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Search for a president: process and profiles

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It is now a common pastime to discuss the qualities needed in a presidential candidate. This, we would like to suggest today, is as much a vain exercise as it is one born of our frustration in the absence of an open process.

Curiously for a position which is key to our constitutional system, there is no formal requirement for candidacy, making the fashionable French word, “présidentiable”, a more accurate description of the state of affairs in the run-up to the election.

There lies the first, significant flaw in the system. The word “présidentiable” was adopted in France only around 1970, according to French etymological dictionaries. It was well-used in Lebanon long before that.

While an argument may be made in favour of the potential elegance of such a process, whereby members of parliament may elect someone who is not even asking to be voted in a dream worthy of Plato’s Republic the reality is more prosaic and is firmly rooted in the history of our republic of notables. For our constitutional forebears, as for the French moneyed elite of the Third Republic and the early American constituents, the people could not possibly be responsible enough to vote directly for their president.

As a result, the lack of formal candidacy has led to a system which strips the country from knowing, up until the very last days of the presidential vote, who will be the head of state for the next six years, and whom we may have missed in his place. Worse still, in the absence of formal candidates, both parliament and the general public remain in total darkness about the “présidentiables programme”.

Hope springs eternal. The current series of articles was started with a view to présidentiables coming out seriously and forcefully on programmes, so that two minimal conditions for democracy were fulfilled: firstly, that some debate, within and outside parliament, takes place between contestants for the supreme position, their supporters, and those parliamentarians who will vote for them; and secondly that in the longer run the successful candidates and their teams be made minimally accountable for what they promised to do and did, or did not, fulfill.

Similarly, those who are unsuccessful in their presidential body would have a chance to pursue, in opposition or otherwise, a constructive political role based on their programme rather than on their persona. In other words, an open programme would start a minimal process of accountability without which no democracy can flourish.

Talk of programmes undermines the mediocrity of the current presidential contest. So far, the contest is all rumours, which, in the absence of a programme leading to debate, will carry on until the last minute.

Once programmes replace rumours as the topic of debate, the circle of democracy gets constantly enriched. Not only do programmes need to be articulated by the “présidentiables” in the first place. We can trust our media, which is uniquely skilled in subjecting talk guests to excruciating and intelligent questioning, to thrive, together with their avid audiences, on putting the candidates to the test. This would mean, for the first time since the republic came into being, a higher quality of debate in the broad light of day.

The alternative is to remain in the dark world of rumours. And with rumours come the inevitable buy-offs, financial and otherwise, which take place in the dark corridors of parliament and the hidden corners of powerhouses all the way from Tehran to Langley, and culminate in the repetition of Lebanon's ingenious but corrupt use of the infamous electoral "keys" on D-day.

Let us, instead of profile, insist on process. For beyond the basic requirements under law, including those which are confessional by virtue of our constitutional customs, there is simply no way to tailor the ideal profile to the needs of the country. Of course, to take up Plato again, we would all love to have a philosopher-king up there, who is simultaneously detached, learned, experienced and weighty. It is a weakness of human nature to believe that one's candidate fulfils these criteria and it is an even more natural projection of the presidential candidate himself to believe that he is better entitled to the job because of his uniquely superior credentials. Unfortunately the Woodrow Wilsons, Mandelas and Khatamis of this world are few and far between.

The search for the ideal president and the characteristics which might generate him or her can only end in platitudes. One should encourage our commentators to steer clear of their insistent search for the ideal profile of our next president, and work to force a programme out of those who wish to assume the supreme position in the country.

So presidential candidates and/or your supporters (if you are too modest to announce your candidacy), please come forward with an articulate programme and be ready to defend it. That will be a privileged entry to doing away with the nefarious presidency-by-rumour and the vacuous presidency-by-profile.

As for the electoral process itself, the articulation of programmes and the active and open work of presidential candidates should be an occasion to expect from our parliamentarians a course of openness from which their predecessors have tended to shy away from on such occasions. That, in turn, will make parliamentarians more accountable to their constituents than ever before, in a further enrichment of our democratic legacy.

Naturally, if there are no presidential elections, there is little point in discussing presidential programmes. Naturally, if the presidency is unimportant constitutionally, or marginal politically, the programme of a new president is meaningless. Naturally, if one has to take up past practice as a yardstick, the presidential candidates' least concern is to come up with a programme for the country. Maybe the answer is to stick to the achievable change for the sake of the country's institutions and courage from the presidential candidates to come out of the closet the minimal conditions lucidly set out by Michael Young on this page ten days ago.

Accordingly, maybe it is time to take a break and close the presidential debate in the hope that we will have an honest person to lead the country from 24 November. That wouldn't be a bad start. Considering the circumstances it would be quite an achievement.

Still, our people deserve better. A programme is not the be-all and end-all of the Lebanese presidency, but it is needed and it is a good start.

Chibli Mallet is a lawyer and law professor. This is the fifth in a series of articles on the presidential elections.