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Lahoud must go if Lebanon is to move forward By Chibli Mallat

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Despite the spontaneous demonstration of people power in Beirut two months ago, the recent voting in Lebanon's continuing parliamentary election has yielded little enthusiasm and no surprises.

Voting in Beirut on May 29 led to the full 19-member list of Saadeddine Hariri, the son of Rafiq Hariri, the former prime minister assassinated on February 14, winning with little contest. Last Sunday it was the turn of the south. Here also, the list of 23 candidates brought together by Nabih Berri, the speaker of parliament, with Hizbollah, the Shia Islamist party, won easily.

There may be some surprises next Sunday because of the candidacy of Michel Aoun, a former general who returned from exile last month. But Mr Aoun has already spent much of the political capital he gained in exile. Because of his authoritarian style, not one colleague in the anti-Syrian opposition met him at the airport. He has since spent much of his time bickering with the leaders of the rebellion. In addition, he has allied himself with candidates strongly associated with Syria to enhance his electoral chances.

As the last two rounds take place over the next two Sundays, a dominant parliamentary majority for the allies of Mr Hariri will emerge on June 19.

One decision must then be foremost in their minds: Emile Lahoud, Lebanon's pro-Syrian president, must be deposed. The president epitomises the Syrian-Lebanese security order responsible for the assassination of Hariri.

The threats of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian leader, to extend Mr Lahoud's mandate last September triggered a political impasse, followed by violence fomented by Mr Lahoud and the Syrians to bring the opposition to heel.

This culminated in Hariri's assassination in February. Protesters chanted for Mr Lahoud's removal at the massive demonstrations that followed. Last Thursday, that call went out again following the assassination of Samir Kassir, the prominent columnist and one of the most courageous critics of the Lahoud regime.

Getting rid of Mr Lahoud will not be easy. There is no simple mechanism to dismiss the president constitutionally and the matter is complicated by an antiquated system whereby the president must be a Christian Maronite, the prime minister a Muslim Sunni and the speaker a Shia.

Nabih Berri, who has been in power for more than 12 years, may agree to dislodge the president but has himself been trying the patience of the Lebanese people. He sought to undermine the anti-Syrian front until March 14 brought half of the Lebanese population to the streets in protest. By preventing parliament from meeting for two months, Mr Berri also stonewalled a popular call for change in the electoral law, so that he could secure the victory of his list last Sunday. Reform in the country will be equally difficult if Mr Berri remains speaker.

The mood for reform in Lebanon is stifled by the continued presence of symbols from Syria's domination over the past 15 years. Unless Mr Lahoud and Mr Berri are forced to leave office as soon as the elections are over the disillusionment of the people will increase. Mr Lahoud's departure is important, not just for Lebanon but as a precedent for non-violent people-power across the Middle East. Lebanon's Cedar Revolution may become a political watershed as important for the region as the fall of the Berlin Wall was for eastern Europe, but only if change occurs at the top.

If Mr Lahoud goes, the Arab ancien regime will falter across the Middle East. Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Mr Assad and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, to name only three of more than 20 autocrats ruling the region, understand the precedent set by the Lebanese people in terms of the risk to their own open-ended rule.

Western democracies can play a role here. The basis for international intervention to hasten Mr Lahoud's departure can be found in UN Security Council Resolution 1559, passed on September 2. The resolution requested the "upcoming presidential elections to be free". Subsequent UN reports have put on record how Mr Lahoud's term was extended the following day in contravention of that resolution. A principled position in Washington and Paris calling for the departure of Mr Lahoud and Mr Berri would square well with the new call for democracy in the region. The assassination of Kassir has put the issue back on centre-stage. Lebanon's yearning for democratic change deserves to be embraced by the west.

The writer, European Union Jean Monnet law professor at the University of Saint Joseph and a lawyer in Beirut, has been active in the Cedar Revolution