

Leader/Editorial

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Hall of Fame or...

The choice of an occupant for Baabda palace has always been subject to external influences, be they Arab, European or American. President Elias Hrawi's successor will be no exception. However, there are differences this time, especially in regard to the Syrian role.

For its own reasons and as part of its efforts to be fully accepted back into international society, Damascus is taking soundings and listening to suggestions about what sort of person other people - including the Lebanese themselves - want as a president. That doesn't, of course, necessarily mean that the Syrians will take any notice. However, if the Lebanese are to move towards regaining control over their own affairs, it is important that they enter this consultation.

Despite Christian assertions otherwise, the post-Taif presidency has not been reduced to the position of impotent figurehead, as explained by Chibli Mallat on this page. However, what did change is that for the system envisaged in Taif to function it is essential to have a close working relationship between president - as a policy-making chairman - and prime minister - as chief executive officer.

This necessary harmony didn't happen between Hrawi and Rafik Hariri, which contributed to periodic bouts of political paralysis, a leadership often pulling in different directions even though the two men agreed on fundamental policies and a cabinet resembling in part a pack of naughty schoolboys determined to defy all norms and authority on the increasingly fractious opportunities presented to them. It's no way to run a country.

Hariri is rumoured to want to replace the lot of them with a bunch of technocrats. Not even a cigar for that idea. Experts give advice. Countries are run by politicians.

The fault at the top lies as much with Hariri as it does with Hrawi. The prime minister has still not come to terms with the difference between the allowed autocratic and secretive rule of a private company and the governing of a nation.

His latest threat to hand over the reins to someone else is a smokescreen and a manoeuvre to win for himself not more power but less accountability. We will move forward when politicians recognise that their role in life is to give a lead to the country and not a lift to their egos.

A strong working partnership between president and premier would undoubtedly have a calming effect on the recalcitrant schoolboys. The narrow, blinkered behaviour of some members of the cabinet is scarcely surprising given the latitude and licence they have been allowed.

And the whole cabinet must realise that it has joint responsibility and that it is - quite rightly - both jointly and individually answerable to parliament, the elected voice of the people.

Nor is speaker Nabih Berri immune from bearing some responsibility for our perpetual chaos. As head of the people's watchdog, the speaker's job is to impose transparency and accountability on the government, not to act as some third force.

Much of the post-war chaos is both understandable and almost forgivable. Building from a base point below zero is a herculean task for anyone. But the extended honeymoon has gone. The tolerance for quietly watching politicians play games with other people's lives has evaporated. With a new president will come a new government and a new opportunity to give the people the leadership they deserve. If it's wasted again, it's not the Hall of Fame that will be featuring the present crowd but the Chamber of Horrors.