

How the Arab League could benefit from Salim Hoss' open, democratic leadership

by Chibli Mallat

When Michael Young wrote a political obituary of Salim Hoss, (In Memoriam, The Daily Star, Sept. 9) the article coincided with my sending a note to the prime minister to congratulate him on a success that goes far beyond his electoral defeat, and for a democratic stature which is further evidenced by his absence from the next Parliament.

In a dignified valedictory to his campaign staff last week, the prime minister explained how he tendered his resignation but was confronted with constitutional quirks that would have paralyzed the country for two months. The democratic tone and resonance of this farewell message encouraged the present public rejoinder, not so much as another testimony, which the man does not need, but as a lesson for the region in the recent electoral consultation.

There were excesses in the last elections, but one thing will stand out as the dust settles: the electoral defeat of an acting prime minister. In any democracy, this would not be an event of particular note. This is precisely the reason one wonders why it is so remarkable in Lebanon.

The fact is, the defeat of a prime minister in the elections is a first in the modern history of the Arab world. While it was a common feature until the early 1950s, and governments changed either in the wake of an electoral defeat, or under the pressure from public opinion, one cannot recall a single

instance, over some four decades, of voting day being politically fatal to those in power. The concept of resignation itself is so rare in the Arab world that one remembers with pride the courage and principle displayed by the former secretary-general of the Arab League, Tunisian Chedli Klibi, who resigned when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

The Arab League, in fact, is the place to start. Whether institutionally or in terms of leadership, the Hoss lesson is compelling with regard to the individual member-states and to the workings of the league alike.

Institutionally, it does not seem proper that an Egyptian secretary-general should preside over the league's executive direction. Either the headquarters are Egyptian, or the secretary-general is Egyptian, but the conjunction of nationalities is detrimental to a separation of functions needed for the smooth and detached daily operation of such organizations. A minimal distance should be kept toward the hosting state as a matter of course. As a secretary-general, it is hard for a national sitting in his own country to allow any criticism, or distance, toward his government. Imagine, for example, the UN secretary-general being a New Yorker.

As for the mysterious processes which preside over the appointment of a secretary-

general (the original Treaty of Alexandria omitted to mention when his term is to come to an end), they can be described as anything but democratic, though electing their chief executive officer is a plague for all international systems, from the United Nations down to the smallest regional agency. In the Arab League, however, the problems are compounded by the lack of accountability, and by the excessive terms of the incumbents.

For the Arab League's member states, it is no secret that democracy is falling behind in most, with the exception of Youssef's Morocco and Hoss' Lebanon.

While all non-Arab countries in the region, including Iran, Turkey and Israel, are distinctly more advanced than we are in the electoral processes and change at the head of the government, the Arab states compare now with the lowest standards across the planet. Witness so many Latin American and (non-Arab) African states that have accomplished great strides toward democracy in the past decade, while freedom of expression is systematically curtailed all the way from Algeria to Saudi Arabia.

Even a government that should pride itself for a history of freedom of expression, such as the one in Egypt, did not hes-

itate to indict a leading intellectual figure as soon as he ventured to talk about free elections and international monitoring. There is much by way of a Hoss lesson in this respect: for months on end, caricatures of the prime minister were published in all the Lebanese newspapers.

Not once did it occur to anyone that this type of criticism, some it extremely harsh, should be curtailed. Nor is it a coincidence that Amnesty International succeeded in establishing a regional office in Beirut during his prime ministership. The dynamism manifested by the government is owed to Salim Hoss' long-time commitment to human rights.

The yearning for democracy is strong in our region, across the board of what democracy entails: regular change at the head of the system, free elections, and the protection of basic human rights and values. In an ideal world, the Arab League should recompense the Lebanese prime minister's statesmanship by asking him to preside over it, and to entrust him with introducing, in all Arab countries, the process that would allow heads of state and prime ministers to be defeated in national elections. But we have learned the Arab world is anything but ideal. One is left with instances of statesmanship to find comfort in.

Chibli Mallat, a professor of law who holds the Chair of European Law just established at Universite Saint Joseph, wrote this commentary for The Daily Star

Opinion

The Daily Star, MONDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2000