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Lebanon girds for chaos as factional rift deepens

MARK MACKINNON

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Gilbert Doumit used to count himself among the optimists, one of the few who believed that Lebanon might be able to free itself from the sectarianism that has repeatedly torn this country apart. But as Lebanon's presidential election crisis continues to worsen, he's switching camps.

"I'm one of the pessimists now," the 31-year-old civil society activist said yesterday. Hours earlier, it was announced that a parliamentary vote that had been scheduled for today to choose a successor to President Emile Lahoud had been delayed for a fourth time.

The vote is now scheduled for Friday, just hours before Mr. Lahoud's term in office expires. With the country's political factions deadlocked over who should succeed him, the possibility of a power void and the establishment of rival governments looms increasingly large. Many Lebanese fear that violence between the two camps - one side backed by Syria and Iran; the other by the United States, France and Saudi Arabia - could follow.

Three months ago, Mr. Doumit was among a small cluster of young Lebanese activists who established a pro-peace movement called Khalass, the Arabic word for "enough."

"I think it's over for us," he said grimly. "Institutions are being destroyed, arms are in people's hands. Everyone in the country feels we're going into civil war."

Many Lebanese have kept guns in their homes since the 1975-1990 civil war that left more than 100,000 people dead. Local media have been filled with reports of the rival groups importing more weapons in anticipation of conflict.

The Western-supported government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the opposition, led by the militant Hezbollah group, have been locked in a standoff for a year, ever since the Shia Muslim group withdrew its support for the government and began a non-stop demonstration to bring about its collapse.

What happens if the two sides are unable to agree on a candidate by Friday is unclear. Mr. Siniora's allies - who hold a slim majority in parliament - have suggested they could name their own candidate to the post without the backing of the opposition. Mr. Siniora, a Sunni Muslim, could also assume executive powers on an emergency basis.

While expressing hope that a compromise could be reached, Boutros Harb, a presidential candidate from Mr. Siniora's bloc, known as March 14, said they could only be expected to bend so far to accommodate Hezbollah and its allies.

"I cannot imagine an understanding which does not take into account that March 14 has the majority in parliament and has the legal, constitutional right to elect a president alone," he said in an interview at his home outside Beirut.

But the opposition, which includes the popular leader General Michel Aoun, has warned it will not accept a president chosen without their consent.