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Letting the public into the presidential race

by Michael Young

For the past three weeks, Chibli Mallat has argued, on this page, the importance of holding a presidential election by November. It is indicative of the state of affairs in Lebanon that virtually everyone remains unsure as to whether president Elias Hrawi will still be in office after the expiration of the three-year extension to his mandate.

For Mallat, an effort must be made to do away with this uncertainty and generate a mood favouring change.

Who can disagree? It is to Mallat's great credit that he has dared question the immovability of an individual who, even more than his partners in the ruling triumvirate, has become synonymous with the Second Republic.

Mallat's efforts are all the more valid in that almost nobody today appears willing to stake out a position on the presidential election. Among the more timorous are those individuals most eagerly pining for the presidency themselves.

The fact that Mallat's final conclusions are incontestable makes it all the more difficult to challenge some of his assertions.

Still, perhaps the most difficult aspect of Mallat's arguments is that his analysis fails, at times, to distinguish between two realities: a *de jure* constitutional reality, in which power has been spread formally between the members of the leadership *troïka*, and a *de facto* political reality, in which the power of the triumvirs is forever ambiguous. This ambiguity tends to weaken Mallat's main argument that "contrary to popular belief, the presidency remains the most important position in the country".

The statement may well be correct if we function in a strictly constitutional reality, yet it is meaningless in the context of the post-Taif political order. Instead, Taif established an ill-defined *troïka* system which transformed politics into a perennial division of the spoils, with the Syrians acting as the mediators.

In such a system, the formal roles of the president, prime minister and speaker of parliament have been mostly distorted.

The uncertainty of the political system leads Mallat to call on potential presidential candidates to announce their candidacies and offer a programme. The first of these demands is the more pertinent.

Several individuals who are unofficial presidential candidates have not dared announce their candidacy. There are two reasons for this: the first is fear that an announcement may prove counter-productive if Hrawi's mandate is extended; the second is indifference towards a public which has virtually no say in the outcome of presidential elections anyway.

Mallat's call for a presidential programme is, alas, less convincing under present circumstances. Periodic changes in state institutions are necessary.

However, change has become a laudable end in itself, whether programmes are offered or not.

The balance and structure of power in Lebanon are such that presidents really only operate in the vague interstices opened up by the Taif agreement; programmes are meaningless.

Far more important is where a president stands vis-à-vis the prime minister, parliament speaker, and, above all, Syria. Any effort to influence the presidential election should focus on what is achievable. At this stage, the most that can be expected is that candidates simply declare their candidacies. This would, in itself, represent a call for change. Programmes are secondary and distract attention from the fact that relatively few Lebanese politicians are in a position these days to implement, let alone make, policy.

Moreover, there is a question as to whether the president, who is no longer constitutionally the chief executive, is even entitled to define a political programme. In many ways, Mallat is seeking to inject a measure of good governance into the debate on the presidency. He avoids cynicism, which is admirable, though over-optimistic. There is one aspect of his exertions, however, which is both realistic and realisable: the desire to show that, if the presidential mandate is extended yet again, this will be done over the protests of many Lebanese.

By giving a more profound meaning to the presidency and the presidential election, Mallat is pre-empting any effort to use *raison d'état* to justify an extended mandate.

There are those countries, among them the United States and France, which have publicly expressed their desire to see the presidential election held on schedule. As far as both are concerned, an election is a necessary component of Lebanon's return to normal life. Mallat's articles are designed to emphasise that such a view is shared inside Lebanon. In the case of an extended mandate, the Lebanese government will have to explain why, eight years after the end of the war, the presidency seems reserved for the gentleman from Zahle, regardless of his achievements.

For some time to come, the interplay between constitutional procedure and power interests will continue to undermine the presidency. And, with it, the hopes of those who assume that such an institution must serve the higher interests of the collectivity. One can, however, define minimal conditions today which, even if they do not guarantee good government, can still insure that institutional continuity is maintained. For the moment these are that the presidential election be held on schedule and that those wanting to become president admit so publicly.

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