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Human rights lawyer seeks to bridge Lebanon's sectarian divide

>By Gareth Smyth

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The idea of a "president for all our citizens" would be obvious in many countries. But in Lebanon - with 18 recognised religious groups in a population of 4m - the idea remains a dream, rather than a normal part of political life.

Chibli Mallat, 45, lawyer and scholar, announced this week he wants to be such a president, although he is eligible only because he is a Maronite Christian. The presidency is reserved by custom for this particular sect - no Muslim, no orthodox Christian, no Druze need apply.

Speculation about the next president arises because Emile Lahoud, the incumbent, whose term extends until 2010, is weakened by close association with Syrian and Lebanese security services that have been implicated by the UN's Mehlis report into February's assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri.

Other candidates for the post, chosen by the 128-seat parliament rather than by popular election, are Maronites best known for their role in the 1975-90 Lebanese civil war. Michel Aoun is a former army commander who led a disastrous revolt against Syria in 1989-90 and Samir Geagea is a former militia leader of the Lebanese Forces only recently released from prison for wartime atrocities. Both see the presidency as the Christians' by right.

Chibli Mallat, however, is a different. He is a rare kind of Maronite who is a world authority on Shia Islam and who regularly appears on al-Manar, television station of Hizbollah. He is also a scholar - fluent in five languages including English and Farsi - with close connections in Washington, Europe and the Muslim world.

For 20 years Mallat's voice has worked to keep alive in the Middle East the twin flames of democracy and the rule of law. Facing pervasive double standards and cynicism, he has argued for political, moral and legal consistency.

Over a decade ago, he initiated Indict, the campaign to try Saddam Hussein for war

crimes. He also launched proceedings in Belgium against Ariel Sharon, Israel's prime minister, for his role in the 1982 massacre by Israeli-allied Lebanese Christian militiamen of at least 2,000 Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Beirut.

I first met Chibli in Salahaddin, northern Iraq, during the 1992 Kurdish elections, and over time we became friends. Back then, Mallat ran the Centre of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law at London university's School of Oriental and African Studies. He returned to his native Beirut in 1996 to practise law in the family firm. A professor at the University of St Joseph, he has also taught at the Islamic University in Beirut and is a visiting fellow at Yale.

Central to his academic and political work is his interest in the Iraqi Shia scholar and activist Mohammad Baqr Sadr, murdered by Saddam Hussein in 1980 as Iraq began its eight-year war with mainly Shia Iran.

Mallat's book on Sadr - 'The Renewal of Islamic Law', published in 1993, and widely translated - won the prestigious Albert Hourani prize. "Sayyid Sadr was the century's most original Muslim thinker, a man who used the tradition of Islamic law to analyse the modern world," says Chibli. "At the time of his death, he was working towards a synthesis of Islamic law and democracy".

Like Sadr, Mallat was rarely interested in scholarship for its own sake. In 1987, four years before the Madrid conference set a new direction for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, he wrote a paper arguing in favour of such an international initiative on the Middle East.

After Saddam's defeat in the 1991 Gulf war, Chibli helped persuade the Iraqi Kurdish leadership to accept international monitors at the 1992 elections in "free Kurdistan".

"The Americans were dead-set against the elections," he later recalled. "But it was important to show that if people in the Middle East were given the chance to practise the purest form of democracy they would rise to the occasion. Old women who couldn't read or write queued up to vote at 4am."

Mallat's primary loyalty, however, remains to the Lebanese. His grandfather, Chibli Mallat, was a poet whose Beirut newspaper, Al-Watan, was burned down by agents of the French. His father, Wajdi, chaired Lebanon's constitutional court.

Mallat well knows that Lebanon - with its kaleidoscope of orthodox and Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Palestinians and Armenians - would be the first victim of any "clash of civilisations" relished by extremists.

Much has changed in Lebanon with the 'cedar revolution' and the withdrawal of Syrian troops. But sectarianism, though it may be exploited by outsiders, retains roots in Lebanon.

Outside Lebanon for most of the past two years, I cannot judge whether Chibli Mallat can win the presidency. He is certainly well regarded across the sectarian divides - close to Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader, respected by Hizbollah, and a passionate advocate of justice in the case of Mr Hariri, a Sunni Muslim.

His message - of citizenship, law, non-violence and human rights - is one Lebanon, and the wider region, would neglect at its peril.

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*Gareth Smyth is the FT's Iran correspondent*