

Real renewal means no Lahoud or Berri

By Chibli Mallat

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With the exception of the third round of voting two weekends ago, the results of Lebanon's parliamentary elections have been pretty much as expected. The opposition now has a significant majority, which is normal considering the massive upheaval that took place following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February.

We should now speak of an "indigenous-led" opposition, which includes those who opposed the Syrian presence "in the field," of which the two tragic icons are Hariri and the recently assassinated journalist Samir Kassir (not to forget Marwan Hamadeh's dead driver, Ghazi Boukaroum, and those many other innocents killed in the Hariri assassination); and we should distinguish this opposition from the "exile-led" opposition, epitomized by Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. One can lament the split within the opposition (although thanks to Aoun's stand - some would say stubbornness - suspense was injected into the electoral process), but the remarkably non-violent revolution we have lived through can now be brought to fruition. That is why there must today be two paramount objectives: the departure of President Emile Lahoud, so we can at last reconcile ourselves with our mistreated Constitution; and the election of a new speaker of Parliament in lieu of Nabih Berri, so that a fresh spirit can infuse legislative matters.

Let us first look at the numbers. The 15 or so seats won by Aounist candidates on June 12 rattled opposition expectations in the Jbeil-Kisirwan district and the Metn, because of the unmerited defeat of three leading exemplars of Lebanese decency: Carlos Edde, Fares Souaid and Nassib Lahoud. As it turned out, this triumph was an exception for the Aounists. Voting in Beirut on May 29 led to a sweep by Hariri candidates. On June 5, the list of 23 candidates agreed upon by Berri and Hizbullah won handily in the South. And last Sunday, the indigenous-led opposition also won as planned in the North, giving it a majority in Parliament. One decision must be foremost on the minds of the new parliamentary majority: the elimination of Lahoud, who symbolizes what remains of the Syrian-Lebanese security order responsible for the assassination of Hariri. Getting rid of Lahoud will not be easy constitutionally, but it should be manageable politically, if Lebanese public animus is given the respect it deserves after so much sacrifice and courage; and only if change occurs in all of the top three positions of the state.

Berri, who has been in power for more than 12 years, may agree to collaborate in an effort to dislodge the president, but has himself tried the patience of the Lebanese people for too long. He sought to undermine the anti-Syrian front that formed after the Hariri murder, until the March 14 demonstration brought a million protestors out into Beirut's streets. By preventing Parliament from meeting for two months, Berri blocked popular calls for a change in the electoral law. He did so to secure the victory of his list in the South, while smothering any chance for new faces to enter Parliament. Reform in Lebanon will be as difficult if Berri remains in power as it will be if Lahoud stays on in Baabda.

The aspirations for reform in Lebanon are stifled by the continued presence of symbols of the worst aspects of the old regime. There is already much disillusionment surrounding the split in the opposition; but unless Lahoud and Berri make room for new leadership, this disillusionment will increase. Who replaces them is surely important, but the country must nevertheless focus on process rather than personalities. Let candidates come forward and defend their views and ambitions before the public. It is crucial to see serious contenders and a full democratic process of choice. Candidates should run openly, both for the presidency and for the speakership of Parliament.

Lahoud's departure is important not just for Lebanon but as a precedent for non-violent leadership transitions throughout the Middle East. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Syria's Bashar Assad, Tunisia's Zein al-Abidin ben Ali, to name only three of the more than 20 autocrats ruling in the region, understand how events in Lebanon put at risk their own open-ended rule. The Cedar Revolution may become a political watershed as important for the Middle East as was the fall of the Berlin Wall for Eastern Europe, but only if change occurs at the top.

Western democracies can play a role here. The better diplomats and policy-makers involved in Lebanese affairs have a strong sense of the public animus of the Lebanese and the sea-change this might entail in a region searching for democracy. It is delusion to think reform is possible with the leaders of the old regime - and that includes Prime Minister Najib Mikati. While the movement for Lahoud's and Berri's departure in particular should be expressed most forcefully from inside Lebanon, universal democratic principles are increasingly being used by the international community to demand limited mandates for political leaders.

In the case of Lahoud, there appears an additional strong anchor in international law for his resignation: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 was passed on September 2 last year, just before Lebanon's Parliament approved a constitutional amendment extending the president's term. The resolution requested that the "upcoming presidential elections be free." However, the subsequent Fitzgerald report on the Hariri assassination put it on record that Lahoud's term was extended through Syrian coercion of Hariri, contravening the UN resolution.

A principled position in Washington and Paris, and elsewhere, calling for the departure of Lahoud and Berri would square well with the new call for democracy in Beirut, now comforted by a parliamentary majority.

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