

Assessing six years of Hariri's leadership

by Chibli Mallat

How will history books assess Hariri's prime ministership since he took over on 31 October 1992 ? I suggested last week that Rafik Hariri's larger-than-life stature warranted an assessment of its own because he pulled the rug from under the presidency in two important ways. On the international front, many more people know of Hariri than of Elias Hrawi: this, despite the fact that he is constitutionally second to the president, in addition to his open disregard to the whole apparatus of the foreign ministry, which should normally be in charge of the country's international projections. On the domestic side, his control of key ministries through personal appointees, and his own business background at a time of the major reconstruction drive in Lebanon, have also ensured that the country will go up or down in direct proportion to his personal fortunes.

This is a heavy legacy, and the balance sheet of the Hariri years is difficult to appreciate, because the very successes of the prime minister include an inbuilt downside.

The fact that our prime minister is quite an international celebrity is an achievement on its own merits. Witness the number of times president Jacques Chirac has visited Lebanon, and his immediate willingness to meet with a prime minister whose protocol rank would not otherwise warrant such a red-carpet treatment. This is true, with nuances, of the US president's readiness to meet with the prime minister, as well as his regular meetings with the pope and other such dignitaries. This is a fact, and it is positive.

However, it is also a fact that there is, outside a business relationship, little to credit the prime minister with for such openness on behalf of world leaders. One senses that president Jacques Chirac's friendship and admiration may have resulted from Rafik Hariri's material support over several years. There is nothing wrong in supporting a political party with funds, so long as these contributions are public. On an issue of importance to the future of the region, one hopes that, in the impending questioning of AIPAC's (American Israeli Public Affairs Committee) finance, the US supreme court will rise to its role of the historic bearer of democratic values by making it a constitutional duty for Israel's main US lobby to submit to financial transparency. Similarly, in an age where transparency is of the essence in the quality of public office holders, Hariri and Chirac owe it to their respective peoples and constituencies to know how much of Hariri's personal gratifications has gone into the RPR's budget over the past decade, in direct or indirect support. Financial support to political causes and parties is an inevitable prolongation of political freedoms, but money must talk in public. This is basic "good governance".

Still, even publicity is not always sufficient when it comes to money. The buck,

whether internationally or domestically, does not seem to ever stop for Hariri or the recipients of his largesses. Witness the recent cheque to the Arab federation of journalists. While the principle of a private individual supporting their fund for liberties is admirable, one wonders which Arab newspaper won't hesitate to assess Lebanon's premier severely after the cheque, when the role of newspapers must be a critical one to those in power ? Surely there are other ways, including financial, to support the battered press in our region.

This goes to the heart of the assessment of our premier's performance. We had in 1983 one sole occasion, which then businessman Hariri will probably not remember, to tell him a common reservation towards what people perceived as his backing of a former ruler in Baabda who was selling the country's honour to Ariel Sharon's May 17 agreement. I fear the overall style has not changed: one solves problems which are not, in their essence, financial, by injecting as much money as needed to seemingly fix the problem. This does not reflect 21st century good governance.

Recent examples are legion, and I will mention three, which are serious for the quality of Lebanon's institutions.

In answer to protests against Hariri's sidestepping the natural repository of foreign affairs, a common response has been that the premier finances his trips, including his advisers', personally ... No country which believes in institutions can afford the logic of private money buying foreign affairs' constitutional prerogatives.

It is common knowledge that a high-ranking civil servant in today's Lebanon cannot earn a decent salary. If one wishes to be in such a position, on which the whole state is supposedly built, he should be independently wealthy, unless of course he is bent on corruption. I believe the prime minister is a generous man, and that his personal economic interests are second to his perception of the country's welfare. This is to his immense credit, and the remarkable stability of the currency could not have been possible otherwise. Also noteworthy is the simplicity in the prime minister's language, away from the traditional *languede-bois*, and his sense of achievement. He appreciates good and competent advice, and some of his appointees may individually be highly commendable. The problem is that, owing to an "oil-rentier" style, he believes he can put advisers and ministers in place by supplementing the state's ridiculous salary by his own, immense, private means. This turns a public official at any level into someone indebted, at the end of the month, not to the state, but to the persona of the prime minister. This, surely, cannot be good governance.

A third example, which is also one of transparency, relates to the prime minister's income. He is immensely rich. This he admits himself, and ascribes it, modestly and gracefully, to the bounties of the Lord. Fair enough, but Hariri's income should be a public matter in a democratic state. How can the prime minister, also officially Lebanon's minister of finance, expect the ordinary citizen to account for his taxes openly and naturally, when the leaders' income (and wealth) is not, as is the case for all the leaders of the advanced world, made public once a year ? These three examples

bring up the question of style: Hariri is a political maverick, who has put the country high on the international map. This was at cost to good governance, which his “Gulf” style is profoundly at odds with. This is all the more serious since the country’s debt has increased dramatically since Rafik Hariri took over in 1992. The new president will have, with or without Rafik Hariri, to deal with a contrasted legacy.

Chibli Mallat is an attorney and a professor of law. This is the fourth in a series of articles on the presidential elections (Daily Star, 13, 20 and 27 July), which can also be read on /www.mallat.com/. Next column will be about process.