

# The human rights activist who would be president of Lebanon

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE

Chibli Mallat has the air of a man who would be president. It seems it was always his destiny, his birthright, and mandate. Now, he is actually running for president of Lebanon, although there is no campaign, and the current incumbent, the pro-Syrian Emile Lahoud, extended his term by a further three years by constitutional amendment pushed through by Damascus.

Mallat is not a man easily deterred. It was the assassination of the prime minister Rafiq Hariri on Valentine's Day 2005 that sparked the Cedar Revolution. One month later, one-quarter of Lebanon's 4 million population erupted onto the streets demanding Syria withdraw its 40 000 troops that had occupied the country for decades.

After almost 30 years, they finally went home on April 26 2005.

Mallat is an international lawyer and human rights activist who left a visiting lectureship at Yale Law School (and is still a senior fellow) to pursue the campaign, and is the "first democratic candidate to the presidency of the Lebanon". He is also a Christian Maronite. In the complex sectarian

division of Lebanese politics only Maronites can hold the office of president, a system agreed at the end of the French Mandate in 1943.

Despite Lahoud's strong opponents among the political parties who have asked him to step down, he has resisted, and he retains enough power to stall any government action he opposes.

Regardless, it's hard to find anyone who believes Mallat has much chance of becoming president. Some think what he is doing, shaking things up, is useful for the political process in Lebanon, which is in a state of paralysis.

Part of Mallat's campaign is to fight against the extension and to force the issue of the presidency on the table, which it is now. That does not mean that the fight to reverse the extension has succeeded. "But many, like former leader General Michel Aoun, are in campaigning mood, whether for now or in a year-and-a-half," Mallat says, which he attributes to the success of his campaign.

"It's difficult to say whether Chibli sparked or is in tune with the situation," says Nadim Shehadi, Middle East expert at the London think tank, Chatham House. "The very conservative political class has not yet caught up

with what has happened." But, he adds, Mallat's candidacy is not without any hope, "particularly if they are looking for a compromise candidate. At least he's being transparent and putting his programme on the table".

Mallat started his campaign almost six months ago. "Every Maronite of worth, and every Maronite of no worth in this country aspires to be president. The problem is they never say it," states Mallat from his Beirut law office on Good Friday.

"This is not healthy. I have learned when you fight for a position you have to do it openly. I have a lot to offer and am dedicated to making the country better."

In fact, he proposes that anyone who does not declare openly should not be allowed to run.

Mallat has long championed the rights of the disadvantaged and was instrumental in bringing together the triumvirate of Jalal Talabani, Masoud Barzani and Ahmad Chalabi, key Iraqi players, in an opposition movement years before the American invasion. He has also championed the Palestinian cause, one of the platforms of his candidacy, and won his case in the Belgian courts against the indictment of Ariel

Sharon, the former Israeli prime minister, in 2001, before it was stopped by retroactive legislation.

"Traditionally you said a few words to MPs and hoped that America or Syria would come down on your side and support your candidacy.

"Then, like some kind of magic trick your name would come out. That is not the proper way to do it," comments the trilingual, erudite 46-year old Mallat.

So why should he be president? "We were the nerve of this revolution," says Mallat in reference to the middle-class professionals, doctors, lawyers, businessmen and women who demonstrated out on the streets.

"Now, we want power. We built this country. We earned it and we want recognition, and one of us should be in power.

"Not a single shot was fired in this non-sectarian, non-violent extraordinary revolution and it should not fail," continues Mallat, a liberal democrat.

I think it would be hard to find anyone who would not say that he was honest and decent. In the world of politics, perhaps in the murky world of Lebanese politics in particular, these traits may count against him.

"To have someone like me who believes in those principles becoming president, who resembles the rest of the nation, is important. I understand openness can be construed as naivety but it's not. I know how the system works; and just look at the presidents we've had."

This, he says unprompted, is in response to much criticism he has had from Lebanese politicians and journalists who don't take his candidacy seriously, remarking that he likes the sound of his own voice.

"Real politics has nothing to do with Chibli," says Abdallah Bouhabib, former Lebanese ambassador to Washington. Others add that he should have become an MP before launching headlong into the presidential campaign.

"I was offered several times to be MP, but did not want to make the needed call to the Syrians for that," he counters.

An admirer of Mallat's, a western commentator, believes that his unlikely success "shows just how crap this country is that someone like Mallat cannot be president".

In his campaign Mallat is calling for adequate representation of women in political decision-making and to strengthen the weakened judiciary. "No

more phone calls from politicians to judges" to quote his campaign flyer.

In the volatile and intractable world of vested interests and long-held prejudices, Mallat radically wants Lebanon to open its now hermetically sealed borders and allow for free movement of Palestinians and Israelis.

In a country where sectarian balances are delicate, the issue of 400 000 Palestinian refugees, who remain stateless and stranded in limbo with no political rights, is paramount. Mallat wants internationally monitored elections in the refugee camps allowing Palestinians in Lebanon to be heard abroad, although he does not "expect such openings now". What is important is that these need to be built up as part of a human rights, non-violent strategy.

One year on the victory of sorts has been bitter. Damascus may not make threatening phone calls so much, but now, laments Mallat, they just blow you up. "The killing of our friends [in the several assassinations that rocked Beirut last year] has removed the joy of our revolution. Lahoud remaining in power shows how unsuccessful we have been, but my approach tends to be positive. You have to hold on to the positive. You can't give up."



Chibli Mallat is described as the first democratic candidate to the presidency of Lebanon. Yet few believe he has a chance of getting into office. PHOTOGRAPH: GEERT VANDEN WUNGAERT, AP