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'Independent' Sunnis head to Baabda



Mufti Derian meets some of the 'independent' Sunni MPs at Dar al-Fatwa. (The Daily Star/Dalati Nohra HO)

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Timour Azhari | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Six so-called "independent" Sunni MPs will meet with President Michel Aoun Friday, raising hopes that a solution to the latest obstacle in the long-standing government formation crisis is imminent, a source at Baabda Palace told The Daily Star.

"We expect them to say they are leaving the issue up to the president and the prime minister-designate, and will go with whatever they decide," the source said, adding that they were hopeful a government would be formed before Nov. 22, Lebanon's Independence Day.

Premier-designate Saad Hariri has refused to have one of the six take a ministry from his share, while Aoun has previously said the MPs' demands were not reasonable as that they do not comprise a unified political bloc.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah-affiliated caretaker Youth and Sports Minister Mohammad Fneish said he had no information on any impending solution to the issue. He insisted that his party's staunch support for the demands of the Sunni MPs was "not about breaking" Hariri.

"This kind of talk attempts to destroy the positive atmosphere" that exists between Hezbollah and Hariri, Fneish told The Daily Star. "There is no breaking of heads."

He said Hezbollah insists on the inclusion of the "independent" Sunni MPs in the new Cabinet because without them, the party claims there will not be a national unity government comprising all the major political forces the type of government Hariri has said he would form.

A national unity government appeared ready to be announced late last month after the fall of what was thought to be the last obstacle: the Lebanese Forces' representation. But shortly after, the six "independent" MPs, of which three belong to various parliamentary blocs, insisted on their demands as Hezbollah, their major ally, stood beside them.

The six MPs include Walid Sukkarieh, a member of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc;

Qassem Hashem, a member of the Amal Movement's political bloc, and Jihad al-Samad, a member of the Azm bloc. The others, Faisal Karami, Adnan Traboulsi and Abdel-Rahim Mrad, have not formed a coherent bloc.

"This isn't the issue," Fneish said, in reference to the fact that the six MPs aren't part of a single bloc. "Together with the other [four Sunni MPs outside of Hariri's Future bloc] they represent 35 to 40 percent of the Sunni vote." He added that neither Christians, Shiites, nor Druze were set to be represented by a single party in the next government. "So why are we seeing this insistence with the Sunnis?"

He denied that Hezbollah was now effectively the only party holding up Cabinet formation. "This is not true. From the beginning we took the decision, as allies, to support these MPs. It's not us [seeking to give] them representation, it's the elections that did it's the people."

But with Aoun, Hariri and Hezbollah all as of yet refusing to budge on the issue, it is unclear where a solution could come from.

In a sign of the grave nature of the issue, there has apparently been little attempt at mediation by the country's political heavyweights.

MP Ali Bazzi from Speaker Nabih Berri's parliamentary bloc said the speaker has not been trying to mediate, and Berri has said repeatedly that the issue requires "prayers."

Deputy Speaker Elie Ferzli called on Free Patriotic Movement leader and caretaker Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil to turn his hand to the matter.

"I am making a personal appeal ... to Minister Gebran Bassil to ... directly contribute to resolving the obstacles of government formation," Ferzli was quoted as saying after a meeting with Berri. Ferzli is part of the Strong Lebanon parliamentary bloc that is headed by Bassil.

In a potential foreign intervention on the Cabinet front, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said his country was prepared to undertake "all necessary contacts" in order to move toward the formation of a government, the state-run National News Agency reported.

Bogdanov was quoted as making the comments during a meeting in Moscow with MP Teymour Joumblatt, the head of the Progressive Socialist Party's political bloc. Accompanying Joumblatt was Wael Abu Faour, a top aide to Teymour's father Walid, who heads the PSP. Abu Faour told local news channel LBCI Thursday evening that an expected Russian initiative on the Cabinet front "may move the stagnation."

But weakening the possibility of a Cabinet being formed soon is the fact that Hariri himself has been in France for nearly a week, and is not expected to return to Beirut before attending the Paris Peace Forum, which will take place Nov. 11-13.

Caretaker Interior Minister Nouhad Machnoug, a member of the Future Bloc, said the premier-designate had remained in France because "there's no need for daily talks at this stage, but he will be back within days." Machnoug tried to downplay the possibility of Hariri accepting failure in the formation process. "He will not [step down]," Machnoug said Thursday after a meeting with Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdel-Latif Derian at Dar al-Fatwa.

Prior to the meeting, the religious leader received the Sunni MPs.

According to a statement from Dar al-Fatwa, its "doors are open to all Lebanese parties." The top Sunni authority in the country called for solutions to be found to the remaining government formation obstacles and for "Lebanon's interests to be considered above all else."

Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah is set to deliver a speech Saturday

to mark Hezbollah's "Martyr Day."

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