

Why Lebanon produces mediocre presidents

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Lebanon's Constitution is the oldest in the Middle East. Established in 1926, it has survived foreign control over Lebanon, international or Arab. It also increasingly operates as the reference point for Lebanese citizens. Its longevity is remarkable, even if the constitutional text has given way to widely divergent interpretations in periods of revolutionary turmoil.

This situation is only natural on the eve of a presidential election, so charged the political atmosphere has become since the assassination of the late prime minister, Rafik Hariri. In far less polarizing moments, controversy is at the heart of any constitutional interpretation: remember the Florida electoral count in the 2000 US presidential election.

I want to open a new controversy, inspired by an excellent French-language book written by the author and consultant Leila Barakat. The work is entitled "Of Presidents and the Exercise of Presidential Functions." Barakat masterfully reviews the history of Lebanese presidents, from Charles Debbas to Emile Lahoud. Two things are striking: the mediocrity of so many of the officeholders and the recurrence of "the presidential disease," as Kamal Jumblatt called it. The disease is that of incumbents who have tried time and again, sometimes succeeding, in renewing or extending their mandates beyond their prescribed constitutional term.

Even the respected first president after Independence, Bishara al-Khoury, succumbed to the disease. Because of his failing, Lebanon missed the opportunity of having its own George Washington, who refused an extended term when everyone was begging him to stay on. Barakat rightly concludes her book on that image. But unlike Elias Hrawi or Emile Lahoud, Khoury had the decency to resign when faced with the strong rejection of the Lebanese, before his extended term was completed.

Why does Lebanon suffer from this "presidential disease" and why has it been so persist? And why have so many presidents been so mediocre?

I have a simple explanation: The Constitution has never imposed on presidential candidates a declaration of intention, nor even a deadline by which they must officially register their candidacy. In fact, Parliament could meet and decide to appoint Joseph Maroun of Wichita Falls, Indiana (whoever he may be), if it so wants. It doesn't even need to ask him whether he is willing to be president. As a result, the most important office in the Lebanese state is one over which, until the

last moment, backroom deals can be made, often with foreign intervention, by presidential candidates who have not even declared their candidacy.

This explains why we so often have presidents who strive to alter the Constitution to remain in power. The failure to establish even a minimal mechanism for presidential candidacies has been devastating to Lebanese democracy.

Because candidates do not fight for the position openly, because they are inclined to play shadow games to get there, because they have to maneuver through a political minefield which often involves discrediting others while avoiding being discredited themselves, their behavior is shaped by an approach that is undemocratic. If a president accedes to power by stealth, why not remain in power by stealth?

Yet if candidates declared their intentions properly, campaigned properly, sought alliances properly, convinced parliamentarians and citizens properly, they would be much less likely to abandon such respect for the democratic process by later scheming to remain in power.

Why is there is no mechanism and deadline for the candidacy? There could be a textual explanation for this. Thanks to a strong tradition of Lebanese scholars of the presidency, of whom Leila Barakat is the latest, original copies of the various drafts of the Constitution have been uncovered in the last decade. The first constitutional project was the so-called "Statut Organique" for Syria and Lebanon (which were then under the French Mandate). Its Article 43 affirms that the eventual head of state of Greater Lebanon be elected by the Representative Council (the predecessor of the current Parliament), "from a list of three candidates drawn up by the council by an absolute majority, with the approval of the High Commissioner." The project is dated December 22, 1924.

From the time of that document until the drafting of the foundational text of the present Constitution, written in the hand of Michel Chiha in early 1926, no less than four successive texts reproduced this form of election. However, it suddenly disappeared in 1926 from both Chiha's text and the project of French High Commissioner Bertrand de Jouvenel, under whom the present Constitution was adopted. We probably will never know why that form of election was dropped. Yet the fact that it was replaced by no clear guidelines for presidential candidates and candidacies has led to a long period of mostly mediocre presidents, democratically wanting.

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