

review # the week

the big idea



Opposition protesters take to the streets of Beirut in December 2006 near the start of an 18-month-long protest the last majority government. Ramzi Haidar / AFP

All for none

Four months after a historic election, Lebanon is still without a government. Elias Muhanna urges an end to the cult of consensus

What's wrong with Lebanon? Nearly four months after a landmark election handed the western-backed March 14 coalition a victory over the opposition alliance of Hizbollah, Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement, all efforts to form a government have failed. Rather than taking advantage of his coalition's victory by putting together a cabinet composed exclusively of his own allies, prime minister-designate Saad Hariri has spent weeks coaxing and cajoling the opposition to join him in a national unity government, in which they would wield significant power.

His reasons for doing so are manifold. On the one hand, his coalition no longer commands a clear majority in parliament, due to the recent defection of the mercurial Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. At the same time, there are the wishes of an important regional ally to consider: Saudi Arabia, which is believed to be courting Syrian co-operation in Iraq in exchange for prodding its Lebanese dependants, the March 14 coalition, into a power-sharing arrangement with Hizbollah. Most importantly, Hariri seems determined to avoid a return to the polarisation of the previous parliamentary term, during which the opposition, demanding more power, quit the government and went on to paralyse the country with massive demonstrations, strikes and an 18-month downtown sit-in.

The opposition's objective then, as it is now, was to replace the majority cabinet with a national unity government in which it would have veto power over important legislation. Appealing to the timeworn argument that Lebanon cannot be ruled by simple majorities because of its diverse sectarian make-up, leaders like Hassan Nasrallah and Michel Aoun have insisted on transforming the principle of consensual decision-making from an abstract desideratum into a practical necessity.

While March 14 figures have publicly insisted on upholding their prerogative to form a majority cabinet, they too have quietly accepted the idea of sharing power by virtue of a face-saving compromise, the so-called "15-10-5 formula". Under this arrangement, March 14 would control half the seats of a 30-member cabinet; the opposition would control 10 seats (one short of the votes required to veto major legislation); and the President, Michel Suleiman, would appoint the last five ministers, with the understanding that one of them would be free to vote with the opposition on major, "life-and-death" issues (such as the matter of Hezbollah's weapons).

The fact that even the majority parties have been more interested in trying to get the best deal they can under this framework, rather than questioning its legitimacy in the first place, betrays their belief – to paraphrase Churchill – that while consensual democracy may be the worst form of government, it is better than all the others.

Indeed, with the exception of a few isolated voices, no one on either side has ventured to engage in a real debate about the viability of consensus politics as a foundation for effective, sustainable democracy. While it is true that the Constitution requires that all sectarian communities be "represented in a just and equitable fashion in the formation of the cabinet", what precisely does this entail? Should political blocs receive cabinet posts in proportion to their strength in parliament, as one opposition leader has argued? Or should the prime minister-designate be constrained only by the demands of the parties that make up the winning coalition, as is the case in most parliamentary democracies?

As recently as this week, the Hizbollah MP Nawwaf Moussawi argued that if the cabinet did not include each party that represents a majority of voters in its own sect, it would be unconstitutional. In other words, a "majority government" is not one that can earn the confidence of Parliament, but rather one that has the support of the leading parties among each and every sect.

In Lebanon, where political power is distributed between different religious groups, the ideal of consensual government is seen by many as an essential ingredient to maintaining a modicum of inter-communal harmony. Indeed, as the oft-repeated formula goes, conflicts should have "no victor, no vanquished" – so as to prevent the domination of one sect over the others.

However, to conflate communal

The claim that power-sharing arrangements prevent sectarian strife and violence by giving all political players a place at the table is simplistic and naive

coexistence with consensual politics (and, by extension, with unity governments) entails three dubious assumptions: first, that sectarian communities are discrete entities whose interests are fully represented by political parties; second, that the practice of politics is nothing more than a zero-sum competition between these sectarian communities over the resources of the state; and third, that the best way to ensure that one sect is not allotted more than its fair share of spoils is to give every sect the ability to throw a spanner into the works. It is to assume, in other words, that political affiliations and sectarian identities are one and the same thing, which has the inevitable effect of further legitimising sectarianism as a dominant feature of Lebanese political life.

To put it another way, interpreting coexistence to mean "consensual decision-making in government" mandates that national politics should be nothing more than a meeting of tribal elders, who gather periodically to brainstorm about how to divide the harvest and keep the peace.

Sharing power with your political rivals may be a nice idea in theory, but it is almost impossible to achieve in practice without regular breakdowns and severe inefficiencies. The claim that such a scheme prevents sectarian strife and violence by giving all political players a place at the table is simplistic and naive. As we have witnessed over the past four years in Lebanon, power-sharing governments, based as they are on an unrealistic ideal of consensual decision-making, are highly vulnerable to paralysis. This is the case because they provide no pathways for forward progress under the likely scenario that disagreements between political players arise. The only option is to agree; otherwise, the system collapses.

The dynamics of such an arrangement virtually demand that the main business of government is the prevention of state failure. Rather than attending to real problems facing the country – like the crippling national debt and the sagging infrastructure – the cabinet inevitably becomes the arena for petty infighting masquerading as consensual co-existence. And while it is commonplace for Lebanese politicians to argue that unity governments help to immunise Lebanon against foreign interference in its domestic affairs, in fact, it is the very fluidity of the Lebanese system that makes it so susceptible to manipulation.

In most developed democracies, the parliamentary opposition acts as both watchdog and gadfly, attempt-

ing to expose and highlight the failures of the ruling party in order that it might prevail in the next election. To do so, opposition parties woo swing voters, attempt to pick off smaller members of the ruling coalition, hamper the flow of legislation in parliamentary committees, and systematically prosecute the case against the ruling party in the public sphere. The formation of a national unity government, by definition, means that there is no such thing as an opposition – and therefore no force within the legislature to balance the power of the ruling coalition and its cabinet.

Furthermore, while there is an incentive for coalition allies in majority cabinets to work together efficiently to pass legislation that will help them get re-elected, under a unity government the impetus is for the opposite: Political parties try to stymie the achievements of their rivals' ministries, so as to prevent them from distinguishing themselves to the electorate through improved services. Ministries, in other words, become warring fiefdoms, the protectorates of individual parties rather than cogs in a smoothly-running governmental machine.

Over the past four years, with no Syrian hegemon to impose some stability on a deeply dysfunctional system, Lebanon has careened from one crisis to another. Almost all of these crises have been rooted in a fundamental political problem: how to distribute power fairly in a consociational system. Unfortunately, the homespun efforts by Lebanese leaders to craft improvised solutions – by adducing contradictory constitutional proof-texts and historical precedents – have failed, and so Lebanon has found itself turning, once again, to foreign powers to broker short-term stability.

At some point, however, a grand bargain will need to be struck by the Lebanese themselves. Issues as central to the normal functioning of government as the procedure for forming a cabinet after an election, or the protection of minority rights and the expression of majority agendas cannot simply be left up to chance. If the rules continue to be re-negotiated every four years, taking into account changing regional dynamics and shifting balances of power, then Lebanon will sink ever deeper into the pit of its economic and social problems, discovering all too late that life is what happens to you while you're busy making governments.

Elias Muhanna, a regular contributor to The Review, writes the Lebanese political affairs blog Qifa Nabki.

the tangled web

Mobile phone towers threaten honey bees

The electromagnetic waves emitted by mobile phone towers and cellphones can pose a threat to honey bees, a study published in India has concluded.

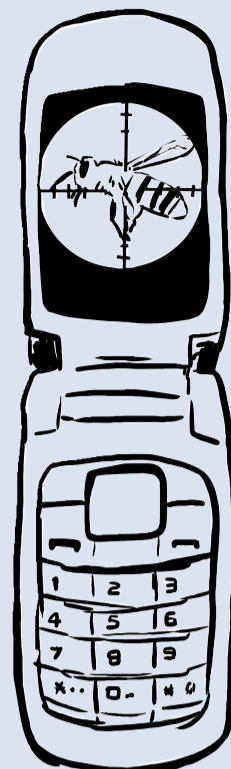
An experiment conducted in the southern state of Kerala found that a sudden fall in the bee population was caused by towers installed across the state by cellphone companies to increase their network.

The electromagnetic waves emitted by the towers crippled the "navigational skills" of the worker bees that go out to collect nectar from flowers to sustain bee colonies, said Dr Sainuddin Pattazhy, who conducted the study, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

He found that when a cell phone was kept near a beehive, the worker bees were unable to return, leaving the hives with only the queens and eggs and resulting in the collapse of the colony within ten days.

Over 100,000 people in Kerala are engaged in apiculture and the dwindling worker bee population poses a threat to their livelihood. The bees also play a vital role in pollinating flowers to sustain vegetation.

If towers and mobile phones further increase, honey bees might be wiped out in 10 years, Pattazhy said.



Agence France-Presse
afp.com

Crash scene overwhelmed by bees in Turkey

A van carrying beehives crashed into a truck on Monday, and huge swarms of bees broke free and stung the injured and rescue workers at the scene.

In the end, about 20 people were taken to hospitals, six of them injured in the crash and the rest rescue workers who were stung by the bees, said the state-run Anatolia news agency.

One of the crash victims later died, but it was not immediately known if he had been killed by the impact of the accident or the insect attacks, said local governor Ahmet Altiparmak.

The rescue workers – including local beekeepers summoned to the scene – used hoses, blankets and rags to try to ward off the bees. But it took about an hour for them to remove the crash victims from the chaotic scene, Anatolia said.

The van hit the stationary truck on a road near the Mediterranean resort of Marmaris in southwestern Turkey, injuring four people in the van and two in the truck, Anatolia said. The impact burst open the bee hives in the van.

The bees swarmed over the injured and police, medics and firefighters who responded to the accident, forcing authorities to seek the help of about 50 beekeepers in the area.

As the crash victims waited for help, bees swarmed over them, Anatolia said.

The news agency's video footage showed men in beekeeping clothing placing an injured man – also in protective gear – onto a stretcher in a swarm of bees and broken beehives, and carrying him down a hillside.

Another person was seen hosing down the area to keep the bees away.

Anatolia showed rescuers in orange-coloured overalls inside a vehicle, trying to kill the bees by squashing them against windows, using a blanket and rags.

Associated Press
ap.org



Man lives with bees for two years

The buzzing of bees sends shivers to many, but not to a Bulawayo man from Emakhandeni who lived with the dangerous insects for more than two years.

The bees, supposedly more than 100,000, had camped in the kitchen cupboard and roof of House Number 652. But that did not bother the owner of the house, who only identified himself as Ngwenya.

The bees were only driven away on Saturday by the Fire Brigade and a team from the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, bringing relief to Ngwenya's neighbours.

Although Ngwenya has been coexisting with the bees, the same cannot be said of his neighbours.

A neighbour identified as Themba Ncube said earlier this month the bees caused terror in the neighbourhood.

"That day they were so vicious, you could hear their buzz from a distance. School kids and those going to work were forced to remain indoors as they attacked anyone on their path," said Ncube, showing an area above the eye where he was bitten.

Some people were forced to seek medical attention after the attack, among them an 11-year-old girl who was admitted to Mpilo Central Hospital.

A resident only identified as Ncube said he once had a confrontation with the man over the volume of his radio, his crime being that he was disturbing the bees' sleep.

"I was shocked when he came to my house and told me to lower my volume because the bees wanted to sleep," said Ncube.



Soneni Dube
Zim Gossip
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Illustrations by Sarah Lazarovic for The National