

## Parliament Puts Off Talks on Reviving Constitutional Council

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BEIRUT: The Lebanese Parliament on Wednesday postponed talks on a draft law that calls for an extension of the deadline to appoint members to the country's Constitutional Council, whose activity has been paralyzed since 2005. Speaker Nabih Berri asked the Administration and Justice Committee to examine the draft with Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar next week. The proposal may be presented and discussed at another legislative session later in October.

Parliament convened in an ordinary session on Wednesday, in the absence of heavyweight MPs Walid Jumblatt, Michel Aoun and Saad Hariri.

According to As-Safir newspaper, MP Robert Ghanem, head of the Administration and Justice Committee, submitted a proposal to extend the deadline for submitting candidacies for membership on the Constitutional Council.

The daily said discussion of the Ghanem proposal had been expected to take up an essential part of the parliamentary debate on Wednesday, especially after Najjar submitted a draft law aiming to introduce reforms to the makeup and by-laws of the council.

However, talks were postponed till next week to give the committee enough time to look into both proposals.

"Reviving the Constitutional Council is a pressing matter," Berri told As-Safir in comments published Wednesday.

The Taif Accord, which put an end to Lebanon's 1975-1990 Civil War called for the establishment of a Constitutional Council to "interpret the constitution, to observe the constitutionality of the laws, and to settle disputes and contests emanating from presidential and parliamentary elections." The current council's term ended in 2005, and since then efforts have failed to form a new council.

Speaking to Voice of Lebanon Radio on Wednesday, Ghanem said the proposal he submitted was aimed at speeding up the formation of the council. "Reviving the council is our main target and all other details can be discussed afterwards," he said, adding that he and Najjar shared similar views on the matter.

Ghanem said that as soon as Parliament approves the draft law he submitted, candidates would be expected to submit their documents within 15 days.

"Then Parliament would call for a session to elect five of the members of the council and the government would appoint the other five," he added.

Ghanem said he expected the formation of the Constitutional Council within two months.

Also during Wednesday's session, Parliament announced that all citizens who paid overdue car-inspection and municipality fees in 2008 would be exempted from 90 percent of their late fees.

Meanwhile, the Finance and Budget Committee, headed by MP Samir Azar, is expected to hold a session on Monday to discuss a number of issues, including granting the Cabinet the right to draft legislation pertaining to customs. The Public Works, Transport, Energy and Water Committee, headed by MP Mohammed Qabbani, is also expected to convene on Monday.

Separately, Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea asked former Minister Suleiman Franjeh on Wednesday to "speed up the holding of a meeting ... to ease tensions in the North." Speaking after a meeting with MP Jawad Boulos, Geagea said: "Any delay in holding this meeting might worsen the situation and result in dramatic developments."

The prospective meeting between Geagea and Franjeh falls within an initiative launched by the Maronite League to broker inter-Christian reconciliation, especially after a clash in the Northern town of Bsarma on September 17, which led to the death of two people.

The LF leader also accused some politicians and their "media outlets" of disregarding Taif Accord by what he called their "rejection of reconciliation and civil peace."

"What country will we build if some politicians and their media outlets continue to live in a state of war?" he asked.

Geagea said that he was expecting a meeting between him and Franjeh to be held early this week and that he was informed by Maronite League head Joseph Tarabay that the latter was still discussing the date with the Marada Movement.

Also on Wednesday, the Central News Agency (CNA) reported that a joint Future Movement-Hizbullah security committee meeting would be held at the Helou Internal Security Forces Barracks in the Beirut neighborhood of Mar Elias in the coming days.

The CNA quoted Future Movement sources as saying that the meeting would discuss the second phase of the campaign to remove political banners and posters from the streets of Beirut, including the airport highway.

The sources said that the 99 percent of political posters and banners in the capital had already been taken down.

The sources added the Future Movement had "fully abided by the agreement reached between the two parties in the first phase of the campaign." - *The Daily Star*