

Business

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The Hariri essay

Last week Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister, wrote a substantial essay on his years in office and his proposals for Lebanon's economic future. These are some reactions.

Rafik Hariri's essay in government can only be welcome. Perhaps it has come a bit late; it would have been useful as a vision he could have articulated in his early months in government. It would have allowed the people to know what to expect, and would have offered measuring standards against which his performance in government could have been appreciated.

We had tried ourselves, in this newspaper, to suggest that the choice of our new president be premised on an open and competitive debate in the run-up to the elections last summer. The occasion was missed, unfortunately, but one is comforted to see that one of

those responsible for the lost opportunity has found a way to put his pen to paper in defence of a vision of sorts. Better late than never.

Still, this is a remarkable contribution to Arab politics, nay to a new style of leadership in post-modern societies worldwide, where programmes must be put forward in the shape of such essays. This extensive manifesto has the advantage over political party platforms in that success is premised less on turgid figures, mostly from the economy and the budget, and more on an overall style which takes into account the past to assess the constraints it casts over the future.

In contrast, the answer of an unnamed military source continues a sad tradition of shadow politics which has no place in a modern democracy.

There is really nothing to hide in a world where information is plentiful, and where the debate over the costs of security must be paramount in an age of shrinking budgets.

More importantly, it is the government — the minister of finance and the minister of defence — who should be in

charge of such statements, and not, as in the previous invention a few weeks ago, from an "unnamed source." Either the government is proud of its policy, and it should defend it publicly and vigorously against its detractors in opposition, or it should change it in accordance with such criticism.

There is no middle way in this field, and no room for shadow politicians in the ministries of information, defence, or elsewhere. Only last week, George Tenet, the director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, testified to the blunders of his agency in the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. One would expect that he takes responsibility for acts and omissions consequently, as suggested in this newspaper some time ago, but it is a remarkable phenomenon to see that the most secretive agency in the world should be put to the task of answering to the public.

On substance, much ink will be spilt in answer to Mr. Hariri's manifesto. The more ink, the better. He will learn from it, we will learn from it, and the government, hopefully, will learn to sharpen its own arguments.

Beyond that debate, which one can only salute, a phenomenon is emerging in Lebanon, which is that of "opposition."

Mr. Hariri may not be used to being in opposition. He should: This is the greatest blessing for statesmanship. If this is an opposition manifesto, and the first shot on the way to publicly competitive politics, then it is the more welcome, as Lebanon would have come of age.

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