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MP for Puchong Lau Yeng Peng

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Hands off Lebanon

IS the crisis in Lebanon an expression of new-found “people power” or a dangerous reversion to type? So far, the “tent city” of mostly peaceful demonstrators in Beirut pressing for the ouster of the government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora looks more like Manila in 1986 than the outbreak of civil war in 1975. There are other reasons not to expect the worst. The Lebanese are tired of fighting, economic ruin and of being bounced around by outside powers. They want their sovereignty back and a restoration of what was once the “Switzerland of the Middle East”. Collaterally damaged by its closeness to the vortex of the world's most volatile region, the country's myriad denominations have rearranged themselves, so that the current impasse is less about sectarianism than democratic display.

Except, that is, for the political assassinations, such as the shooting of Pierre Gemayel on Nov 21. On one side of the deadlock is Siniora, who has the support of Sunni Muslims (30 per cent of the population), half of the Christians (20 per cent) and most of the Druze (about eight per cent). Ranked against the so-called March 14 Movement, an alliance of anti-Syrian parties which won a majority in the parliamentary elections of May-June 2005, is the Hizbollah-led coalition backed by most Shias (who number as much as Sunnis) and the other half of the Christian minority. The anti-government factions want a more representative Cabinet and, more controversially, the right of veto. Both sides have traded lethal-sounding insults; one is accused of being a stooge of the West and Israel, the other of being under the pay of Syria and Iran.

With the country split so messily down the middle, the temptation for meddling foreigners to tip the balance is constant. Syria's departure after a quarter century of overlordship last year not only upset the apple cart of Lebanon's contending sects but left a vacuum large enough to usher Israel's disastrous invasion in the summer. A United Nations-sponsored inquiry into the murder of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, which its opponents claim is a plot to finger Damascus, remains a lightning rod of the country's rupture. The Siniora government, despite its constitutional, is perceived as too pro-Western for Hizbollah, whose star has risen since its stout and solitary resistance to Israeli aggression. A lasting solution may have to wait for a *modus vivendi* in the Middle East. But if Lebanon is to have a chance, foreigners will have to leave it alone.

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Tel: 03-2282-3322

Fax: 03-2282-1434

Email: nstedit@nst.com.my

Online: www.nst.com.my

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Making sure our MPs keep eyes wide shut

The proposed code of ethics for parliamentarians won't just spell out the do's and don'ts for MPs. ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD finds the implications far-reaching

WHEN Jasin Member of Parliament Datuk Mohd Said Yusof asked the Customs Department to “close one eye” to alleged improprieties in a case involving the import of sawn timber, it triggered a chain of events that could eventually make MPs more answerable to voters for their behaviour.

A select committee will now draw up a code of ethics and integrity for MPs. The 12-member team, headed by government Whip Datuk Seri Najib Razak, will include a series of public hearings for input.

And the code could have major consequences for public accountability:

“It won't just bind backbenchers and opposition MPs. It will apply to the executives as well — from deputy ministers to the prime minister,” explains Lau Yeng Peng, a member of the committee and the MP for Puchong.

Generally, the code will seek to identify immoral or unethical conduct.

“Interfering” in the affairs of a public authority, or asking an enforcement agency to ignore wrongdoing will be listed as an offence, say lawmakers.

But what is “interference”? What is immoral and unethical behaviour for an MP, whether a rookie Yang Berhormat or the prime minister?

Opinions are split.

“Some MPs, including myself, see no objection in what the Jasin MP did, if what he did was to help his constituent sort out problems with Customs,” says the committee's deputy chairman Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz.

However, Mohd Said has been reported to have an interest in the company on whose behalf he was acting.

Nazri, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of Parliamentary Affairs, cites other examples.

“I've been approached various times by constituents whose sons had been detained by the police for suspected involvement in drug-related offences.

“They want my help, so I contact the police chief and ask him to look into it.

“Is this interference? As long as we don't have a personal interest in the matter, then we



Jasin MP Datuk Mohd Said Yusof's demand to ‘close one eye’ triggered a chain of events that could make MPs more answerable to voters for their behaviour



Shad Saleem Faruqi says parliamentary privileges accorded to MPs are not confined to the actual physical location of the Dewan Rakyat, but to function

don't think it is.

“But then again, doesn't any MP who helps his constituent have a vested interest? His help is in return for support?” asks Nazri.

“The real question here is vested interests in serving voters,” says committee member Datuk Shahrir Samad, who quit as Backbenchers Club chairman after he failed to refer Mohd Said to the parliamentary Rights and Privileges Committee.

“It's something the committee will have to look into.”

An eerily similar dilemma is playing out in Umno. Widespread allegations of vote-buying at the party's last election two years ago led to a revision of the regulations, an exercise that is still on going.

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, a member of the select committee, says the attempt to set benchmarks for conduct would only be appreciated if it can prove impartiality.

“Whether or not there will be the political will to look above partisanship and ensure that the code maintains the interests of Parliament is yet to be

behaviour outside Parliament.

And because the code will specify minimum standards of conduct in the public domain, related agencies — namely the police and Anti-Corruption Agency — will need to probe any violation.

“We may even need a new law, a Parliamentarians Conduct Act (*Akta Kelakuan Ahli Parlimen*),” says Nazri.

This would mean that violators land in court.

“There's no reason to have a code of ethics, only to have offences internally investigated. We don't want MPs to feel they cannot be brought to court for their misbehaviour in public,” he adds.

Shad points out that parliamentary privileges accorded to MPs have never been confined to the actual physical location of the Dewan Rakyat, but to function.

“For example, a parliamentary committee which holds a public hearing outside Parliament is still protected by the parliamentary privilege of free speech, even though they are outside Parliament,” he explains.

How far can the code go?

The committee will be looking at similar ethics guidelines in countries such as Britain.

One particular item, the Register of Interests, has already attracted attention.

It requires MPs to declare all financial-related affiliations and sponsorship.

It isn't just a declaration of assets, Shad explains.

If an MP is sponsored by a consumer group, he will have to declare his affiliation when he speaks on a related issue.

Shad hopes the code will include such a requirement for MPs to declare their interests.

He even suggests that the code ultimately cover bigger areas such as campaign financing.

“In some countries, ethics committees provide not just guidelines on the conduct of the lawmakers, but deal with ethics in government as well,” he says.

Some may find all this a touch unrealistic, and there's probably good reason.

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Voters' tolerance towards errant reps thinning

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"There have been many efforts to increase public accountability and transparency in the past, but they've not been successful," admits Shad.

"In the 1980s, for example, there was a push by many activists to introduce a freedom of information law.

"What came instead was a tightening of the Official Secrets Act," he notes.

But there are two practical reasons why the government should follow through.

First is Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's commitment to increase integrity and accountability, of which the code will be an important part.

Second is the BN's need to maintain support from voters.

There are many tales of BN elected representatives who scored huge victories in the 1995 general

election and then ignored their constituents.

They were punished by the electorate in the 1999 general election, which saw the opposition making significant gains.

The BN's slide was reversed in the subsequent polls two years ago, but with a current 93 per cent majority in Parliament, the danger of overconfidence is all too real.

And as it stands, the average voter's tolerance towards errant elect-

ed representatives seems to be thinning, judging from the public outcry in cases like Mohd Said's, to Selangor state assemblyman Datuk Zakaria Mat Deros, a Klang municipal councillor who built a palatial home while flouting the laws of the council he served.

"If you look at the country's political milieu, you'll find that for a long time, many politicians believed that as long as they could mobilise ethnic or religious support then their place

was secured," says Shad.

But, nowadays, apart from these two types of support bases, politicians are realising that they need to also get support from the general public based on their accountability and integrity.

"There's a growing sense that you are no longer 'entitled' to office just because of who you are, but how well you can perform a trust."

■ razak@nst.com.my