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The problem is the extended presidency

Commentary by **By Chibli Mallat**

The ideal course Lebanon must pursue following the resignation of Prime Minister Omar Karami starts with a simple step: the resignation of President Emile Lahoud.

A dignified resignation should be followed by national agreement on a compromise president and the formation of a national unity government. That government's first move, and indeed main program, would be to request a full and immediate Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, conducted in an orderly fashion in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 (or the Taif Accord, if some are still keen to use that fig leaf). In this way, parliamentary elections could be carried out with full freedom, without foreign boots and intelligence-service fixers lurking. International observers could also be invited in.

Such a process would be a showcase for nonviolent change in the Middle East's history, which the Lebanese have been writing in recent weeks.

When President Bishara al-Khoury resigned in 1952, also under popular pressure following the enforced extension of his constitutional mandate, his last action was to appoint a Maronite as prime minister in a caretaker capacity, until Khoury's successor could be elected. There is no reason to repeat this precedent. What is needed is a letter from the leaders of the opposition to the speaker of Parliament, Nabih Birri, bearing the names of a dozen parliamentarians, where they would ask him to convene a session dedicated solely to electing a new president, under the relevant constitutional provisions. The current Karami government would, meanwhile, continue to guarantee the continuity of state institutions.

It would be a grave mistake to leave Lahoud in his position and start haggling over a new government, for two reasons: the first is causal, in that the main problem in Lebanon today was not the Karami government, but the extension of the president's mandate. Internationally, the extension stands in open violation to Resolution 1559, which "declares its support for a free and fair electoral process in Lebanon's upcoming presidential election conducted according to Lebanese constitutional rules devised without foreign interference or influence." Domestically, the extension represented the worst possible form of tampering with a constitutional system long characterized by change at the head of the executive.

The second reason is more prospective. In the shadow of protests in the Ukraine, Togo and now Egypt against the recurrent nature of autocracy at the top, Lebanon may be joining, to use a variation on the term of political scientist Samuel Huntington, the "fourth wave" of democratization in the world. This wave is just starting in the Middle East and Africa.

One cannot defend the Karami government, collectively or individually. There has been far too much mismanagement of the investigation into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the attempted assassination of Marwan Hamadi. If only to register his shock at what happened during his tenure, Karami, the scion of a great national family, did well by resigning. But it would be wrong to primarily blame him, or his two controversial ministers, Interior Minister Suleiman Franjeh and Justice Minister Adnan Addoum, for blockage in the political system. The blame lies squarely with the decision on Sept. 3 to formally extend Lahoud's mandate. And the system will remain deadlocked until the president leaves the scene, whether now, next year, or in three years' time.

The Lebanese presidency is in no way powerless, and Lahoud has shown time and again that he calls most of the political shots in the country. Had he not lobbied actively for the extension of his mandate, both in Damascus and Beirut, the present crisis could have been avoided. Over a year ago, and again on the eve of the extension, we warned that such action on the presidency would bring tragedy to Lebanon. Nor is the matter personal or judgmental: Many of the major crises befalling our society have gravitated around incumbents trying to hang on to power.

Here is a more fitting motto for the Middle East and Africa in the years to come. It was coined by the Egyptian movement Kefaya (enough), which opposes the extension of President Hosni Mubarak's mandate: "No extension; no [political] inheritance."

Without the resignation of Lahoud, the chance for the restoration of stability in Lebanon will be much weakened. As important now, a new president and government must come into place to present the demand of the Lebanese people to the Syrian government, written with the blood of Hariri and the peaceful anger of the demonstrators: the immediate and full withdrawal of Syrian troops and intelligence personnel from Lebanon.

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