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Presidential elections in Lebanon (III):

Nine years later - an assessment of the achievements of Elias Hrawi

by Chibli Mallat

What will remain in the history books of Hrawi's nine-year mandate?

Even without the benefit of the historian's hindsight, it is important for a new president to take stock of what Hrawi has achieved, so that he can improve on the positive side of the balance sheet, and avoid or reverse the mistakes made by his predecessor.

Some qualifications might be helpful to start with. Firstly, it would be appropriate to exclude the international dimension from the balance sheet. The president's margin for manoeuvre, regionally and internationally, was dramatically constrained from day one of his effective presidential mandate on October 13, 1990. Without the Gulf War and its resulting upset of the regional balance and the readiness of the Syrian president to support Hrawi's bid to assume power, the status quo may have remained for years. There is no point in saying how disastrous for the very existence of Lebanon the dual power -- the cannibalistic "Lebanonisation" caused by the mediocre legacy of Amin Gemayel -- might have been.

Coming to power largely on the strength of others, and in view of the limited choice the president had in order to assume his constitutional mandate, his debt to Syria was bound to be huge. As a consequence, the readiness to tie the interests of Lebanon to those designed in Damascus was both morally and practically irreversible. This will remain true for sometime in the country, and Hrawi can hardly be blamed for the excesses of his predecessors in Baabda and for a regional deadlock largely caused by the access of Netanyahu to power. This is why we should restrict our

assessment to the domestic scene.

A second reason for leaving the regional-international scene out is the larger-than-life stature of Hariri, which warrants an additional qualifier to the balance sheet. Precisely because of the prime minister's dominant stature, the international limelight was taken away from the president, as witnessed in the recent French and American visits to and from official Lebanon. Hariri was clearly calling the shots on both occasions, and the president was left in the shade. Short of appointing another foreign minister, there was little Hrawi could have done to avoid it. Hariri has accumulated over the years of his successful international business career a network of friends in high places which he is understandably cashing in on at present.

Hariri has also succeeded in organising and putting his close friends in charge of some of the most powerful local ministries and institutions and on this level the mandate of the prime minister deserves an assessment of its own, which also includes the economy. So one is left, in reviewing nine years of the presidential mandate, with a strictly domestic dimension which does not include the economy.

On the positive side, civil peace has been restored and strengthened. This is no small achievement. One may have wished that the quality of peace could be based more on the rule of law and informed consensus and less on various forms of coercion, some bordering on thuggery. The two parliamentary elections left much to be desired, whether in the coerced structuring of lists or the poor use of executive power in some precincts. It was in any case a serious mistake to follow blindly a French model of an omnipotent ministry of interior. Moreover, a major success for electoral rights and freedoms will be achieved when the Lebanese government invites respectable international observers to cast their views on electoral campaigns and bless voting day with the seal of international standards. But history books will remember Hrawi's presidency mainly in contradistinction to the preceding fifteen years of turmoil. Peace against war; the contrast is as simple as it is powerful.

Some may reject this conclusion on the premise that any other president would have done the same. I am not so sure, and I think that the common sense manifested by Hrawi, together with good judgement and a felicitous political instinct in times of adversity, have allowed the country to ride roughshod over the most difficult waves, including the Israeli invasion of 1996.

Alas, the very same basic political instinct of the president may loom large on the negative side of the balance sheet in history books. Hrawi was unable to rise to a position where the mere importance of the president's constitutional position warrants a different style of governance. No office holder can afford to lose his nerves in public.

Less dramatically, the president should have avoided at all costs being drawn into trivially local politics by detaching himself completely from the most dangerous political temptation of all: friends and family cronyism. He should have never appointed a close relative as foreign minister, which was an early slip. He should have always kept a distance from electoral fights, whether they were parliamentary or municipal. He would then have avoided weakening the position of the presidency which stooping down to acrimonious hearsay elicited by such occasions makes inevitable. And last but not least, he should have preserved the remarkable record of slowly institutionalised peace by refraining from indulging in a second term.

Taking stock then, one hopes for a new president who will take on board the real achievement of civil peace under Hrawi -- a fundamentally benign ruler -- while shunning nepotistic tendencies and damaging public outbursts.

If the president does not leave in November, the record of family and personal nepotism will deteriorate and social peace, which is the greatest achievement of the current presidency, will be at risk. If the president does leave in November, the history books will be unfortunately laden by the self-prolongation of October 1995. This is sad, considering the stability achieved, against difficult odds, in the first six years.

Chibli Mallat is an attorney and professor of law at St Joseph's University. This is the third in a series of occasional columns on the presidential elections. The next column will assess Hariri in power.