

Hezbollah reneges on Lebanese govt pledge

Fri, 2021-03-19 23:37

BEIRUT: Hezbollah has walked away from a previous agreement to form a Lebanese government of nonpolitical specialists, claiming that any leadership not backed by political forces "will go down in a week or two."

The militant party's change of tack has shattered hopes that an 18th meeting between President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri scheduled for next Monday would end the long-running stalemate over the formation of the government.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's comments, made in a televised address on Thursday, also undermine French efforts launched by President Emmanuel Macron to form a government free of political forces in order to gain the confidence of the international community and help Lebanon recover from its crippling economic and health crisis.

Mustafa Alloush, a leading figure in Hariri's Future Movement, said: "There is a chance to agree on the formation of the government on Monday, but Hariri has no intention of bringing back a political government because it will inevitably fail, based on previous experience."

Aoun remained firm in his demands for a government of 20 ministers with the blocking third, while Hariri seeks a government of 18 specialists.

The disagreement between the two escalated on Wednesday after an exchange of statements, with Aoun calling on Hariri to step down if is unable to form a government.

Hariri responded by asking Aoun to set a date for early presidential elections.

Hopes that Monday's meeting could end the political impasse lifted the Lebanese pound to 11,500 against the US dollar after it had earlier exceeded 15,000 on the black market.

However, the currency lost value again on Friday after Nasrallah's address.

FASTFACT

Nasrallah's address brought widespread anger, with a source in the Maronite Patriarchate condemning the 'betrayal' of Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi's demand for a neutral Lebanon.

In his speech, the Hezbollah chief criticized the International Monetary

Fund, on which Lebanon relies for assistance, and attacked calls for Lebanon's neutrality, saying that these were part of efforts to include the country in the "US-Israeli axis in the region."

Nasrallah also targeted the policies of Lebanese central bank Gov. Riad Salameh, warning him of the need to improve the dollar exchange rate.

The Hezbollah leader called on Hassan Diab, the caretaker prime minister, to make his government operational "as a plan B in the event that a government is not quickly formed."

He also condemned protesters blocking roads, saying that such actions are "forbidden."

Nasrallah devoted part of his speech to defending party members who receive their salaries in dollars.

He said: "The members of the military mobilization force do not receive a salary in the first place. A large part of those who work within the institutions receive their salaries in Lebanese pounds. Those who are getting paid in dollars are those whose salaries are too low to support themselves. We asked them to take a monthly initiative to help those around them."

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Sami Gemayel, leader of the Kataeb Party, asked: "What kind of government will they form if that is the speech given before its formation?"

He called on "countries to shoulder their responsibilities toward Lebanon because the problem is not only internal but external as well."

Gemayel also targeted Nasrallah, saying: "Lebanese citizens do not want a civil war. You may be seeking war, but do not threaten us with a war."

Meanwhile, after a meeting on Friday between the central bank governor and the president's financial adviser, Charbel Cordahi, the president's media office said: "Salameh announced that the central bank will start working on its electronic platform, so that all operations are recorded and become the main reference for the real market rate."

The central bank's decision includes "allowing banks to trade in currencies from next week and to register transactions at their real price on the platform."



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[Crackdown on Turkey's pro-Kurdish party intensifies after dawn raids](#)

Fri, 2021-03-19 17:04

ANKARA: Following its lawsuit to ban the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the Turkish government's crackdown against the party escalated on Friday morning, with dawn raids carried out on houses in Istanbul, Ankara and several other cities detaining dozens of people, including local HDP executives.

The government claims the HDP has ties with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which the HDP denies.

On March 17, a prosecutor filed a case with the Constitutional Court of Turkey to ban the HDP, the third largest party in the Turkish Parliament, representing 6 million voters at the 2018 election

The move, criticized by the US and the EU, was denounced by the HDP as a “political coup” not based on legal grounds.

“Even after all of (President Recep Tayyip) Erdogan’s authoritarian repression against his political opponents, actually shutting down an opposition party always seemed like a bridge too far,” Merve Tahiroglu, Turkey program coordinator at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), told Arab News.

“Given that Erdogan himself has suffered from anti-democratic party closures throughout his political career, it may still prove too politically costly for him to pursue the closure of the HDP,” she added.

Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) survived a closure case of its own in 2008 after an indictment brought by the then chief prosecutor, seeking to bar it and its leaders from politics. The Constitutional Court decided instead to cut the party’s state funding due to its “anti-secular” practices.

According to Tahiroglu, the latest government moves to ban the HDP from the political scene, and the recent crackdown on party officials, aims to appease the AKP’s far-right coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party.

But, she said, even the threat of closing down the HDP would benefit Erdogan by driving a wedge in the opposition coalition, forcing politicians to either come out in support of the move, thereby alienating liberal and Kurdish voters, or oppose the move, alienating nationalists.

On Thursday, former Turkish President Abdullah Gul, a staunch critic of Erdogan, warned that attempts to close the HDP will damage Turkey greatly, adding that similar moves against pro-Kurdish parties in the past had resulted in “Turkey’s isolation.”

Despite up to 600 officials facing expulsion from political life, the HDP is expected to regroup under a new brand, but with similar ideological beliefs, if officially closed.

“The ongoing crackdowns against the HDP are bad enough for Turkish democracy. But given the Biden administration’s emphasis on democratic values, the closure of an opposition party should be a red line,” Tahiroglu said.

In Ankara, Ozturk Turkdogan, the chairman of Human Rights Association (IHD), was also detained during the raids, with no official statement given as to why.

Turkdogan was recently criticized by Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu after he condemned the government for risking the lives of 13 people during a military operation in northern Iraq’s Gara Mountains, where Turkish hostages were being held, and were later executed, by the PKK.

Soylu reacted angrily to Turkdogan’s criticism, calling the IHD a “cursed association.”

The IHD has previously acted as an intermediary between the PKK and the state to return hostages, including 20 captives who were returned to Turkey in 2015.

Turkdogan also recently criticized the government's new Human Rights Action Plan, claiming that it was little more than window dressing, and that it should include measures to protect human rights activists and associations.

The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) released a statement on Friday, calling for the immediate release of Turkdogan.

"The arrest and search of Turkdogan's (house) continues a systematic pattern of misuse of criminal law to harass and persecute human rights defenders and lawyers in Turkey in recent years," said the ICJ's Europe and Central Asia Program Director Roisin Pillay.

"Turkdogan must be released immediately. If he remains in detention then he must be ensured immediate and confidential access to a lawyer, and be informed of the nature of any charges against him and brought promptly before a court."



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Warnings over Turkish attempts to ban pro-Kurdish partyMove to ban pro-

Turkey's Erdogan says Biden comments on Putin 'unacceptable'

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Fri, 2021-03-19 12:19

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said on Friday that Joe Biden's comments about Russia's Vladimir Putin, in which he said he thought he was a killer, were "unacceptable" and unfitting of a US president.

In a TV interview broadcast on Wednesday, Biden said "I do" when asked if he believed Putin was a killer, prompting US-Russia ties to sink to a new low. Putin later responded that "he who said it, did it."

"Mr. Biden's statements about Mr. Putin are not fitting of a president, and a president coming out and using such remarks against the president of a country like Russia is truly unacceptable, not something that can be stomached," Erdogan told reporters in Istanbul.

"In my opinion, Mr. Putin has done what is necessary by giving a very, very smart and elegant answer," he added.

Ties between Ankara and Washington, NATO allies, have been strained over a host of issues in recent years including Turkey's record on human rights and freedoms, its acquisition of Russian defense systems and policy differences in Syria.

The United States, which along with other western allies has accused Ankara of straying from NATO and the western bloc, last year imposed sanctions on Turkey over the Russian defenses. Turkey called that a "grave mistake."

Erdogan, who had a close relationship with former President Donald Trump, has yet to speak to Biden since he took office in January.

Turkey and Russia have developed strong strategic relations in recent years despite backing opposing sides in conflicts in Syria and Libya. Erdogan has frequently met with and held calls with Putin, whom he calls a friend.



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AFP

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Fri, 2021-03-19 11:58

RAMALLAH, Palestinian Territories: A Palestinian was shot dead by Israeli

soldiers during a demonstration in the West Bank on Friday, the Palestinian health ministry said.

“A citizen who was shot in the head with live ammunition died,” the ministry said, adding the incident happened in the village of Beit Dajan, near Nablus. The Israeli army did not immediately comment on the report.



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[Egypt to implement raft of family planning measures and services](#)

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Thu, 2021-03-18 01:39

CAIRO: Egyptian Minister of Planning and Economic Development Hala Al-Saeed has said a study is underway to issue a Family Insurance Fund for Egyptian families using birth control, in cooperation with the Financial Regulatory Authority, as part of a national project of family development.

The goal of this project is to control population growth, as a way to improve the quality of life of Egyptians, the minister said, adding it would include the economic empowerment of women aged 18 to 45 by providing job opportunities and encouraging them to achieve financial independence. The minister said that criteria for benefiting from the insurance scheme will include periodic family examinations every six months and breast cancer tests, in addition to the obligation to wait a specified period between having children, and only having a certain number of children per family. The first stage of the scheme will take place over a period of three years, she said.

During the first phase, 2 million women will be trained as part of the National Initiative for Women's Empowerment. Smaller projects are also planned for about 1 million women.

Al-Saeed said there will be coordination with the Ministry of Higher Education to formulate programs for young people to raise awareness of family planning regulations. Television programs on the issue of family planning will be part of this plan to raise national awareness.

In addition, an online platform, the Egyptian Family System, will automate the services of the Family Insurance Fund with links to units of health and family development. The project will also include providing family planning methods free of charge to all, said the minister.

She indicated that the project also aims at raising the efficiency of Al-Takamol hospitals by creating family-planning units, providing vaccinations and primary care services.

Clinics to monitor women's health, nurseries for the children of working women and provision of necessary care and support needed for Egyptian women will be part of this program, with 1,500 female doctors trained in family planning methods, in addition to increasing the participation of NGOs that provide family planning services.

Twelve million home visits, 30,000 seminars and 500 activities targeting 6 million women will also form part of the program.

Legislative intervention is being planned to develop a regulatory framework governing the policies taken to control population growth. It includes the criminalization of child marriage, and expanding the scope of punishment to include children's guardians. Child labor and the failure to register births will also be tackled with punitive measures.



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