



Mallat at U. of Virginia law school. Lebanon's democrats retaking the initiative

Visiting Prof. Mallat Hopes to Reform Lebanon as New President

Visiting professor Chibli Mallat hopes to overturn a sectarian, undemocratic election system in Lebanon, and to many, he has already succeeded—by running for president himself. Mallat, who is teaching the short course Islamic and Middle Eastern Law at the Law School while on a break from visiting at Princeton, is a principal in Mallat Law Offices, as well as a scholar. He serves as the EU Jean Monnet Chair in European Law and director of the Centre for the Study of the European Union at St. Joseph's University in Beirut.

Mallat was heavily involved in Lebanon's Cedar Revolution, a series of protests triggered by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Mallat's political activism and human rights record spans from Palestine to Iraq (see www.mallatforpresident.com). Mallat will lecture on "Lebanon and Middle East Geopolitics" on Monday, Nov. 6 at noon in room WB105.

Why are you running for president of Lebanon? What do you hope to accomplish if you become president?

Lebanon is a particularly complex and fragile country, where running for president did not exist as a concept in the first place. The president is elected by parliament, and there is no constitutional mechanism that requires a candidate to come out openly and declare his or her candidacy. My campaign, which I started in November 2005, was designed first to break that undemocratic pattern, and actively and publicly run for the presidency, rather than wait and see how domestic and international forces come together at the last moment to dictate a president on the country, as they have done since 1970. Other "hopefuls" have since declared, so there is already a qualitative progress achieved by merely "running".

Then there was the Cedar Revolution, which was leaderless. The sitting president was forced upon the Lebanese by Syria in 1998, then his mandate was forcefully extended by Syria again in September 2004. A U.N. Security Council resolution underlined his illegitimacy, as has my candidacy. Our nonviolent revolution deserves to result in a better leader for the country.

What are the most difficult problems facing Lebanon?

The war between Israel and Hizbullah this summer shows how frail Lebanon remains. A militia dragged us into war without consultation, and Israel destroyed much of the country in its overbearing, excessive reaction. At present, Hizbullah, with the support of Syria and Iran and the sitting president, are trying to undermine the Cedar Revolution and bring down the government. We need, as Lebanese democrats, to retake the initiative, and I have been formulating a number of proposals in this direction. A necessary condition is a change in the presidency, but the more pressing issue over the coming two weeks is to prevent the threats expressed by Hizbullah to resort to the street as arbiter of the conflict from remaining unchallenged. Lebanese democrats should be again on the offensive and reclaim the high political ground.

Is the Cedar Revolution a new model for change in the Middle East?

It is an absolutely new model. It is the first time in the history of the Middle East over the past

two centuries that a peaceful revolution results in some forward, humanist, change. But that change has been insufficient. The first phase of the revolution was about sovereignty, and we succeeded in forcing Syrian troops out of Lebanon peacefully. But we failed on the democratic side, and were unable to remove icons of the Ancien Regime from their entrenched, usurped position. This mixed result is also true for what the revolution has meant for the Middle East. My candidacy is part of a process of necessary enhancement of democracy in Lebanon and in the larger region. Some of the most remarkable support has come from Arab democrats, who were inspired by our revolution. But it is true that we have failed them by not winning in a decisive manner, and the sense we had last year, of a wind that looked like 1989 in Eastern Europe, did not last. But it may still be rekindled, if a democratic Lebanese president is elected to power.

How can Lebanon move past the conflict this summer with Israel and Hizbullah?

With a new president who offers a different way to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict. I campaigned last year in the South of Lebanon on a platform that said we need a different type of approach to the conflict, and war and bombs are useless. These ideas are finding their way both in Lebanon and in Israel, against extremism which is driven by the logic of confrontation. But we need also the understanding of moderate Israelis to move forward. Are they ready to move courageously and respond to the opening of Lebanese democrats like myself? Or will they continue to consider that Arabs understand only the language of force, mirroring a similar position that prevails on our side of the barrier?

What kinds of legal reforms would most help Lebanon?

In my campaign over six months of a daily, U.S.-style encounter with citizens, two central proposals for reform have echoed beautifully with the audience. One was the election by direct, universal vote of the president, or to be more precise in a complicated Lebanese system dominated by sectarianism—i.e. the president must be a Christian Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the speaker a Shi'i Muslim—the direct, universal election of the head(s) of executive power.

The other was active female participation in the formulation of policy, and I am proposing that 25 percent of the first cabinet include women in prominent portfolios.

What is the most important thing the American government can do to help Lebanon?

Stay the course in support for democracy and sovereignty that the Cedar Revolution represents. When I met the U.S. president last year, briefly, we uttered this word simultaneously. Now staying the course, for Iraq or for Lebanon, does not mean the status quo. Staying the course means being creative within the strategic policy in support of democracy, and creativity means taking a number of steps for Lebanon: one is to accelerate presidential change through implementing the Security Council resolution; another is to continue active support to the international tribunal which should be established imminently by the Council against the assassins who have systematically targeted the leaders of our Revolution—and at Monday's talk I will be making a more precise, novel proposal I think in this direction. It also means being ready to act seriously against the Syrian and Iranian leaders. It also means telling the Israelis that the moderation sought in the Middle East cannot happen when someone like [recently appointed Israeli Deputy Prime Minister] Mr. [Avigdor] Lieberman, who openly advocates the ethnic cleansing of Arab citizens of Israel, has coopted the government. So there are plenty of innovative, principled steps—while staying the course of democracy for the Middle East—in

which the U.S. government can help.

What do you hope to impart to your American students?

I am very much enjoying my teaching at the law school, the class is superb and committed, and I am learning a lot from them. I have actually assigned them chapters of my forthcoming book, entitled "An Introduction to Middle Eastern Law," and they are helping improve it qualitatively. I have also had the privilege of speaking at Prof. Deena Hurwitz's human rights class, and here also, the session was remarkably informative, as many students have already had a unique track record of human rights achievements on the world scene.