

Create a contest for Lahoud's successors

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After the assassination of our colleague and friend Samir Kassir last week, Lebanon's so-called Cedar Revolution once again had to confront a central issue: the resignation of President Emile Lahoud.

Drawing on the collapse of the dynamism visible on March 14, when a million or so people gathered at Martyrs' Square, Samir recently wrote a powerful column on the waning unity drive in the daily An-Nahar. He wondered what went wrong, and why the extraordinary momentum of that day gave way to disappointment. His diagnosis was that the opposition had made a mistake in failing to seize the opportunity to form a government, based on the strength it had derived from the street.

Samir's point was perfectly legitimate. My only difficulty with it was that, ever since Taif, the Lebanese system has not been, as many argue, a parliamentary system; it very much remains a presidential one, with Taif having only marginally dented the president's powers. That's why it was not possible after March 14 for the opposition to put together a Cabinet whose composition Lahoud disagreed with; and even had he temporarily ceded ground, he would still have been able to block on a daily basis, by stonewalling or pussyfooting, any serious reform measures the new government intended to introduce to end the nightmarish security system.

Samir's assassination tragically brought this argument back to the forefront, and was echoed at the opposition's meeting at the Bristol Hotel last Thursday. The Bristol opposition called for a sit-in on the road to the presidential palace to demand Lahoud's resignation; yesterday the president said he would not resign, and the opposition momentarily agreed, in response to a request from Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir, to call off its protest. Michel Aoun has also resisted the idea of ousting Lahoud. Nonetheless, the demand is bound to snowball, so clear is it to all, including the Syrian leadership, that the turmoil in Lebanon started with the ill-fated decision to extend the president's mandate.

The inevitable mention of Maronite hopefuls for the presidency underlines how much the focus has become on personalities rather than on process. At a meeting of opposition figures at Walid Jumblatt's palace in Mukhtara following the resignation of former Prime Minister Omar Karami, I saw firsthand how uneasy most of the Maronite politicians were with the Druze leader's demand for Lahoud to resign. Many of them saw the president's premature departure as a threat to their own presidential ambitions.

That is also the case today for Aoun. Despite the shock occasioned by Samir's outrageous assassination, Aoun's reluctance to challenge Lahoud can only be explained by his perception that in the present context the president's departure would undermine his own presidential gambit. Better to wait, Aoun believes, for more auspicious circumstances allowing him to take power.

To break the impasse, we must move beyond the name-game to process. The inexorable search for names partly comes from the fact that many Maronite contenders are decent enough to merit the job. But process also matters immensely. At the height of the Cedar Revolution, I proposed a mechanism where one could advance this, whereby Sfeir and Jumblatt, as the leading opposition figure, would vet a group of legitimate and decent candidates who would then campaign to try and win the country's approval, and rally support from whatever Parliament was in place.

Since then, the political scene has shifted, particularly in terms of Jumblatt's ability to play a leading role in any such process. However, the principle remains the same: let candidates fight in an open contest to convince both the Lebanese people and parliamentarians, through an open debate within the legislature, that he or she is best qualified to be elected.

Lahoud should acknowledge the grave mistake he is making in seeking to perpetuate an extended mandate. He must bow out of the political scene. But the Lebanese people also need and deserve an open contest between his successors. It is important to avoid queuing up at ambassadors' doors, Western or Arab. The focus on a competitive procedure for the presidency, as opposed to the dark game of names in obscure alleys from Tehran to Washington, will not only help the better candidate win; it will also ensure that the losers emerge as counterweights to the winner. Lest we forget, such a course is the essence of democracy.

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