

Suleiman becomes front-runner in presidential race

Largest bloc willing to elect general

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BEIRUT: Lebanese **Armed Forces** Commander General Michel Suleiman came back into the spotlight as a serious contender for the presidency on Wednesday, after Future Movement MP Ammar Houry announced his bloc's acceptance of amending the Constitution to allow for his election. The announcement pointed to a change of heart on the part of Future Movement leader MP Saad Hariri, as Suleiman had long been a favorite candidate of the opposition.

Houry, speaking to Al-Arabiyya satellite news channel Wednesday, said his bloc was taking this "positive step" after Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir announced he would accept a candidate from outside his list as long as there is broad national consensus on such a candidate.

"We declare our acceptance of amending the Constitution in order to achieve consensus over the nomination of [the army commander], a symbol of unity of our armed forces that shed its martyrs' blood in defense of the nation against those who threaten civil peace," Houry said.

The ruling coalition has long opposed amending the Constitution to allow the election of a grade-one **civil servant** to the presidency, a move which would be required to allow Suleiman's election to the presidency.

A source close to Speaker Nabih Berri said only that "there is nothing official on making Suleiman president." Berri met with Suleiman at Ain al-Tineh Wednesday, shortly after Houry's comments. Suleiman also received March 14 MP Nayla Mouawad at his office in Yarze Wednesday and later visited Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Beirut Elias Aoude in Achrafieh and **Grand Mufti** Mohammad Rashid Qabbani in Beirut.

Resigned Energy Minister, Hizbullah's Mohammad Fneish, told The Daily Star that any consensus candidate has to be approved by the party which represents a majority of Lebanese Christians, which he said is Change and Reform Bloc leader MP Michel Aoun, with whom Hizbullah has signed a memorandum of understanding.

"Aoun is the starting point to any consensus. The question here is whether this move is a maneuver on the part of the ruling faction to create a rift between us and [Aoun] or is it a serious offer by the ruling faction and a clear position?" Fneish asked. He said if Suleiman is considered a serious candidate by the ruling coalition, then his election should be discussed with Aoun first and the other opposition parties. He added that the party does not object to Suleiman in principle.

Aoun, asked by reporters Wednesday to comment on Suleiman's candidacy, said only "let [the majority] shed their contradictions and let them amend the Constitution and first consult legal experts, then we will comment." Aoun said that the opposition will take practical peaceful steps to express their opposition to the government.

Change and Reform bloc MP Ibrahim Kanaan called on the majority to prepare a draft proposal for a **constitutional amendment** and express a serious desire to support Suleiman for the bloc to express its position.

"Is this just a maneuver or a serious offer? Our experience with [the majority] in the past has not been very encouraging, many times they made overtures and went back on them," Kanaan told The Daily Star.

Loyalty to the Resistance bloc leader MP Mohammad Raad said a constitutional amendment is possible only if Premier Fouad Siniora resigns from the "unconstitutional government."

"Parliament cannot meet with an unconstitutional government," Raad said, adding that this is just his personal opinion not the opposition's stance.

Raad said Suleiman "knows our position well." "When [Suleiman's] candidacy is put forward in a serious and objective manner we will discuss it," Raad said in an interview with Naharnet on Wednesday.

Raad said his bloc will not "hinder any possibility for consensus" if a consensus requires a constitutional amendment, provided all the opposition parties are in agreement.

"Is a constitutional amendment possible from a constitutional standpoint? And who amends the Constitution now, the unconstitutional government under whom Parliament refuses to convene?" he asked, adding that at the very least, the matter requires further "discussion and contemplation."

Raad said any amendment is only possible through collusion between the majority and opposition. "This matter needs to be discussed in detail among the opposition before we take the right decision," Raad said.

Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea said Wednesday that amending the Constitution remains "one of the options" being considered to settle the presidential crisis. He said all options are being considered to salvage the top post and "huge efforts are being exerted to fill in the vacuum at the presidential office as soon as possible."

Grand Mufti Mohammad Rashid Qabbani told the army head that the safety and stability of Lebanon is entrusted to the army, which is performing its mission impeccably and that the army is fully aware of the dangers threatening Lebanon.

He called on the army to "rally behind the legitimate and constitutional government of [Siniora] which proved its ability to shoulder its responsibilities with patience, audacity and courage."

Hariri received in Koreitem Wednesday French Charges D'Affaires Andrea Parant and discussed developments concerning the presidential election. He later met US Ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman and discussed political local and regional developments.

Democratic Gathering leader MP Walid Jumblatt called on both Berri and Hariri to resume dialogue to elect a consensus president from among the names on Sfier's list, adding that it was not right to wait to see the results of the Annapolis peace conference to act.

He stressed the need for a president even if only to manage the crisis, as such an option is preferable to a void, adding it is in no one's interest to risk clashes. He said managing the crisis will ensure security and limit the damage that Lebanon could suffer. - **with additional reporting by Maher Zeineddine**