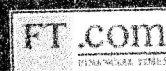




"I am not going to thank anybody  
because I did it all myself"



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## Beirut calm as government bans demonstrations

Gareth Smyth in Beirut - Apr 11 2001 10:30:15

It was business as usual in Beirut on Wednesday after the authorities banned demonstrations, alleging they would revive the bitter Christian-Muslim sectarianism of the civil war of 1975-90.

Unlike last month, when students threatened protests against Syria's role in Lebanon, the government did not flood the streets with soldiers.

The softly-softly approach is a victory for prime minister Rafik Hariri, who on Tuesday assured a conference of Arab businesspeople that "differences are a way of life in Lebanon" and that investment in the country is "less risky" than buying shares on the Nasdaq.

Mr Hariri heads a group of technocrats in the government who want to liberalise the economy in a bid to restore economic growth.

Last Friday, the finance ministry closed a 5 year \$1bn Eurobond, reflecting efforts to reduce borrowing costs on the \$25bn public debt. But the successful issue took place amid simmering sectarian tensions as rival groups threatened demonstrations for and against the presence of 35,000 Syrian troops.

The debate over Syria, which has been the power-broker in Lebanese politics since the civil war ended in 1990, has taken increasingly sectarian lines in recent weeks. Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, leader of the Maronite Christians, has called for Syrian withdrawal. For the Muslim community, Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Qabbani, the Grand Mufti, has welcomed "brotherly Syrian Arab troops".

Opponents of the Syrian presence have become more vocal since last summer, when Israel troops withdrew from south Lebanon and Bashar al-Assad replaced his hard-line late father Hafez as Syrian president. Much of Lebanon's political class - including the security services - is closely allied to Syria and uncertain as to the drift of events.

"Public debate has broken a number of taboos," said Chibli Mallat, a leading lawyer. "When politicians and newspapers questioned Syria's presence, prime minister Rafik Hariri at first said nothing. Then he said the Syrian presence was legitimate and necessary. Then he said it was legitimate, necessary, and temporary."

Wary commentators and politicians have reminded the Lebanese that Syria has sometimes manipulated sectarian divisions for its own ends. "The Syrians are willing to exploit tension between Muslims against Christians if this means they can stay in the country," said Michael Young, a Lebanese political analyst. "I don't think this will lead to a major confrontation, as the state is losing more and more of its credibility."

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