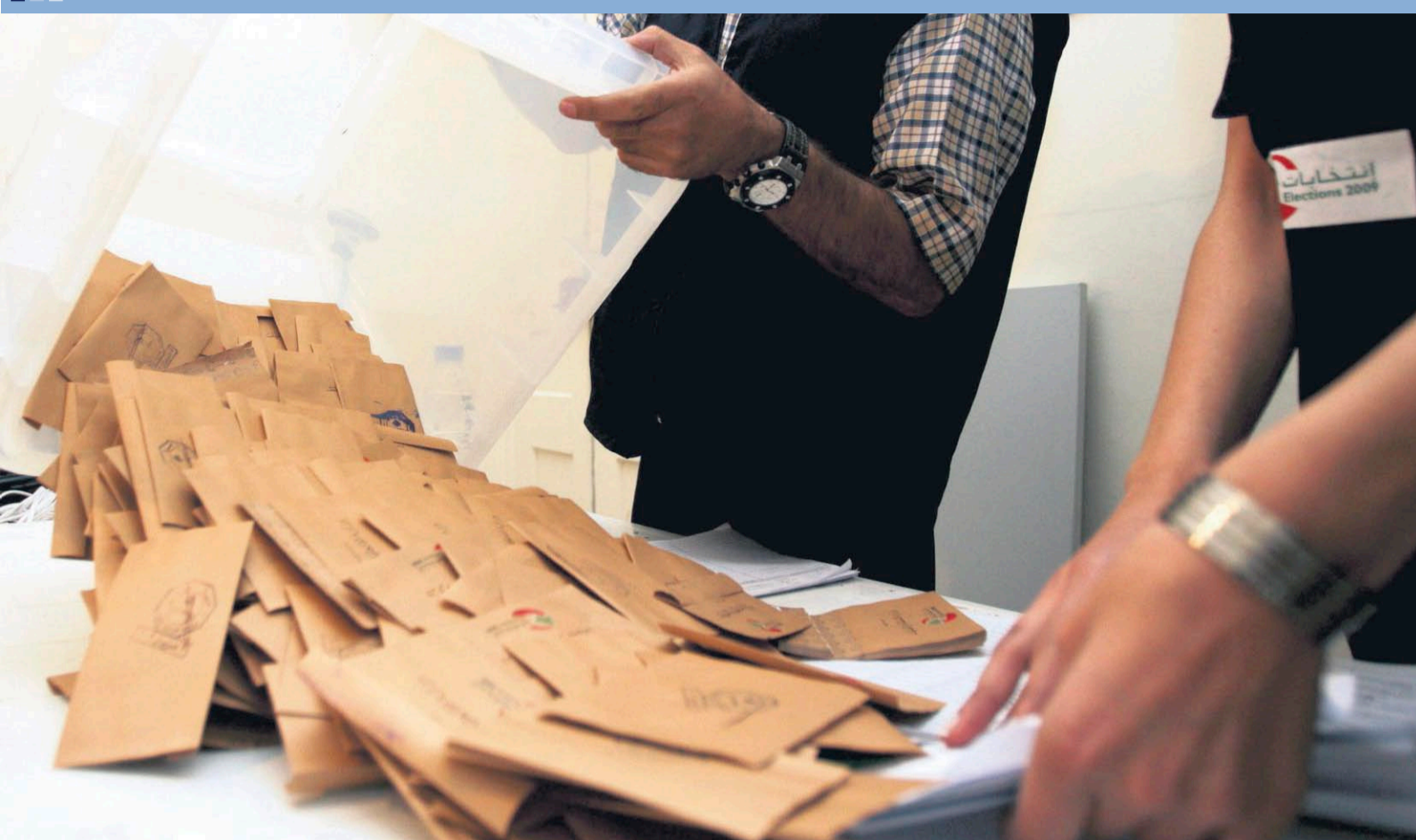## the big idea

High hopes: Lebanese election officials empty a ballot box after the close of a polling station at the end of the day on June 7. Mohamed Azakir / Reuters

Two houses, many mansions

How can Lebanon fix its parliament? Double it, says Elias Muhanna

Two months ago, with the world peering over its shoulder, Lebanon held parliamentary elections. Perhaps more significant than the surprising result – which saw the Western-backed March 14 coalition hold onto power – was the outpouring of enthusiasm for the election itself. Voter turnout reached record highs, and thousands of Lebanese expatriates returned home to cast their ballots, many of them taking advantage of airline tickets paid for by deep-pocketed political parties. The first truly competitive election held in decades, it was portrayed by all sides as the gateway to a new era (indeed, some claimed, a "Third Republic") where the chronic dysfunctions of the post-war period – from corruption and mismanagement to sectarian violence and institutional immobilism – would be swept away under a bold new mandate.

Today, nearly 10 weeks after the last vote was counted, hopes of a fresh start have fizzled as Lebanon finds itself mired again in circumstances conspicuously reminiscent of the pre-election status quo. Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri has faced one obstacle after another on his way to forming a national unity government, all the while fighting a rear-guard action against the splintering of his own parliamentary bloc.

While sluggish deliberations and brittle coalition governments plague many parliamentary democracies, Lebanon's repeated bouts of state paralysis are symptomatic of deeper problems. The experience of the past four years, since the end of the Pax Syriana and the false stability it imposed, has made it all too clear that the basic principle of Lebanese democracy – consensual decision-making by confessional elites – is inadequate to the task of managing the country. The state functions primarily as a tool in the hands of a corrupt cartel of sectarian leaders, a space to compete over parochial interests at the expense of the national welfare.

The inevitable injustices engendered by this system have helped to maintain feelings of disillusionment and revanchism among Lebanese citizens, who have little recourse but to turn, ironically, to the patronage machines of their confessional leaders for the basic services that the government is unable to provide. In this way, a vicious cycle is set in motion, entrenching the original source of the system's frailty and empowering the elites to continue to govern in their own interests.

The chronic anaemia of the state and its vulnerability to breakdown have many causes, high among them the dilemma that has bedev-illed Lebanon's affairs since independence: the question of how to govern a society composed of 17 confessional communities in a manner that protects minority rights and religious pluralism while retaining an effective central authority.

The solution to this problem, at least in Lebanon, has taken the form of a consociational government that distributes power among the various sects through parliamentary quotas. Half of the seats in parliament are divided among seven Christian denominations, and the other half are reserved for members of four different Muslim sects. In the executive branch, cabinet seats are also parcelled out in confessional allotments, while the three highest posts in the land – President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of Parliament – are always held by a Maronite Christian, a Sunni, and a Shiite, respectively.

This unwieldy arrangement proved to be surprisingly stable during the first 30 years of Lebanese independence, prompting political theorists to declare the country a successful example of the exercise of consociationalism – and to note the stark contrast between Lebanon's liberal society and the autocratic regimes surrounding it. However, the powerlessness of the state to halt the descent of its increasingly divided and radicalised communities into fratricidal war exposed the dangers of a weak unitary authority and transformed Lebanon from the embodiment of Muslim-Christian *convivencia* into an ominous cautionary tale.

Since the end of the civil war, there have been repeated calls to cleanse Lebanon of its sectarianism and to promote a shared national identity through the decoupling of religion from politics. At the same time, concerns about evolving demographic balances have caused many to regard with suspicion any project that could erode their representation in Parliament and threaten Lebanon's identity as a mosaic of confessional communities. The tension between these two seemingly irreconcilable positions has conspired to maintain the status quo for 20 years, despite widespread public support for substantive reforms of some shape.

The ideal solution would seem to be a system that safeguards the rights and interests of religious (or other) minorities while providing an outlet for the will of a political majority. Other countries have deployed various means to circumvent what Alexis de Tocqueville called "the tyranny of the majority" – from federalism and other forms of administrative decentralisation, to quota systems more limited than those currently in place in Lebanon. But the classic mechanism to amalgamate the interests of diverse constituencies within a single authority is a government "whose deliberations involve two distinct assemblies": a bicameral legislature.

The most familiar examples of this arrangement are the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom, where the legislative branches are composed of a House of Representatives and a Senate (in the US), and a House of Commons and a House of Lords (in the UK). In both cases the existence of two legislative bodies provides a space for the representation of specific constituencies alongside the expression of the popular will. According to political theorists, the virtues of bicameral legislatures also include increased stability, a tendency to pass legislation with higher degrees of consensus, and increased oversight between the two chambers and over the executive branch.

It is a system that would seem tailor-made to address the confessional deadlock that has paralysed governance in Lebanon. In Beirut's bicameral legislature, the Chamber of Deputies would be elected without confessional quotas, while the Senate – with seats divided along confessional lines – would serve as the explicit guarantor of minority rights. Sequestering confessional interests in a dedicated institution would allow the Chamber of Deputies to be transformed from a marketplace of sectarian bartering into the primary locus of political authority whose constituent was the citizen, irrespective of his or her religion.

This idea is neither new nor particularly controversial. The Ta'if Accords, which ended Lebanon's civil war, call explicitly for the dismantling of political confessionalism through the election of a Chamber of Deputies on "a national, non-confessional basis" and the formation of a Senate representing "all of the spiritual families". Leaders from across the ideological and confessional spectrum have declared their support for this idea, in terms as vague as the stipulation itself. Ta'if provides no details beyond the basic description of two legislative chambers elected on different bases, which prompts a wide range of questions about the architecture of such a system. How would the seats in the Senate be distributed among the various communities? What would the Senate's powers be, and what kind of role would it play in the passage of legislation beyond confessional matters like laws pertaining to religious worship, personal status, citizenship and elections? All these and many other questions would have to be addressed in the course of moving from a unicameral to a bicameral system; it is not simply a matter of appending a new legislative body onto the existing one, but rather of building a whole new legislature from the ground up.

A bicameral system in Lebanon would ideally have the effect of empowering the legislature at the expense of the executive branch, which currently wields too much authority, and which – by virtue of the deliberative principle of consensus enshrined by the Constitution – is the major source of stagnation in the political process.

Unlike more radical and unrealistic proposals that call for the emasculation of the political class, a bicameral system would provide confessional elites a stake in the new system – making its chances of becoming reality rather more likely. Finally, in combination with a fair and transparent electoral law based on some form of proportional representation, a bicameral legislature would help to promote a multi-party system and facilitate the growth of independent parties based on issue-based political platforms.

Creating a Senate is not going to solve all of Lebanon's problems. It will not pay the public debt, put food on people's tables, create peace and stability, or give the state a monopoly on the use of legitimate violence. Having two chambers in parliament rather than one will make no real difference to the accountability of government if political actors refuse to be bound by its rules. But the creation of a more democratic system – one that provides equal representation for its citizens – is the only way to begin addressing the rest of Lebanon's many political woes.

Elias Muhanna, a regular contributor to The Review, writes the Lebanese affairs blog Qifa Nabki.

> **The state functions primarily as a tool in the hands of a corrupt cartel of sectarian leaders, a space to compete over parochial interests at the expense of the national welfare**

the tangled web

Taliban leader 'killed' in power struggle telephones reporters

A senior Taliban commander who was reported killed in power struggle telephoned journalists today to dismiss claims of his death, adding to the growing confusion over the fate of the insurgents' leadership.

Hakimullah Mehsud, one of the contenders to succeed Beitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban who is believed to have been killed in a US drone strike last week, was reported to have died in a shoot-out with Waliur Rehman, a rival commander. The clash was supposed to have taken place during a tribal council to choose a new leader. Rehman has already denied that any such incident took place.

Independent sources said the latest statements by the Taliban could be an attempt to conceal infighting over who gets control of millions of pounds to pay its 3,500 full-time fighters.

It is also thought that al Qa'eda, which is believed to have a large presence in South Waziristan, may be trying to promote its own candidate as Taleban leader. Al Qa'eda has provided training and financial support to the militants, officials claim.

"They are trying to install somebody as chief terrorist in the area," said Rehman Malik, the Interior Minister.

Pakistani and Western intelligence agencies believe that Ayman al Zawahiri, the al Qa'eda second-in-command, has visited the area frequently and had close links with Beitullah Mehsud.

Hakimullah told reporters that he was alive and that reports of his death were merely propaganda. He also said that Beitullah was alive and would appear before the media soon.

**Zahid Hussain
Times of London
www.timesonline.co.uk**

New use for your iPhone: controlling drones

MIT professor Missy Cummings used to fly F/A-18 Hornet fighters for the Navy. "I spent whole time complaining — who was the moron who designed this thing?" she recalled. If you've ever peeked inside a fighter cockpit, you'll understand her gripe. Dials, displays and controls pack every nook and cranny. It's the farthest thing from ergonomic.

Her crew of 30 grad students and undergrads is chasing a number of new ideas and technologies, all aimed at easing the sometimes unwieldy interactions between machines and their human masters. And what could be simpler than an iPhone?

Actually, using an iPhone was her undergrads' idea — because experimenting with it as a basis for a new robot controller meant she'd have to buy them all iPhones of their own. "We had the idea in June," Cummings told Danger Room. "In six weeks, we went from the idea to a real flight test," using MIT's indoor robot range. The total cost? $5,000 for a new, commercially available, quad-rotor robot – plus the cost of iPhones for her crew.

The iPhone bot controller is basically just an app, like any other. It relies on only the iPhone's existing gear, and the phone can still be used for regular calls, web-browsing, texting, etc.

Real-world uses abound. Not only would a iPhone-like controller make soldiers' jobs much easier, it also opens up UAVs to a whole new, non-military market. If robot control is cheap and intuitive, people might find all kinds of new uses. Cummings' own favourite: "Being able to launch one out of the window and fly it down to the Starbucks, to tell me how many people are in line, so I know when to get coffee."

**David Axe
Danger Room
wired.com/dangerroom**
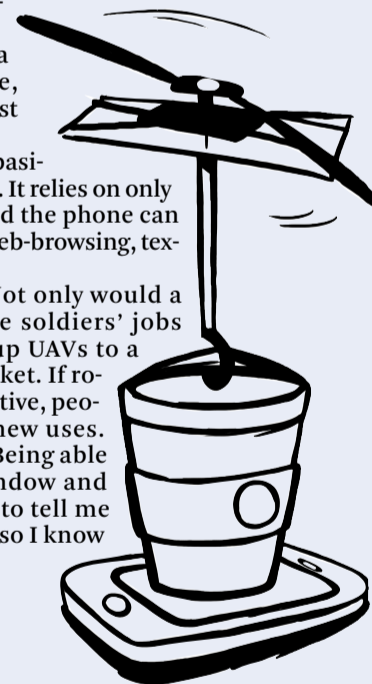
Pak TV show spoofing Taliban a big hit

A Pakistani TV show spoofing Taliban has become a roaring hit with its quirky humour and dark satire. A sampler. Information on how to clean rifles is shown in a segment called "Gharelu Nuskhe". Time to laugh?

Pakistan's troubled civil society is tuning in every Friday for the Geo TV show for some lighter moments.

The show is named "Hum Sab Umeed Se Hain" and its songs, skits and spoofs make fun of all, from Musharraf to Shahid Afridi, from the lawyers' movement to burqa diktats. But the clear favourites are the segments named Channel T (Taliban), Channel M (Musharraf) and Channel B (Burqa), also available on the internet.

Launched three months ago, the satirical digs on Channel T have struck a chord with audiences. "In one episode, the Pakistani pop singer, jeans-clad Hadiqa Kiyani, comes on stage covered in a *chador* as per Taliban diktat of not to be seen or heard in *gair mehram* (without male blood relatives) and just sits with her back to the camera," says 37-year-old producer and writer of the programme, Dr Younis Butt.

Channel T has two Taliban-style hosts making declarations such as, "Opinion of women will not be included on this channel." On one episode, imagining a Taliban news channel, the host read the news: "Popular Pakistani actress Meera gets national award for best actress," adding quickly, "the co-actors were horses!" At this point, a maulvi butts in to say, "Kodey padney chahiye," (She should be whipped).

**Meenakshi Sinha
Times of India
timesofindia.indiatimes.com**

Illustrations by Sarah Lazarovic for The National