

Lebanese archbishop: Election of new president marks new beginning

BEIRUT, Lebanon – The May 25 election of Lebanon's new president and an agreement signed by rival political leaders mark a fresh start for the country, said a Lebanese archbishop.

The agreement signed May 21 in Doha, Qatar, also opens "a relevant gate toward peace and stability in Middle Eastern countries," Maronite Catholic Archbishop Bechara Rai of Jbeil told Catholic News Service May 24.

"Certainly, it's a new beginning," for Lebanon, he said.

The Doha Agreement between the Western-backed government and the Iranian-backed, Hezbollah-led opposition ended an 18-month political crisis that nearly plunged the country into a civil war.

The Doha Agreement called for the election of consensus candidate Michel Suleiman as president, the formation of a national unity government and reform of the electoral law prior to the 2009 parliamentary elections.

Mr. Suleiman's election "will grant trust and confidence to the people and bring back new hope to the soul of the Lebanese," said Archbishop Rai. Suleiman, a native of Amchit, a coastal village north of Beirut, is from Archbishop Rai's diocese.

After being sworn in before lawmakers May 25, Mr. Suleiman, 59, said, "Let us unite ... and work toward a solid reconciliation.

"We have paid dearly for our national unity," he said. "Let us safeguard it hand in hand."

The former army chief, a Maronite Catholic, pledged to protect the country's constitution, sovereignty and independence and urged the Lebanese to put their differences aside to bring about a new era.

Under Lebanon's power-sharing system, the presidency is reserved for a Maronite

Catholic. The post had been vacant since November, when Syrian-backed Emile Lahoud stepped down after his term expired. Feuding politicians failed to elect a new president – even though they had agreed on Suleiman as a consensus candidate in December – because they could not agree on the makeup of the new government. Nineteen parliamentary sessions to elect a president were canceled.

Central Beirut's sprawling "tent city," erected by the opposition 18 months ago in an effort to topple the government, immediately was dismantled following the announcement of the Doha Agreement. Because of the prolonged sit-in, a popular nearby dining and shopping destination for Lebanese and tourists alike "became like a desert, with no sign of life," said Gaby Mouzaner, 42, owner of a jewelry shop.

"Now people are flocking to the area, happy and full of nostalgia," he said.

"I feel that all these leaders finally realized that nothing can be done without dialogue. And as a Christian, I feel that the hand of God was there," Mr. Mouzaner said.

Many Christians attributed the Doha Agreement to the intercession of St. Rita, known as a patron of impossible cases and one of the most popular saints in Lebanon. The agreement was signed on the eve of her feast day.