

Lebanon's ruling coalition has yet to say how it would like to rule

By The Daily Star

Monday, March 17, 2008

Editorial

Since its inception, Lebanon's ruling March 14 Forces coalition has failed to define its objectives or realize its full potential, and the grouping's more thoughtful supporters have been left disillusioned as a result. Last week's convention in Beirut was advertised as the beginning of a process by which participants would stitch together a more coherent platform from the disparate views of the grouping's constituent parties. It is too early to pronounce that effort a failure, but the initial signs were not encouraging: Many of the ideas expressed were simplistic, and much of the rhetoric employed was divisive and insulting to a sizeable number of Lebanese.

Presumably, most of the 2,500 or so people who attended the convention did so in hopes of hearing something different from the limited (and limiting) perspectives that the coalition's most influential figures have made a habit of articulating. Instead, they were fed another helping of accusations against the opposition and denied a clear idea of what their own leaders propose to do about the myriad challenges facing Lebanon. Again, the organizers pledged to soon begin a process of workshops aimed at formulating intelligent policies on various issues, but they offered no evidence that they are any better prepared for such an undertaking than they were 16 months ago when the current power struggle with the opposition broke out.

The task is not an enviable one, because the parties that make up the March 14 alliance have little or no ideological affinity with one another. They agree on preventing any return of Syrian domination over Lebanon and on accusing the opposition of conspiring to bring one about, but little else unites them. Some of them chant nice-sounding words like democracy and sovereignty, but almost never do they explain how they plan to make use of either. As many other broad-based movements have found after gaining political power, it is easier to maintain a united front when the only goal is to stage mass protests or cooperate in an election. The actual wielding of that power by a coalition can be maladroit at the best of times and disastrous at the worst.

These and other failings can be reversed, but only if March 14 is serious about representing all Lebanese. No coalition can do this unless all of its components agree at least on that goal as a starting point. This may mean shedding some deadwood, which might, in turn, permit the acquisition of some new partners. One way or the other, the pro-government camp cannot afford to waste any more of its time - and ours - on empty talk.