



Democracy Under Siege in a Luxury Hotel

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Globeandmail.com

November 14, 2007

Lebanon's political future is up for grabs with the election of its next president delayed for a third time, leaving the status of this would-be, could-be democracy unclear. At a time when democracy is under siege from Pakistan to the former Soviet republic of Georgia, we need to work harder to extend freedom to such countries.

Lebanon is a small country, half a world away, but it is fighting for the very same values Americans treasure. Imagine our own opposition politicians holed up in a hotel for weeks, fearing assassination if they walked the streets of their capital. Imagine them being killed in action. It's no made-for-TV movie script, but real life for more than 40 Lebanese parliamentarians, who spend most of their days inside the Phoenicia hotel while police guard the perimeter and check for snipers.

These politicians have reason to be nervous: Last month, a fellow MP, Antoine Ghanem, became the eighth politician killed in Beirut since the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

It's no accident that all those killed have spoken out against intimidation by Syria and Iran — two countries seeking to dominate Lebanon and broaden their influence in the region. Moderate Lebanese politicians who oppose extremism are marked for death, and ordinary citizens who voice support for democracy and reform are powerless against the extremists' arms and cash. We can no longer afford to be bystanders as Lebanese democracy is held up at gunpoint. The country is crucial for success in the war against extremism. Despite its small geographic size, it has long been the cultural and media capital of the Arab world. Lebanese journalists, artists, entertainers and media moguls are very much regional trendsetters. Their capital, Beirut, remains the Middle East's most politically vibrant city, where liberal democrats, Islamists, communists and even Baathists compete for the hearts and minds of the people. The country is home to a rich communal mosaic, 18 different religious communities living side by side in relative harmony. Allowing it to fall back into the grip of authoritarianism will signal the failure of efforts to support grassroots democracy in the Middle East.

Lebanon is also in a dangerous neighbourhood. United Nations soldiers patrol the country's porous borders, trying to keep peace while Syria and Iran fund paramilitary groups with an anti-Western agenda. But in Lebanon, unlike Iraq, the door is open. The great majority of Lebanese citizens strongly reject violence and support democracy, independence and reform. 2005's peaceful million-strong popular uprising, now dubbed the "Cedar Revolution," demanded an end to foreign domination. It was a call for freedom, a goal the Lebanese people continue to strive for and in which they deserve to be supported. The country's presidential election is more than a matter of life and death for parliamentarians and those they represent — it has international ramifications for the rule of law. At issue is the future of critical United Nations reforms that shape the region. The UN has passed several resolutions calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Lebanon, and resolutions calling for the establishment of an international tribunal to investigate the assassination of Mr. Hariri. Both Syria and Iran are pressuring for the election of a Lebanese president who will answer to them. Such an outcome would thwart UN efforts and the will of the majority of Lebanese.



Hotels should not become shelters. Terrorists should not be allowed to carry out financial transactions in the West or anywhere else. And authoritarian regimes supporting violence should no longer be allowed to slaughter the symbols of Lebanon's democracy.

Time is short for Lebanon, and for the Middle East.

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