

Lebanese MPs get set to delay presidency vote for eighth time

Jumblatt backs compromise, reaches out to hizbullah

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BEIRUT: The parliamentary session scheduled for Tuesday to vote on a new Lebanese president is likely to be postponed as government and opposition leaders have yet to agree on a mechanism to have the constitution amended, sources from both camps said late Monday .

The poor chances of holding a session to elect the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), General Michel Suleiman, as president were acknowledged by a source close to Speaker Nabih Berri and by one of his allies, Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun. Sports and Youth Minister Ahmed Fatfat offered much the same prediction in a brief telephone interview.

The postponement would be the eighth since Parliament first attempted to elect a president in September.

Aoun warned Monday that a presidential election was "unlikely to take place before the end of the year."

"We are not scared of chaos should vacuum persist," Aoun told reporters following the weekly meeting of his Reform and Change parliamentary bloc. "It seems that there will be neither election nor constitutional amendment on Tuesday."

He accused the parliamentary majority of "blocking" Suleiman's election.

"I think that the majority does not want to elect General Suleiman and all this is nothing but a maneuver," Aoun said.

Aoun has tied the election to the conclusion of a comprehensive agreement on several political issues, including the shape of the next government.

Also Monday, Suleiman met with Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir for 30 minutes at Bkirki. The LAF commander declined to comment following the visit.

Article 49 of the Constitution bars public servants, including Suleiman, from acceding to the presidency while in service. But articles 76 and 77 offer two different means to have the constitution amended and both require the approval of the government - which is not recognized by the opposition.

MP Robert Ghanem, who heads Parliament's Administration and Justice Committee, and Future MP Bahij Tabarra - both of the ruling March 14 coalition - are expected to submit a petition to amend the Constitution at Tuesday session. The petition will be signed by five MPs from each side.

However, Article 77 specifies that the petition requires the approval of both two-thirds of MPs and the Cabinet. The opposition brands the government headed by Prime Minister Fouad

Siniora as illegitimate, after six ministers, including all five Shiites, submitted their resignations in November 2006.

Thus far, opposition MPs have refused to send a draft amendment to a government they do not recognize, and visitors to Siniora on Monday quoted him as saying that he would not accept any amendment that does not pass through the government. He also reportedly rejected calls for a Cabinet resignation before the presidential election takes place.

According to the National News Agency, the premier made a series of phone calls to the ambassadors of Russia, Egypt, and China on Monday to explain his government's stance concerning an amendment, as well as recent political developments.

Fatfat, who represents the Future Movement in the Siniora government, said that an election on Tuesday "is unlikely to take place."

"MPs from the opposition will not show up at the Parliament and the scenario witnessed in the past seven sessions is likely to be replicated," the minister told The Daily Star on Monday.

Concerning the amendment, Fatfat said the Constitution makes it clear that "any amendment should go through the government."

"Articles 76 and 77 of the Constitution propose two options to having the Constitution amended and both scenarios require that the government approves or supervises the amendment," he added.

Meanwhile, Berri's spokesperson, Arafat Hijazi, told The Daily Star that the speaker "strictly opposes" having the amendment go through the current government, adding that Berri was working on having the Parliament "amend the Constitution itself."

"Exceptional circumstances require exceptional measures, especially since the Parliament is a full-fledged independent entity," Hijazi said.

While dismissing the possibility of an election taking place on Tuesday, Hijazi said that MPs from Berri's Development and Liberation parliamentary bloc "will report to Parliament tomorrow."

"One never knows what might happen," Hijazi added.

In other developments, the head of the Democratic Gathering, MP Walid Jumblatt, said the "political concessions" made by the March 14 Forces "are not to be seen as a sign of defeat or surrender."

"It is not a drawback, as some are calling it. It is rather a step forward and a pre-emptive measure against attempts to hamper democracy and civil peace," he argued in comments carried by his Progressive Socialist Party's Al-Anbaa newspaper.

He told the weekly that any deal that does not take into consideration March 14's principles would be "treason."

He also said that Lebanon's independence could not have been achieved "without the sacrifices of the resistance," adding that Hizbullah "should be gradually merged with the Lebanese Army so as to stand in the face of Israel."

"This merger, if achieved, would spare Lebanon a number of problems, including that of excessive foreign interference," Jumblatt said.