

Cardinal: Lebanese must coexist, get president elected in timely manner

Doreen Abi Raad | Catholic News Service | Feb. 7, 2014
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Lebanese Cardinal Bechara Rai said the Maronite Catholic church could not remain a bystander as Lebanon neared an "existential crisis."

"We must return to the achievements reached by the Lebanese people when they devised the original national pact," Rai said, referring to the 1943 agreement that laid the foundation of Lebanon as a multiconfessional state. "Coexistence lies in belonging to a civilized project that brings together Muslims and Christians."

Rai, Maronite patriarch, announced Wednesday that the Maronite church had issued a "road map" for Lebanon. The document comes amid extreme tension over the civil war in neighboring Syria and a recent wave of bombings in Lebanon, some of them involving suicide bombers.

The cardinal stressed the need for a timely election of a new president.

President Michel Suleiman's six-year term ends in May, but there are fears that the differences among rival political parties will lead to a vacuum in the country's top post which, under the Lebanese constitution, is held by a Maronite Catholic.

"Electing a new president as a new head of state within the constitutional deadline is not debatable, and it is a prerequisite condition because its absence means an absence of the state and its future," Rai told journalists.

He said the new president would be tasked with restarting "honest dialogue" among political foes.

"The Maronite church believes that resolving the current crisis lies in returning to national principles, which can be achieved through honest dialogue," the patriarch said.

Lebanon's parliament extended its term for 17 months last June after rival parties failed to agree on a new election law.

He said the Lebanese authorities must continue to build the state, preserve the constitution, and respect the judiciary.

"It is not reasonable for the Lebanese to boast of their democracy when they, in fact, are obstructing the state's institutions," Rai said. "It is unfortunate that the Lebanese factions have been forced to resort to foreign powers to resolve their internal disputes."

He warned the Lebanese, "particularly officials, against continuing to exclude others, remaining obstinate and power hungry, because that will only drive Lebanon to the abyss."

He said it is important for Lebanon "to avoid becoming a point of transit or departure for activities that might plunge it into regional or international conflicts."

The cardinal also called for an end to the crisis in Syria through a national dialogue in which Syrians could decide their own fate.

"A speedy resolution to the crisis and the return of refugees to their homes are vital Lebanese interests," he said.

Lebanese authorities say there are more than 1.2 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, equal to about one-quarter of Lebanon's population.

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