

Lebanon: civil war feeling again

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BEIRUT: Lebanon has not really had the occasion yet to enjoy the departure of Syrian troops and the victory of anti-Syrian groups in the parliamentary elections last month. The country is facing a period of political and economic upheaval almost unparalleled since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war. This week a fifth bomb went off in a series that has been aimed at mostly anti-Syrian politicians and journalists since October last year. Syria extended a weeklong slowdown of border checks for trucks coming out of Lebanon, and the country's prime minister designate is close to resigning as a result of pressure by Syria's still powerful supporters.

The target of Tuesday's bomb attack was outgoing defence minister Elias Murr who is also deputy prime minister and former interior minister. He is a scion of the powerful Murr family that has had a hand in many political and economic pies in the country for decades.

Murr, who survived the blast that killed two people in a northern suburb of Beirut is also son-in-law of pro-Syrian president Emile Lahoud.

Tannous Mouawad, a security analyst with close ties to the army, says that despite his pro-Syrian image and connections, Murr had been in conflict with the powerful former head of Syrian security in Lebanon, Dustom Ghazale, since 2003.

So far only explicitly anti-Syrian politicians and a journalist have been targeted, apart from a parallel series of bombings aimed at commercial properties.

The most prominent victim of the bombings was former prime minister Rafiq Hariri who was killed in a huge blast in the centre of Beirut in February. He had resigned several months earlier after a conflict with Syria over the extension of the mandate of President Lahoud, which he initially opposed.

Despite Syrian denials of involvement, the killing of Hariri sparked huge protests in Lebanon that eventually, in combination with international pressure, led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops who had been present in the country for some 30 years.

The attack against Murr, said Mouawad, was meant not only as a settling of accounts but may also have been intended to intimidate his immediate family, President Lahoud in particular. "You always think it will not happen to you but when it hits your family, you start thinking about it," he told IPS.

Lahoud is Syria's most important remaining asset in the Lebanese political system. But he has the approval of the new cabinet that the victorious anti-Syrian coalition is trying to form.

Prime minister designate Fouad Siniora from the bloc of Saad Hariri, son of the murdered former prime minister, has been trying to put together a broad coalition, including also the pro-Syrian Hezbollah and Amal parties and the right-wing former army general Michel Aoun.

On Tuesday, hours after the attack on Murr, Siniora finally presented a list of 30 ministers to Lahoud for approval. Later in the evening, Aoun and Hezbollah withdrew from the list. President Lahoud is rumoured to be opposed to the list.

With all of Syria's allies or presumed allies such as Aoun opposed to the new government, the impression of Syrian obstructionism in the formation of the new government became even stronger in Lebanon after weeks of negotiations in which Siniora had given in to most of their demands.

Syria has condemned the attack on Murr, as it has condemned earlier attacks, but the timing does again lead many Lebanese to point the finger at Damascus.

“Syria wants Siniora out and (current pro-Syrian PM) Najib Mikati back in,” said Mouawad. Mikati is known to be friendly with Syria's president, Bashar Assad.

While there is no hard evidence to link Syria to any of the violence in the country, or even to the political stalemate, there is now a clear element of economic pressure added to the mix.

For more than a week now, Syria has imposed stringent border controls on traffic leaving Lebanon, particularly on trucks exporting products from the country but also on travellers.

Hundreds of trucks, some carrying perishable produce, have been stuck for days at border crossings that are normally negotiated in a matter of hours.

Lebanese trade lobbyists have accused Syria of using economic pressure for political purposes. “This is a political game the Syrians are playing to influence the formation of the new government,” said Mouhedienne Jammal, coordinator of Lebanon's agricultural and industrial cooperatives.

Many Lebanese see the Syrian behaviour as an act of vengeance. Syria has given contradictory explanations for the slowdown.

Syria's measures may be in violation of an Arab League free-trade agreement. The controls may also run counter to the association agreement that Damascus wants to sign with the European Union.—*Dawn/The InterPress News Service.*