-led government, to serve its interest in the petrol in the region.

This power struggle has, as one of its roots, the oil wealth in the region; domination and control of oil in the Middle East is a key to the global economy. With regimes in the region holding little authority and with no mass support from their people, external interference is made easier. In Lebanon, religious sectarianism deforms class awareness, impairing people from realizing the moving factor of the current crisis, which is, at root, economic by nature. This dynamo appears in class antagonisms in Lebanon but it is veiled and deformed by sectarianism.

However, despite the divisions that exist over the strategic goals of each of the political sides, on the economy, the two sides do not differ a great deal. In their official speeches, the 14th of March movement wants to build a state “free from Syrian intervention”. Syrian involvement, in practice, lasted thirty years. The 8th of March – the Hezbollah and Free Patriotic Movement (FPM - want to build a state that “stands up to Israel”.

Sectarianism is used in Lebanon to provide reactionary religious groups and neo-liberal parties, like the Future Movement, grass roots support. Sectarianism can dominate society and individuals, blunting and arresting even basic awareness of ‘citizenship’ – or a Lebanese national consciousness. Identity is diverted to sectarian and confessional ‘awareness’, which limits outlook to local geography and the religion the individual is part of. Therefore, religious sectarianism is one of the obstacles that stand in the way of workers getting organized on class lines. When workers are conscious of their class interests and the need to fight on class line, a united working class can develop strength against the ruling elite. Working class people, be it Shiite or Sunni, Muslim or Christian face the

same daily class problems and exploitation from the same ruling class.

But, due to institutionalization sectarian structures, working class people are forced to support such political powers. These political forces give their supporters material support to win their loyalty. Hezbollah, for example, have different social institutions, like hospitals and schools they use to fill the gap which the absence of a welfare state creates. The Future Movement gives direct salaries to their supporters! What is more, the electoral system reinforces sectarianism in the way that it gives people no chance to vote unless they vote along sectarian and confessional lines.

In the end, neither of the opposing factions in Lebanese politics have a class-orientated programme. Both of the political factions want people to be beggars at the doors of their institutions! Whatever of the political factions wins a struggle, the losers will be workers and the poor, who still face the same daily social and economic problems.

Baathism

The Syrian support for Hezbollah, and the latter's public "thankfulness" for this support, has helped lessen the Hezbollah's gains from its perceived armed victory over Israeli forces. The Syrian Baathist regime had a destructive influence in Lebanon. For example, the Baathists worked to split the working class by dividing the trade unions in the late 1980's and early 1990's (The paper unions in Syria were appointed and controlled by the Syrian state in a similarly destructive manner in the 1970's).

The Baathist dictatorship regime's negative influences were not restricted solely to the Lebanese working class, but also to the Syrian working class that come to Lebanon to work in awful conditions, to escape the devastating conditions in Syria. The working class of the Middle East have long been the victims of dictatorial regimes, from the Syrian Baathist regime, to the Iraqi Baathist regime, to the Gulf monarchies, to the North African corrupt, puppet regimes.

However, in Egypt, we are now starting to see mass struggles by the working masses against poverty. The enormous gap between rich and poor is not only seen in Egypt but across the whole Arab world. The Arab masses, while deeply impoverished, watch their leaders making billions from energy deals with Western powers. The region is rich and the poor and oppressed increasingly demand a share of the wealth.

In Lebanon, workers have made attempts to fight back against attacks but the intervention of the Baathists, over 30 year of Syrian presence, dividing the Lebanese working class, as well as the actions of

confessional and sectarian forces, paved the way for the current rule of the Lebanese pro-capitalist governments and the banking class. Over the last 15 years, and after the end of the civil war, Baathist intervention in Lebanon helped hollow-out and even destroy trade unions, by dividing them along sectarian lines and appointing sectarian leaders to 'lead' different sections of unions. This helped put an end to many of the accomplishments made by the Lebanese working class, when mass movements, over long years of struggle, forced previous governments to make concessions.

When Israel invaded Lebanon and reached Beirut, in 1982, and after the withdrawal of PLO leaders and militia to neighbouring Arab states, there was a general mood of 'surrender' to the Israeli army. However, the left, mainly communists, started an armed organized resistance, under the name of the Lebanese National Resistance Front (LNRF), and was highly active for a few years. Unlike Hezbollah, this resistance was from all religious communities. It was recognized for its heroic determination. But in the absence of support from cross-confessional armed forces amongst the Beirut population – which, under democratic workers' control could have been the launchpad of a mighty socialist resistance – the LNRF-led resistance was strangled by the Syrian regime.

International powers and imperialist interests

The meeting of interests of the reactionary regimes in Syria and Iran led to the arming and support of Hezbollah. This same meeting of interests led Syria to fight the leftist resistance in the 1980's and to restrict resistance to the Islamic Resistance - Hezbollah.

It is clear why then the accomplishments of the Hezbollah victory over Israel, in 2006, were limited. This is due to the sectarian nature and the regional associations of the Hezbollah party. However, now, over a year since the end of the war, there is a more deepening division among workers, along the two main political camps, the government and the opposition (or between the 8th and the 14th of March).

Since the end of the 2006 July Israeli war, the Lebanese masses have been living the post-war consequences on the economic and political fronts. The war caused huge destruction in the Beirut Southern Suburb, in the south, the Bekaa Valley, and infrastructure was destroyed all over the country. There are many homes, schools and services that are in desperate need of reconstruction. While the corrupt government has received hundreds of millions of dollars in donations and loans for 'rebuilding funds', the money has still not reached the people, due to political disagreements, and the funds are now used as

tools to manoeuvre by the different competing political factions. This situation is used by the Iranian regime as an opportunity to fund Hezbollah and the reconstruction of destroyed schools, houses and Mosques.

Channelling the masses' anger in bosses' interests

Soon after the 2006 war, the opposition, represented mainly by the Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), jointly called mass rallies, uniting their forces against Seniora's Western-backed government. Hezbollah and the Amal Movement cabinet members withdrew from the government after severe political disagreements with the other political parties. They have been in continuous protest since and while their presence on the Down Town Beirut today is only symbolic ('awaiting developments'), there have been heated mass protests from the start.

One of the main drives to participating in the movements has been the anger over government policy on day to day lives. The largest protests were huge mass demonstrations which took place at the height of the movement on the 1st December 2006 and which called on the government to step down, with some even going as far as calling on the people to storm parliament.

However, the opposition failed to make any gains from these events, fearing the consequences of mass action and needing to control the movement to use it as tool in their manoeuvres against the government parties. The lack of a clear, coherent general political line, and the absence of a class programme, meant missed opportunities for the working class of a united mass uprising against the government.

The opposition leaders, during the protests, concentrated on attacking many of the government's 'anti-worker' policies and used them to gain popularity. Though Hezbollah have no clear economic policy, they have recently been opposed to a full scale privatisation of the public sector. While their opposition to plans by the government, Hezbollah is not opposed to privatisation, in general. Their opposition allies, the FPM agree with the governments' neo-liberal policies.

More recently, due to pressure from below, and the fact that the supporting masses' underlying issues have been economic, especially in the aftermaths of the war, Hezbollah has linked the US-backed Israeli attack on Lebanon, in 2006, and the US administration talk of a "New Middle East", to Seniora's neo-liberal agenda.

The political disagreements between the government and the opposition are related to the regional and international power balance in the region. The gov-

ernment is associated with the Western block, and the opposition to the Syrian-Iranian block. The Syrian and Iranian regimes are allied against the US-dominated block. The West accuses Iran of developing nuclear arms, while the US and Israel both stock nuclear arms – in the longer term a threat to humanity.

Iran and Syria, and the US and its allies, including "alliance of Arab moderates" (the Western tail in the region), may negotiate on issues like Iraq and Afghanistan. The rhetoric used by both camps may escalate or tone down, according to the aims and interests of the regional and international players. But the working class will pay the price for the struggle between the two camps.

The Annapolis Middle East 'peace' conference, in the US, was watched with distrust and scepticism by the masses in the Middle East, who remember previous peace agreements between imperialist powers and Arab leaders. This time, in Lebanon or in Palestine, there were no illusions in the meeting, although, for a short time, the conference seemed to have an effect on the internal situation in Lebanon and in its relations with Syria.

In the midst of all this political turbulence, the issue of political Islam leaps to the scene. Its rise has roots in the lack of a mass working class alternative. After decades of defeats for working class movements in the region, and in the absence of a mass socialist alternative, alienated youth and others can be attracted to political Islam organizations and movements. Hezbollah's growth can be understood in this way. Many Shiite working class people have joined it because they can find no other viable organization to defend their rights and to fight for their needs.

Terrorism bred by this rotten system

The reactionary Takfiri Sunni Al-Qaeda-like group, 'Fateh el Islam', found support in the north of Lebanon, especially the northern Palestinian camps. In 2007, the Lebanese army was in a continuous war, for 106 days, against Fateh el Islam, destroying the al Bared camp, and forcing 40,000 inhabitants to become refugees in the nearby camp Baddawi and in Palestinian refugee camps throughout Lebanon.

Palestinian residents of the camps are the most oppressed sections of the working class; they do not have the right to work, access to social services and are not allowed to be organized in unions. To have full rights is the first step for workers in Lebanon to getting organized in a united movement with the working class of the region and to fight together for basic democratic rights in the face of a common enemy: the oppressive regimes!

Political religion is not homogeneous; it can be right wing or left wing and both factions can be within it. It is not a fixed phenomenon and can swing in both directions, depending on the forces involved, the pressure from below and the class struggle. With mass support, such movements can sometimes express progressive ideas and moods. Class divisions can be revealed within political Islamic movements that have wide support amongst the poor and exploited.

Where Islamist regimes come to power, such as in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, regimes use it to divert and confuse class awareness, by focusing on the religion and nationalism, and often encouraging Islamic fundamentalism in the region.

In Lebanon, the working class is divided into two broad political camps that use religion. The religious aspect is the Sunni-Shiite struggle that is represented by Shiite Hezbollah in the opposition and the Sunni Future Movement in the government. This disagreement reflects the struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and the Shiite Iran over dominance on the region, and the use of this struggle by the US to benefit from the natural resources of the region, especially in Iraq and the Gulf.

In battles for dominance, Lebanon edged towards civil war. Shiite and Sunni youth continuously get involved in street clashes. These disputes are spreading all over Lebanon, and are halted, to some degree, by measures taken by the Lebanese army.

The general perception of the army is that it is a neutral, cross-confessional, peace keeping force and that if the army splits this would mean the collapse of the state and a slide to civil war. But the army is a capitalist state force open to sectarian divisions, as well as class divisions. In fact, it is the masses, although divided, that are currently strongly opposed to sectarian armed conflict. There is also racism in the Lebanese army, with Palestinians being largely the victims of this, as seen by the army's indiscriminate mass bombardment of the Nahr El Bared refugee camp and by racist actions taken against the Palestinians.

Two sides of the same coin

The big oil companies that play a key role in the direction of the US administration benefit enormously from establishing puppet regimes in the region to control and dominate oil supplies. The neo-conservative regime in the US and its "constructive chaos" policies in the region, are carried out in a very destructive manner.

Imperialist meddling and intrigue in the region's national, ethnic, religious and tribal ethnic fault lines can ultimately provoke civil wars. The US super power and other major imperialist powers will do anything to

further their class interests in the region, including the division of the masses. In the case of Iraq, this policy spiralled out of their hands, causing huge problems for imperialism and the image of its power and prestige.

Imperialism and capitalism are two sides of the same coin; the need for 'system change' is vital. This is seen in Lebanon, in particular, with growing tensions between Sunni-Shiite, Muslim-Christian, and in the Lebanese-Syrian conflict. Walid Jumblat, the feudal Druze lord, hinted at a future struggle between Arabs and Persians. The Lebanese masses are continuously hearing such speeches about divisions, while real class divisions in society are blurred.

The need for a class alternative

Guided by a neo-liberal agenda, the Lebanese government's policies continue. This is despite the opportunities that opened up for the masses and which could have stopped those neo-liberal policies from being carried through. Hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets in protest against cuts and privatisations, but they were not given a class lead. The current opposition leaders went along the same path as the government and Paris 3, attending the conference of the so-called "Donating Nations".

The neo-liberal programme was agreed in the name of "reform to rebuild the country". It included privatization of the small public sector, a VAT rise, and further worsening in the living conditions of the working class.

Today, 60% of the masses live below poverty line, 20% are unemployed, if not more, and the minimum wage for most workers is fixed at US\$ 200 – the same level since 1996! Energy sources are in short supply, electricity and petrol prices are high, and power cuts in working class areas make life unbearable. Electricity bills of up to US\$ 50 for an average size family, and private power generator bills up to \$40 for the average working family, mean that half the minimum wage goes to covering energy bills!

Lebanon's national debt, built up over the last 15 years, is US\$ 45 billion. It is common knowledge that Rafiq el Hariri made billions over the last fifteen years when he was in Lebanese government (when first elected as prime minister, his fortune was about 2 billion dollars; when he died, it had reached 16 billion dollars!). Is it any coincidence that the former French president, Chirac, a good friend of the Hariri family, has been facing charges of corruption?

Way forward for workers

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) in

Lebanon calls for worker's unity and an end to war and poverty. Working people and youth need a united movement to oppose the bosses, the forces of sectarian division, including confessional-based parties. In the workplace and local communities, working people need to be independently-organised, through democratically elected cross-confessional and multi-ethnic committees, which promote the class interests of workers, the poor, youth and the oppressed. The masses' liberation can only be fought for through a mass workers' party that can stand in opposition to the corrupt governing parties which only serve the interest of the bosses – the capitalist class nationally and internationally.

The working class can create an alternative way of organising society; one in which people's needs and rights are collectively discussed and agreed and where resources are democratically controlled and managed in a socialist planned economy. This would see jobs for all and decent social welfare. This would appeal to the masses of the region, inspiring them to overthrow their own dictatorships and the other reactionary and corrupt regimes, and to fundamentally transform society.

The only real alternative to wars, exploitation, imperialist occupation, and sectarian and confessional divisions, is for the working masses to unite to struggle for real system change, to end capitalism and landlordism in the region. This would ensure minority rights are guaranteed and civil and democratic rights for all, regardless of religion and ethnicity. Due to the failure of past leaderships of workers' movements in the region, the working class, the poor and the oppressed have tragically missed opportunities to take power and to change society in the interest of the majority.

The CWI calls for and works to build independent working class formations in Lebanon, and across the region. This includes fighting trade unions and the development of strong socialist parties with mass support that, armed with a revolutionary programme, can play a decisive role to change society!