

Hariri's response to MPs remarks before obtaining the confidence: The government's decision is to work, work and work

The third government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri received Parliament's confidence last evening in a late-night vote on the third day of discussions on the policy statement.

Just before the vote, in which it obtained 111 votes of confidence, the President of the Council of Ministers Saad Hariri responded to the MP's remarks during the debate.

He said: "It is beneficial to build the government's response on the positive remarks expressed in the interventions of the MPs, especially the interventions of the last session. I think that the quiet and serious talk reaches the Lebanese better than the tensed talk that deviates from the principles of communication between the Lebanese and between the officials in particular. In all cases, it is my duty and the duty of the government to hear all statements, based on our respect for parliament and our commitment to our democratic system.

We undoubtedly heard good remarks from our fellow MPs that we must take into consideration, especially those that reflect the spirit of national consensus and the importance of solidarity to implement the economic reform program. But, there are other remarks that made me feel that some colleagues entered Parliament with their parties yesterday and that we alone have been in power for the last fifteen years without any partners or ministers.

No one is saying that the administration is fine, and we all see that the squander in electricity is the mother of all misfortunes. This is a fact known by every Lebanese citizen. We hear a lot about the reasons behind squander, corruption, delaying projects, etc... All these are exaggerated. During the past years the country paid the cost of wars, struggles, disruptions, chaos, instability and the cost of making the demand of sects prevail over the rights of the state. Not a single year has passed without problems and crises, and we talk as if the institutions worked regularly, as if the parliamentary elections were held on time, as if the presidential election was not delayed for two years and as if the governments were formed immediately. If we want to make a simple calculation, we will find that it took three or four years to accomplish all this. Do you think that it has no price?

Just for the sake of comparison, in 2010, we had an 8% growth, which means that if we did not have disagreements as political parties, our Gross Domestic Product would have been of 75 billion today and surely, the debt would not have reached this size. What made matters worse is the war in Syria and its repercussions on us in the security, financial, economic and social fields.

Here I want to talk about the displaced. You all know my stance regarding the displaced. We want them to return to their country as soon as possible, but we cannot blame all the problems we face today, in the formation of governments, the election of a president and others on the displaced. The problem is in us and in the way we work together, the disrespect for the Constitution, and so on.

Today we have reached a place where we all agree on the fact that the country will collapse if we do not agree among each other. I hope this agreement will continue and bring the country out of the impasse.

Regrettably, some see CEDRE program as an international bribe to Lebanon to accept the resettlement and create job opportunities for the displaced. To me, these are political and economic illusions that have nothing to do with the truth.

Some do not like to see that CEDRE would provide work for some Syrian workers, as was always the case in Lebanon in the past. I reassure everyone that CEDRE is a clear program that has nothing to do with any resettlement. This is a program to support the Lebanese economy and a serious opportunity for social stability, growth, employment and reforms.

CEDRE is a Lebanese program par excellence and not conditions imposed by anyone from the outside. We took the reforms that the Lebanese private sector has been demanding for years, which all politicians have been talking about, which the administration needs and we committed to them because we want them and we are convinced that this is our last chance. According to that, the international community decided to stand by us.

Here I want to ask. Who is against a modern law for public tenders? Who is against the development of customs, the facilitation of the business environment that attracts investments from abroad? Who is against the computerization of all state administrations to reduce squander and corruption and facilitate the lives of citizens? Who is against the restructuring of the public sector? Who among you is against the reduction of budget deficit? And most importantly, who among you believes that the infrastructure in our country does not need any rehabilitation or development?

It is important for me today to emphasize that the country has a real opportunity, and we have a clear program that needs a workshop in which everyone participates. Whether we like it or not, this is our country, and we are all partners in the good and bad days. We have a clear program, and we have responsibilities in the government and parliament to turn words into actions.

Those who see that there is an opportunity in a program other than that of the government can present the alternative. The parliament controls its own decision and can say that the government's program is useless. Let us go to another program, I do not mind. We can tell the international community and the Arab brothers that CEDRE does not suit us. But the government and I consider it an opportunity and we asked for confidence based on our statement.

With all confidence, I say: "2019 is the year for finding a serious solution for electricity and if this does not happen, we would all have failed as government, parliament and presidency.

We heard talk about the banking sector asking why doesn't the government reduce interest rates to reduce the debt service? First, interests are decided by the market, that is the supply and demand and not the government. Second, the banking sector played and is still playing a positive role during crises in contributing to solutions. This is what happened after Paris II when the banks intervened, but what happened after that? We did not achieve any reforms. They are clear in their willingness to play a positive role today. But this doesn't happen alone. It must be part of a package of reforms. When we, as a government and parliament, start implementing a package of reforms and measures to reduce the budget deficit, the banking sector will certainly be responsive. And I reiterate that addressing the chronic deficit in electricity is the starting point.

The issue of the \$400 million from the World Bank was raised. This aims to accelerate the partnership projects with the private sector. These projects are needed by the country and our budget does not allow us to spend on these projects. This same program was previously adopted and gave results in the Ministry of Education during the days of Minister Elias Bou Saab. These projects, such as the economic zone in Tripoli and the development and modernization of customs, were approved by the Council of Ministers and the country needs them. We either take these \$400 million, just as we did, from the World Bank with an interest rate of 1.5% over thirty years, or tell the Minister of Finance to issue bonds with interest rates of 10%. Practically, what we are taking from the World Bank is a support for the state budget and dollar liquidity that enters the country and does not come out of it. Indeed, the government should be thanked for that and not attacked. In any case, this issue is still under negotiation and we did not finish it.

Regarding the Ministry of Telecommunications, we heard a question about the decline in communications revenues. Who among the colleagues doesn't use the free internet calling service? Who doesn't use WhatsApp, Facetime and all applications? These are not wasted funds but calls that the Lebanese didn't make on the regular telecommunications network. What can we do?

Shall we send bill to the Lebanese of calls they didn't make? The government is accompanying the change in technology and is putting a plan to improve revenues without increasing the cost on the citizen. As you all know, there is a period where the country was paralyzed and there was no investment, in electricity, oil and telecommunications. Today we are investing. We have invested in the telecommunications sector. We introduced the fiber optic, we have the 3G, the 4G and the LTE. Everyone is suffering from the communications issue. We are introducing improvements and investing in the future. Certainly, somewhere the revenues will decline.

In the nineties, there were illegal phone centers selling illegal international calls and putting the money in their pockets. This money was equivalent to \$300 million over seven years, a total of \$2 billion. This is the money of corruption and theft from the pocket of the State. I want to remind of the words of Martyr Prime Minister Rafic Hariri from this very forum during the budget discussion session on June 21, 2001, on this subject. Back then, he was supported by Speaker Nabih Berri, MPs Walid Jumblatt and Boutros Harb and late Premier Omar Karami.

Nothing is hidden in this country. We all know everything, and all the Lebanese know everything. The easiest thing is to get into arguments and respond to the outbiddings that we heard. My decision is different. My decision is that this country has had enough outbidding, obstruction and speculation. It needs one thing, work, and my decision and the government's decision is to work, work and work.

This requires cooperation between everyone in the government, between the government and Parliament, and between all the Lebanese, whom I will address from this podium: "We, as a government, and I, feel your pain, your ambitions, how you wish your country to be and how you want to be in your country. The government and I pledge that all our work will be to achieve economic progress and reforms so that you have job opportunities and the chance for a decent life in your country.

On this basis I ask for your confidence and the confidence of the esteemed Parliament."