

## **Elect Ghassan Tueni interim president**

*By Chibli Mallat*

*Commentary by*

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It has now been one year since I announced my candidacy for the presidency of Lebanon, against the unconstitutional continuation in office of President Emile Lahoud. By offering an alternative, and by pursuing the first democratic campaign in the country's history through six months of day-to-day meetings with citizens, I believe my campaign created new dynamism on the domestic political scene.

On February 14, 2006, the campaign's ambition of pushing for Lahoud's ouster and a democratic election seemed on the verge of success when hundreds of thousands of Lebanese gathered on the first anniversary of the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination to demand a new president. Change seemed imminent for a few critical days. As the international noose of illegitimacy was tightened around Lahoud's neck thanks to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, my campaign outlined a course for non-violent, presidential change. Failure to adopt that constitutional course subsequently allowed the so-called national dialogue to break the momentum of the widely popular demand for constitutional renewal.

This situation had unfortunate consequences. It bolstered the factions nostalgic for the former regime, helping lead to the war between Hizbullah and Israel last summer. Since then, the Cedar Revolution has been in retreat. Yet there is no reason to buckle now. If the crisis continues to be driven to the wire by the pro-Syrian coalition, people who remain faithful to the Cedar Revolution should know that they can prevail, given that they command a majority in Parliament.

How can we regain the initiative, solve the governmental crisis, and avoid a collapse into civil war? First, it must be made clear that the resignation of the six ministers, so long as a third of the ministers remain in place, should not lead to the Cabinet's collapse. In times of crisis particularly, the Constitution is there to be followed. Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his colleagues should appoint replacement ministers, from the Shiite community if necessary. There are a number of distinguished Shiite personalities who reject being vetoed by Hizbullah and Amal. The two parties have threatened to take to the streets. Marching peacefully is acceptable, but resorting to violence is not. The March 8 coalition should remember that time and again the supporters of the Cedar Revolution have won the numbers game, whether in the street or in Parliament.

As a next step, the government should go to Parliament and seek a vote of confidence under the Constitution. This is what Articles 36 and 37, as well as Article 69, are there for: the first two articles mention the vote of confidence as a major stabilizing factor in the republic, while Article

69 encourages resorting to that vote as a way of clearing the democratic air. Article 69 says the government should resign "when there is a vote of no confidence against it, at the initiative of the Chamber of Deputies, or at its own initiative." A vote of confidence, in contrast, confirms its legitimacy.

One should also recall that the quorum for a meeting of Parliament under Article 34 is half the members plus one, in other words 65 members. Constitutionally, the Parliament speaker is just one parliamentarian among others, and cannot prevent his colleagues from meeting.

After the vote of confidence, we should then move speedily to appoint a new president. Ghassan Tueni has proposed that parliamentarians sign a petition to remove Lahoud. I agree with this, and advised such a course months ago. Since Lahoud's extension was coerced and a majority of parliamentarians last February confirmed both the coercion and the unconstitutionality of his extension, a vote should be taken in Parliament, following which a new president should be elected if the vote is positive.

To keep the country away from the brink, I propose that Ghassan Tueni be elected as interim president. This would serve several purposes. First, few in Leb-anon, the Arab world and internationally would deny that he is that rare bird in the Middle East: a statesman. His sacrifices, namely his own son's life as well as those of journalists at his newspaper, only add to his reputation. Second, though Tueni is not a Maronite, his presence would give sectarian calculations a necessary, momentary time off. His interim tenure would remove the sting from a presidential clash, and allow a framework for open competition until elections are held in September-October 2007. A more consensual government could be established until then, and with Lahoud out of power Lebanon's contending political forces might more readily accept a political accommodation.

Parliament, as the representative of the people, must meet twice in good order during the coming days. It should vote confidence in a government that has filled the six vacant ministries in accordance with Article 69 of the Constitution, and it should elect Ghassan Tueni as president for the remainder of the current presidential mandate. The political system can only benefit from a combination of both measures.

Chibli Mallat, a candidate to the Lebanese presidency, is a visiting professor at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. He wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR.