

“Monday Morning”: Friday, December 04, 2009

**MINISTER OF STATE FOR PARLIAMENTARY AFFAIRS MICHEL PHARAON: ‘PRIORITY TO FULLY APPLYING THE CABINET’S POLICY STATEMENT’**



*Micheline Abi Khalil Daou, Rania El-Hashem Aoun, Nadim El-Hashem and Bariaa Faqih during the interview*

In an interview with Monday Morning and its sister-publications Al-Hawadeth, Al-Bayrak and La Revue du Liban, **Beirut MP Michel Pharaon**, who has been appointed as Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs in the recently-formed cabinet of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, didn't try hard to hide his annoyance. His Christian and Greek Catholic “weight” hadn't truly been respected, since he has been appointed only as a minister of state, while he would have preferred to be given a ministerial portfolio. He added that since he had been a minister in cabinets presided by the late Premier Rafik Hariri his representation with a portfolio would have given “added value” to Premier Saad Hariri's cabinet. If he had accepted this “unfair” situation, it was only to facilitate the formation of a new cabinet, since the country could “no longer tolerate paralysis and blockage”. During the course of the interview, he noted that the cabinet was a “coalition cabinet”, not one of “national unity”, as it is currently described. Minister Pharaon called on all parties to tackle the controversial issues especially that of implantation of Palestinian refugees, the economy, security and the political situation.

**To which point do you feel that your interests and those whom you represent have been prejudiced, and that you do not hold the post you merit?**

Unfortunately, during the formation of the government of national coalition, the distribution of portfolios was transformed into a matter of sharing spoils, in that certain ministries have become the “fiefs” of particular parties. I made it very clear, following the announcement that the government would be formed, that I had received some but not all of what was due to me, just as the Christian representation of Beirut has not been truly respected during the distribution of

ministerial posts. I think my experience in cabinets led by the late Premier Rafik Hariri could have given an added value to this cabinet had I received a portfolio of substance.

That said, it has become essential in this new stage to relaunch institutions and that everyone should shoulder his responsibilities in order to facilitate the work of the government, which has to deal with many complex issues after a period of paralysis and blockage.

We accepted this situation because we have entered a new stage in which the collaboration of all sides is indispensable, which is why we, the majority, showed a certain flexibility to make it possible to form this government of necessity. At the same time, we made clear our belief that this formula must be considered exceptional since the Doha compromise is no longer more important than constitutional bases and democratic principles. We shouldn't give priority to Doha at the expense of the Taef agreement.

**But isn't the spirit of Doha still prevailing?**

The regional situation and the internal conflict on the Lebanese political scene -- which still continues because of external and regional factors - require solutions that consolidate the internal scene. We would have preferred that collaboration and openness among the Lebanese had led to a formula that protected Lebanon from external interference, but we see that the absolute contrary has happened. Nevertheless, there are important matters on which the Lebanese must reach agreement, including the state, the UN resolutions, the Constitution, and Paris III.

**All these matters have been raised in the cabinet's policy statement.**

**Why did you decline to take part in the committee drafting the statement?**

I didn't decline, but I proposed that Minister Jean Oghassabian should take part. I was a member of the committee that drafted the policy statement of the government that took office in 2005, and I consider that the titles of the present statement have been inspired by the statements of 2005 and 2008. The important thing today is implementation. We agreed on the texts, but there was then a reaction against these texts and the decisions of the conference of national dialogue. That's why I think the important thing is application, especially regarding difficult issues like Hezbollah's weapons and Palestinian arms.

**But don't you find that each side in the government has its own reservations?**

Our political choices as a majority are clear, even if they are confronted by many obstacles. In any case, the citizens expressed their choice at the polls and the majority has remained the majority. It is the right of these citizens to expect positive results, despite the difficulty and complexity of certain dossiers.

**PARIS III, A PROGRAM OF REFORM**

**You raised the matter of Paris III, which called for privatization, a matter on which certain people have reservations?**

In addition to privatization, the decisions of Paris III stipulate reforms that

touch on various economic and financial questions. The question of privatization does not date from yesterday, but arose from national unanimity. It doesn't imply a monopoly in the hands of certain capitalists, but can be achieved by allowing shares in privatized enterprises to be sold on the market. Practically speaking, the private sector is the only channel through which great advances can be made in the area of telecommunications. The same is true of economic activity and the movement of capital. Let's not forget that privatization is the rule in most countries, not the exception. It requires decrees and framework-legislation that will lead to a win-win situation in which everybody gains. Reform and privatization go hand in hand.

In regard to the privatization of the Lebanon Electricity Authority, it's possible to set up power plants that will be managed by the private sector at the lowest possible cost. To this end, funds, notably long-term loans at low rates of interest intended to finance the sector were allocated in the framework of Paris III. In privatization many details that ensure gains for everyone, and we need to give priority to the interests of the country and of the Lebanese people.

### **What are the priorities of the government?**

The important thing today is that there should be political stability, financial stability and security stability. These titles involve several ramifications and difficult questions to resolve. There are also the principal sovereignist matters to be discussed at the table of dialogue. Similarly, for example, the issue of Lebanese-Syrian relations. It is in the interest of the two countries a new phase in their relations to deal with numerous issues, including, among others, the demarcation of the frontiers, including on the level of the Shebaa Farms. In addition, it's necessary to settle the question of Palestinian arms, above all the firing of rockets by unknown parties from South Lebanon.

### **Who do you think is behind the firing of rockets?**

It's a very delicate question. But what is certain is that it is not the Lebanese state. The national interest presupposes application of UN Resolution 1701, and that's why it is necessary to settle quickly the question of Palestinian arms outside the camps and organize them inside the camps, with improvement of conditions for the refugees.

### **Don't you think the implantation of Palestinian refugees may become an accomplished fact that will imperil the Lebanese entity in the future?**

The question of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is, first of all, the responsibility of the international community to deal with, then the Arab League. In regard to Lebanon, it's essential that this matter should be open and boldly debated. Overbidding won't get us anywhere, and that's why it's necessary for us to be responsible and work for effective solutions since there is no magic wand. Any laxity in this framework will in future years expose us to another Nahr al-Bared.

### **Do you fear there will be a Sunnite-Shiite war, a thing alluded to in Lebanon and the region?**

There are many regional problems and the risks are great. Discord represents one of the facets of these dangers, behind which very specific objectives are

hidden. Thus, there is the Iranian nuclear dossier, the continuing Israeli threats, the Palestinian issue, which is in an impasse, and the new Yemeni issue. So we have a responsibility to the Lebanese people which consists in preventing the country from becoming a flashpoint or a scene of conflict. That's why we speak of positive neutrality, while at the same time respecting the decisions of the Arab League regarding support for the Palestinian cause. When we speak of a strategy of defense, we do not perceive it solely in terms of a strategy about weapons, but as a strategy for the protection of Lebanon. Isn't Resolution 1701 part of this strategy to protect Lebanon? Certainly the danger is great. But on the basis of a spirit of responsibility, we must have the courage and audacity to see the country's interest far removed from overbidding, since any new war will have very dangerous repercussions.

## **MEDIA RECONCILIATIONS**

**How do you see the reconciliations among Lebanese politicians now going on, and what advantages flow from them?**

One aspect of these reconciliations has a purely media character, but another part constitutes a terrain on which it is possible to lay foundations. The Taef Agreement has not been implemented because of the absence of reconciliations, including reconciliations among Christians. In addition, instead of witnessing reconciliations after March 14, it is clear that certain parties had an interest in reviving and reinforcing inter-Christian disputes. Since today we consider that we have a chance, because of the fact that everyone agrees on the need to facilitate the launch of the government's work, it becomes necessary to carry out speedy initiatives, at the top of which is inter-Lebanese dialogue on all levels. Dialogue is indispensable to turn the page of the Lebanese war and its repercussions.

**Walid Jumblatt is one of those involved in the current reconciliations. Why do you think he has changed his former stances? Do you think he will remain on the side of the majority?**

I can't reply on his behalf. Of course, he himself does not explain his demarches. But there is a matter in regard to him about which I have given some thought and about which I have questioned some of those close to him, namely his evocation of Michel Chiha, one of the fathers of independence and one of the pioneer thinkers who discussed the Zionist danger in their writings. What I mean is that today, yes, there is a majority and a minority, but at the same time there is an opening to prevent the differences between March 8 and March 14 from persisting. Walid Jumblatt is working to eliminate the big obstacles. We for our part, though we remain committed to the broad lines of March 14, are working to bring about an opening up to the others.

**House Speaker Nabih Berri is preparing to reactivate parliamentary activity by launching a debate on political deconfessionalization and decentralization. What are the chances that this debate will succeed?**

After the Taef Agreement was concluded, there was hope that the accord would be properly implemented, that the militias would be integrated into the state, and that political stability would enable us to undertake wide-scale political reforms. I now wonder whether the political atmosphere makes it possible to undertake great reforms, especially during a stage that has

witnessed iniquity and injustice regarding the rights of the Christians, notably during the years of the Syrian tutelage. I don't think that today we enjoy the ambience of stability that would enable us to carry out great reforms. Is it in our interest to open the big dossiers in the context of the present atmosphere, especially since we have so far been incapable of implementing the decisions of the table of dialogue, and this, despite the fact that they are part of the Taef Agreement? It is very legitimate for us to question the usefulness of this proposal, especially at a time when some of the Lebanese are holding weapons.

In addition, we have all said that we don't want to amend the Constitution except in regard to points where experience has shown that there are flaws, notably on the subject of the presidential prerogatives. That is why we cannot today undertake the amendment of the Constitution in the absence of balance and stability.

In regard to administrative decentralization, it's necessary to say that even the notion of it has evolved since 2000, in such a way that centralization remains on the level of administration, while services are applied on the level of regions. I think there are much more important steps that need to be taken before talking about political decentralization.

In addition, with the new formula of a government of national coalition, there is real disquiet and a big probability that it will henceforth become impossible to call the government to account. Any opposition to or reservations about any minister whatever will from now on be perceived as opposition to national unity and as something prejudicial to the rights of the community. Any question addressed to the cabinet could be transformed into a means of exerting pressure against certain ministers, and consequently it will be impossible to ask for an accounting. That's why Parliament should develop its procedures of supervision and surveillance in parallel to its role as legislator.

### **Do you think the cabinet will implode?**

Agreement on the policy statement has transformed the coalition cabinet into a government of national unity. However, there are matters that could provoke conflicts, including that of appointments to various senior state posts. Certain matters on the table of dialogue could also provoke sensitivities. In the light of the last five years, I have questions, and I don't share the optimism now prevailing. Of course I do hope that everyone cooperates in the work of the government. But it's only when I feel able to share this ambience that I may be able to consider that it is really a government of national unity.

### **The Maronite patriarch, Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir, recently raised the question of recruitment to the Beirut municipality. As an MP for Beirut, what is your view of this subject?**

The martyred [former] Prime Minister Rafik Hariri held to the principle of balance, and he applied it during municipal elections, since Beirut has a very particular symbolic and specific character. Any settlement of this matter must take account of this formula and this balance, as defined by the past, which is not difficult. In any case, we have undertaken several initiatives to promote a settlement guaranteeing the principle of balance.