

Turning 'consensus' into a mortal threat

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Slowly but surely, the idea of a consensus president to succeed Emile Lahoud is gaining ground. Slowly but surely the speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, in the name of his "strategic alliance" with Syria, is helping Damascus revive its supremacy over Lebanese affairs. And slowly but surely, as Antoine Ghanem's assassination yesterday showed, preparations for that moment are coming with a grizzly price tag.

The hard-liners in the March 14 coalition, most prominently Walid Jumblatt, but also the Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, are unhappy with the idea of a consensus president. This is putting considerable stress on the coalition, since Saad Hariri appears to be more amenable to Berri's project. Divided, March 14 will be much less able to defend against a presidential plan favored by Syria, therefore by the opposition. A consensus presidency appears to be precisely that, and, worse, has the merit of being appealing domestically, regionally, and internationally. After all, it is difficult to fault the idea of "compromise."

But what does compromise, or rather consensus, mean in the case of the Lebanese presidency? Jumblatt is not wrong in warning that a consensus candidate is bound to be a weak president. Why? Because the opposition will not sign off on someone who consolidates the gains of 2005 and enforces the agenda of March 14; but it also cannot impose a candidate of its own; therefore it will give a green light only to someone unable to harm its interests. If March 14 is so keen to avoid a vacuum imposed by Syria and enters into the logic of compromise, then the coalition, too, will be compelled to approve someone who does not threaten its interests. What will emerge is a president without teeth; water rather than wine.

As Berri hinted when he was interviewed by Marcel Ghanem on the "Kalam al-Nass" program last week, the next battle will be over the government. After a nonentity is elected, the opposition will have much leeway to work on strengthening its hand elsewhere. It will demand veto power in a new government (which is why Hizbullah will not abandon its alliance with Michel Aoun), and is likely to succeed in this because the spirit of conciliation will sweep everything before it. Once March 14 agrees to compromise over the election of a president, it will have no choice but to do the same for the Cabinet. And if it is true that Saad Hariri will be named prime minister, then expect the next government to be political rather than technocratic. That means it will be polarized and utterly unable to pursue a systematic agenda.

This will have alarming consequences. If the opposition is given veto power over government decisions and controls Parliament through Berri, then the majority will have lost the vital advantage it enjoyed through its hold over the Cabinet. March 14 would have sacrificed executive authority in order to gain a weak president. That's a trade the Syrians and their allies can happily live with. All in the name of arriving at a consensus.

Jumblatt has already indicated that he would not vote in favor of a consensus candidate. But Jumblatt's margin of maneuver is largely determined by two things: where the United States stands and where Saudi Arabia stands. The

Saudi-Syrian rift has allowed the Druze leader to raise the ante in recent weeks. According to unconfirmed reports, the Saudis recently asked Syria to endorse Nassib Lahoud as president. The Syrian refusal allegedly led to the last-minute Saudi cancellation of a visit to the

kingdom by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem.

However, will the Saudis stand tough? Ultimately, they may conclude that a consensus candidate is better than a political vacuum, which would only escalate Sunni-Shiite tensions. The kingdom's ambassador in Beirut, Abdul Aziz Khoja, has been especially sympathetic to Berri's endeavors. The Saudis, sensing the wind turning, may conceivably favor compromise.

What of the US? The Bush administration is still taking a tough line on the presidency: The new tenant of Baabda should not be someone who turns the clock back to where it was before 2005, when Syria ruled in Beirut. For the Americans, a Syrian return would also bolster Iran and Hizbullah. What it really would do, however, and one doesn't need the Americans to deduce this, is undermine United Nations Security Council resolutions on Lebanon, which have created a de facto international trusteeship over the country. What future would there be for Resolution 1701 in a country where the majority is paralyzed and Syria regains the upper hand? Or for Resolution 1559, which aims to prevent this?

Indeed, what would happen to the Hariri tribunal? The notion that the tribunal is a fait accompli must be seriously qualified. If March 14 falls into the opposition's headlock, the work of the tribunal can be impeded. Everything from its financing to the behavior of Lebanese judges would be affected. Worse, what is to prevent the leaking of judicial

information to the Syrians on the prosecution's case? If it is true that Hariri seeks to head a new Cabinet, achieving this will severely hamper his ability to push the tribunal forward, because his job as prime minister will demand accepting myriad compromises merely to hold his unwieldy team together.

It's too early to assume that this scenario will play itself out. Hariri has no interest in alienating Jumblatt and Geagea on behalf of Nabih Berri. Nor are the forces working against such a project negligible. Someone like Michel Aoun, for example, sees few advantages in agreeing to a consensus candidate, since this would terminate his presidential bid. Indeed, convincing Aoun may prove a major obstacle for Hizbullah and Berri. Jumblatt and Geagea find themselves on the same wavelength as Aoun in resisting a presidential compromise, albeit for diametrically opposing reasons. As odd as it might seem, this might create an alliance of circumstance down the road if the consensus plan gains momentum.

The wild cards in this presidential ballet are the Europeans. Their fear of a void in Beirut is understandable, given the UNIFIL commitments. The Europeans seem to be heading toward backing a consensus candidate, regardless of whether Syria respects Lebanese sovereignty. Both the Saudis and the Americans, whatever their better instincts, might find themselves forced to follow the European lead if the alternative (one encouraged by the Syrian regime) is a dangerous split in Lebanon.

If a weak president is elected and the opposition gains veto power in the Cabinet, the Lebanese should start worrying. It would only be a matter of time before Lebanon finds itself where it was before Rafik Hariri's assassination. An axe would have been taken to the Cedar Revolution, much as it was yesterday to Antoine Ghanem.

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