

Gen. Suleiman Ready to Head Transitional Government If No New President is Elected

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Army Commander General Michel Suleiman is willing to head a transitional government if parliament failed to elect a new head of state before President Emile Lahoud's term in office runs out in November, provided all sides accept his nomination.

Former Defense Minister Albert Mansour, who proposed the idea of heading a transitional government personally to Suleiman, told The Daily Star that the army chief agreed to lead such a cabinet in the event a new president is not agreed upon.

"Such a government would be in keeping with established practice, which is for a president to hand over power to a Maronite prime minister. It happened twice before," Mansour said.

He said being appointed prime minister of a transitional government would allow Suleiman to bypass constitutional requirements that prevent grade-one civil servants like Suleiman from being elected to the presidency while still in their post or within two years of their resignation.

A visit by Suleiman to Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir last week took on a great significance.

Suleiman on Monday stressed that "I will stay in my post as commander of the army until a new president is elected and a new government is formed."

"Is it possible to leave command of this ship while it is facing such high waves?" Suleiman asked.

He expressed hope that Lebanese leaders would return to applying the "spirit and text" of the Taif Accord.

Suleiman also hoped that the leaders would make "reciprocal concessions."

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<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&25F206B3DA2352D9C225733600494C99>

 Lebanese Army commander willing to head interim government if MPs fail to choose new president

By Hani M. Bathish

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BEIRUT: Army Commander General Michel Suleiman has indicated he would accept to head a transitional government in the event MPs are unable to choose the next president before the end of President Emile Lahoud's term in office in November, provided all sides accept his nomination. Former Defense Minister Albert Mansour, told The Daily Star Monday that he has put the idea of heading a transitional government personally to Suleiman, who agreed to head such a government in the event a new president is not agreed upon. "Such a government would be in keeping with established practice, which is for a president to hand over power to a Maronite prime minister, it happened twice before," Mansour said.

Mansour said being appointed prime minister of a transitional government would allow Suleiman to bypass constitutional requirements that prevent grade-one civil servants like Suleiman from being elected to the presidency while still in their post or within two years of their resignation.

In light of this, Suleiman's visit last week to Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir takes on greater significance.

Speaking to a group of officers to mark the 62nd anniversary of the Lebanese Army, Suleiman said Monday he would remain at the head of the armed forces until a new president is elected and a new government is formed and he is satisfied with the security situation in the country.

"Is it reasonable for me to abandon this ship while it is being lashed by high waves from all sides?" Suleiman asked, adding: "At any rate I am a public employee and I am subject to the Constitution and the law of national defense that determines how an army commander is appointed and how his services are concluded."

Suleiman hoped political leaders in the country would go back to applying the "spirit and text" of the Taif Accord and for each and every one to make "reciprocal concessions" so the whole country may traverse this difficult period successfully. He said he is unafraid for the future of Lebanon whose people have united behind its armed forces in a manner "unprecedented in Lebanon's modern history."

US Ambassador Jeffery Feltman, who met Telecommunication Minister Marwan Hamade Monday, said his country is looking forward to helping create a regional and international atmosphere conducive to holding presidential polls on time and in accordance with the Lebanese Constitution without interference over the naming of candidates.

"The Lebanese Parliament will decide on the next president in accordance with the Constitution, we will not interfere in discussions over candidates," Feltman said. "We have no electors inside the Lebanese Parliament and we have confidence in MPs that they will vote for a president in keeping with Lebanon's tradition of independence, sovereignty and democracy."

Amal MP Ayoub Humayed, speaking at a memorial service in the South, re-emphasized the need to hold the presidential election in accordance with the Constitution, stressing the vital role of Speaker Nabih Berri and his insistence on holding the presidential election in keeping with constitutional rules for electoral sessions of parliament.

Humayed criticized those who relied on holding "unconstitutional sessions" of Parliament and wanted to elect a president by the votes of "half plus one" of the total number of MPs. He said declarations from several quarters in the country have come out in support of ensuring a quorum of two-thirds for the session and for agreement to be reached among all sides over the next president.

Lahoud in a statement issued Monday said handing power to the present Cabinet is impossible: "I assure you this will never happen. This is why I am calling for the formation of a cabinet of national unity, because in case the presidential election is not held, this cabinet could run the country, simply because it represents all segments of our society."

While the country is preparing for the presidential election, Democratic Gathering leader MP Walid Jumblatt renewed his verbal assault against Lahoud Monday, lashing out and dubbing the president "the occupier of the Baabda Palace," an embracement to his allies and a reminder of the state of "political bankruptcy" the opposition has reached.

Jumblatt, who made his comments to the Progressive Socialist Party newspaper Al-Anbaa Monday, said Lahoud is reopening old wounds and reviving memories of the Civil War, "forgetting that there was a reconciliation in the mountains with Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir."

The president's Press Office responded Monday evening to Jumblatt's comments, pointing to "the state of moral and political bankruptcy" that Jumblatt alone has reached. The press office said the "big words" Jumblatt used no longer suit his "minor political status" that is in retreat as a result of "betting on the wrong side."

After March 14 MP Butros Harb's declaration Sunday that he would run for president, MP Robert Ghanem indicated he too may be a contender for the presidency in comments to Voice of Lebanon radio Monday.

Asked if the plethora of nominations within the majority's Christian ranks has an impact on consensus within the March 14 alliance, Ghanem said: "Such nominations are a distinctive feature within the majority, there are divergent opinions but not on the core issues."

Ghanem said there is no common mechanism for announcing presidential nominees within March 14, adding that members of the majority bloc are not subject to central decision-making as within a political party. He said there is no reason why there shouldn't be a large number of presidential candidates from March 14. - Additional reporting by Maher Zeineddine

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Video from LBC TV Beirut - 8/13/2007

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