Lebanese Politics and the Tyrany of Confessionalism

Camille H. Habib

Camille H. Habib, the dean of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Lebanese University.

Lebanese Politics

and the Tyrany of Confessionalism

Introduction:

Lebanon's glorious past (1943-1975) and its tragic present made its history one of conflict and consensus. The crisis of 1958, 1975 and 2005 had illustrated both the precarious stability and the persistent dilemma of a plural society like Lebanon. It is true that the country had shown a remarkable ability to survive between 1943 and 1975. Many claim that its survival was due mainly to the politics of consociation which the Lebanese had adopted as their approach to government. However, when this approach had historically failed to respond to various external and internal challenges, the Lebanese system simply collapsed twice in 1975 as well as in 2005. These challenges encompass the total web of economic, military and diplomatic aspects of the regional and international system, as well as the whole pattern of political, social and ethno-religious values of the internal setting of Lebanon.

To seek a solution for only one part is to adopt a reductionist approach to the crisis. One must not forget that regional conflict and international interferences are important variables in the Lebanese situation, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a stable Lebanon, without a settlement of the Palestinian issue. In 1815 Prince Klements von Matternich of Austria helped to shape modern Europe after the Congress of Vienna. Before sending his ambassador to Constantinople at the height of the debacles of the Eastern Question, a period of intense European intervention in the Ottman Empire, he told him: "Tell the Sultan, if there is war in Lebanon there will be war in the Levant; and tell the Sultan if there is peace in Lebanon there will be peace in the Levant" 1. Paul Salem follows the same line arguing: "A stable and peaceful Lebanon could contribute to a stable and peaceful region, but an explosive region would sooner or later come back to destroy Lebanon"2.

But the Lebanese people must not wait to strengthen their state until a settlement of the problem in Palestine is reached. In retrospect, they must start constructing their own house. To this end, they must have the courage to recognize the obstacles that impede the prospects of state-building. Chief among them is the fact that confessional political system breeds nothing but crises. For her part, Safia Saadeh argues that "The caste structure has hitherto hindered collective sympathy from developing, and blocked any attempt at the creation of a citizen whose allegiance is to the country as a whole instead of giving priority to his caste over and above the country" 3. "Actually", Kamal Salibi avers, "the chances of whether Lebanon survives as a country depends on whether or not the Lebanese Republic can break with its history to become truly a commonwealth involving citizens' rather than community right"4.

Lebanon's continuous crisis must come to an end. Yet, the country cannot afford the so-called radical solution that is the secular solution, because it threatens the very existence of all confessions. Besides, Lebanon lacks secular political parties that are expected to implement secularism. The Communist and the Syrian Nationalist Socialist parties who had members from all religious denominations had been shattered by series of confessional crises that had implicated Lebanon throughout its history. Even democracy, along the Western lines, has remained an aspiration and a long-term goal yet to be reached. Lebanon is a confessional, not a democratic, state; for democracy can only develop and flourish in a secular state. Thus, to implant democracy in a confessional context, that is at the political-structural level, is to allow the tyranny of a religious minority 5. The Maronites failed to dominate others in the mid-1970's, and so did the Shiites in the mid-1980's and the Sunnis in 2008.

Also, Lebanon is not immune to the danger associated with the rise of political Islam. Islamic Fundamentalism has emerged as militant movements and gained strength after al-Qaeda's attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001. But due to the pluralistic nature of its society, establishing a theocratic state in Lebanon is both improbable and impossible. Nevertheless, fundamentalism presents a formidable threat and a major obstacle of having an open society where religious tolerance must be accepted as part of our heritage

in Lebanon and the Levant. The danger remains, however, that the "disruption of the middle class and the impoverishment of the country led to a vacuum that was filled by fundamentalism movements who wanted to implement the Muslim Shari'a and a theocratic state 6. "I believe", Saadeh correctly concludes, "that the consequences of such a movement will not lead to democracy but to further bloodshed in the area"7.

It is of an urgent need for Lebanon to begin the process of deconfessionalism as a departure point towards modernizing the state and the mentality of the citizens. The Lebanese people must understand that consociationalism is only a temporary measure to a long-term crisis. At best, consociationalism aims at achieving neither a complete unity nor a total disintegration between the various confessions. It is, therefore, argued that communal fences have made consociational arrangements so fragile to resist socio-political eventualities. Worse still, consociationalism did not prevent Lebanon from undergoing the agony of the two civil wars in 1958 and 1975 respectively, and did not provide the necessary mechanism to solve the national crisis of 2005 peacefully. In addition, Lebanon's history has shown that consociational arrangements and rearrangements always come after times of crisis, hurriedly elaborated. These arrangements, whether the National Pact of 1943, the Ta'if agreement of 1989, or the Doha Agreement of 2008 had, implicitly or explicitly, acknowledged the superiority of one confession, depending on the outcome of military unrests. As time goes on, objections would arise as one confession, or an alliance of some of them, attempt to change the status quo, usually at the expense of others. Indeed, confessional politics does not translate itself into making room for others, but rather attempting to cancel them and eliminate all competitors.

Other criticisms of the consociational system introduced by Saadeh can be summed up as follows:

1. It is very hard, in a consociational system, to translate into concrete steps what "equal" means. Each side feels that it is not "equal" enough!.

2. Consociation is a system that contradicts the rules of Western democracy, because it does not treat equally all citizens in a country, as consociation is an agreement between the major players while the minor castes are left out. Moreover, consociation leads to the evasion of responsibility. Who is blamed in consociational system since everyone is forced or persuaded, willy-nilly, to agree?

3. The consociational system is a traditional form that defies the modern spirit of individual endeavour and social change. Each move has to be agreed upon by all parties which results in the entrenchment of each group, and the latter's attempt to get more, but never to give up what it already has.

4. Resisting any structural change, the consociational system seems incapable of moving along scientific and rational lines.

5. No referendum has ever been taken concerning all of the consociational agreements, thus turning them into very vulnerable projects since no consensus has ever been reached by the people 8.

Consociational system has, on its own terms, bred some profound obstacles towards building a modern state in Lebanon. First, the emigration of intellectuals has, over the years, allowed extremist groups and religious leaders to assume important political roles. Christian and Muslim clergymen deliver "political sermons", on Sunday and Friday respectively, instead of sticking to their roles of showing believers God's ways of personal salvation. Second, the principle of quotas among confessions has made it possible to initiate reforms to adapt to inevitable social changes, for fear of producing unbalance among confessions. Third, the confessional structure sharply limits the Freedom of the individual seeking to change political allegiance, and impedes the formation of national patriotic sentiment. Fourth, and finally, consociational model has allowed a duality of legal power between the state on one hand, and the various religious leaders on the other hand, permitting the latter to have a say in the

affairs of citizens. As a result, personal status laws have caused further fragmentation of society into different groups being geared to different laws 9.

Social integration is the opposite side to fragmentation. But integration does not necessarily mean transforming the Lebanese society into one confession. On the contrary, "integration implies the existence of diversity and heterogeneity, but integration also implies that in order for the whole of society to function properly, interaction and association between the different groups is required" 10. At the structural level, new institutions must be created that have the capacity to lead the Lebanese people into an arena where they can decide their own fate. To this end, Lebanese must explore major evolutionary reforms based on a "cooperative approach" that must be adopted in order to reach a more democratic mechanism that would allow for further political modernization without resorting to arms. In the final analysis, the Lebanese people deserve a much better political system that can make the state a priority in the citizen's life.

Prospects of State-Building:

As this essay makes clear, two views can be drawn about Lebanon's future. The first suggests that the country's problems are too many, too great and too complex for a comprehensive solution, but the second argues that the case is not that gloomy. Such optimism is based on one factor: although the Lebanese criticize each other and their political system, they all seek to preserve Lebanon while changing it. All have rejected that state's "Balkanization" or its incorporation into another state; and all seem to agree in viewing confessionalism as an inaccurate reflection of their interests, expectations and aspirations. It, thus, seems that any formula designed to restore stability must address the fundamental crisis of sectarian divisions, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the various external challenges to sovereignty.

Confessionalism and consociationalism have hindered the prospects of building a strong state in Lebanon. By a strong state, one does not necessarily mean an authoritarian or totalitarian state. Any state that adopts a strategy of universal suffrage to secure effective citizens' participation in the governmental process and, thus, strengthens its national unity, can be described

as strong. For this to happen, the process of deconfessionalism must be pursued rapidly.

It should be noted that confessionalism is not only a matter of neutrality as it is a matter of institutional and parochial interests. Hence, deconfessionalism must be approached from informal as well as from formal perspectives. First, in any evolutionary process that entails profound social and political changes, the intelligentsia must play a decisive role. I argue that the educated class must appreciate its proper role and play it appropriately. This class must stay clear of the confessional snares and engage itself in a "cooperatist approach" which includes a voluntary and informal coordination of conflicting objectives to be conducted through continuous political dialogue between groups, state bureaucracy, and political parties. Furthermore, the educated class must promote the idea of social partnership, that is shared by both business and unions, and to be expressed in national policies. Finally, the educated class must promote non-confessional (i.e., non-governmental) organizations with the aim to institute a culture of citizenship – a citizen aware of his/her national duties towards his/her fellow Lebanese regardless of their confessional affiliations.

Continuous national dialogue is the best alternative to continuous national crisis. The issue has recently gained popularity. First, in their Memorandum of Joint Understanding, Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement support national dialogue as the "only way to find solutions for the crisis that are overwhelming Lebanon". They argue, however, that its success should be based on the fulfilment of three necessary conditions:

1. The participation of all parties that have a political, popular, and national status in a round-table meeting.

2. Transparency, frankness and the placing of national interests, through Lebanon's independent will and free decision-making.

3. The inclusion of all issues that have a national character and require general consensus.

Paul Salem supports this suggestion, considering national dialogue as a "profound necessity", to the extent that "Lebanon's survival is predicated on its ability to sustain dialogue"11. "For him, such a dialogue must be built on the following understandings:

1. The process must be considered as a long one. No country in a condition similar to that of Lebanon today can realistically concludes a national dialogue in just a few months .

2. The process must not be limited to a few politicians, and must include active members of the civil society as well .

3. The discussions must not be limited to "high-politics" (i.e., the containment of Hezbollah's arms), but must be broaden to include all issues of high and low politics, such as finding venues to promote equality between men and women, supporting the youths, and conserving the environment 12 .

At the formal level, the prospects of State-building require the implementation of the following measures:

1. The enactment of a discretionary civil personal status law. The dichotomy between the civil code under the domain of various religious leaders of their respective confessions had led to the fragmentation of society into different groups being subject to different laws.

2. Rejuvenating Lebanon's national life requires the adoption of an electoral law of which proportional representation may be an effective formula that guarantees the accuracy and fairness of popular representation and contributes to activating the role of non-confessional parties, with the aim of bolstering civil society. In addition, the electoral law must make provision for the citizen to elect a certain number of deputies (10 out of 128) in a single national continuency and outside the confessional quota.

3. The enactment of a maximum administrative decentralization as to ensure local participation in the development of all regions,

and to make the state closer to the needs of the citizens. In this regards, the role of municipalities in the overall development process, in the management of public affairs, and in bringing relief to the social and daily pressures on the community should be taken into consideration.

4. Promote administrative efficiency on the basis of competence and the implementation of the principle of liability and accountability. Administrative reform also requires a flexible system which has the capacity for self-correction. As former prime minister Hariri once states: "The real reform of public administration would be through significant simplification and streamlining of laws, systems and procedures"13 .

5. The state must play its proper role to elevate the main burdens preoccupying the citizens and, thus, make itself a priority in their lives, so the latter can lessen his/her dependency on his/her confession for benefits and other services. The government must continue its effort in supporting public education, widening the coverage of social security and health insurance, and expanding the scope of housing loans.

6. Strengthening the Lebanese Army and other security agencies, and developing a national defence strategy to defend the borders against Israeli aggressions.

7. Promoting a fully judicial independence as a prerequisite for creating state rights, law and institutions.

8. Enacting the necessary laws to combat corruption in all its forms and demanding the government's adherence to the United Nations Anti-Corruption Convention.

9. In order to ensure a true separation of powers between the executive and the legislative branches of the government, a member of parliament should not become a minister.

10. The immediate formation of a Senate wherein all confessions will be represented with its authority being confined to matters of destiny.

11. Recognize Lebanese immigrants as an essential part of Lebanon's strategic assets and enact the necessary law so as to enable them to exercise their political rights in Lebanon from their countries of expansion.

12. Enact a law that encourages the establishment of national parties that cut cross confessions.

13. Call upon the Constitutional Council to explain the powers conferred on the president in Article 49 of the Constitution. What does it mean that the President is the "Symbol of national unity?" What are the means available to the President to "safeguard the constitution and Lebanon's independence, unity and territorial integrity?".

14. Normalization of relations with Syria on the basis of mutual respect for the sovereignty and independence of both states.

15. Lebanon is called upon not to take side in Arab-Arab rivalries.

The final goal of these reforms is to facilitate the propagation of the culture of dialogue, democracy and peace among the Lebanese people. What matters is that the sincerity, with which these reforms are pursued, and the effectiveness with which departure from them are corrected.

The antecedents of these reforms are based on the followings. First, at the political level, there is an obvious connection between democratic practices and the transformation of deficient structures and capabilities. Second, at the economic level, it is hoped that any structural economic adjustments must be designed in a way that improves the efficiency of the economy without jeopardising social benefit programs. Finally, at the cultural level, the overall theme which must govern Lebanon is the building of national capacity through human development. This means that more investment in the field of human

resources represent the very basis on which development and economic growth rest.

Admittedly, there is no trouble free solution to the confessional problem in Lebanon. In a way, a stable Lebanon requires the fulfilment of a number of conditions. To end up, it requires a transition period during which all confessions should engage in measure to build confidence and reduce tensions. For this to occur, the people must recognize that only they themselves can bring an end to their agony, and they must understand that moderation, restraint and nonviolence are keys for Lebanon rebirth. In other words, unless the above reforms are regarded as an optional formula to Lebanon's multidimensional problems and become a tangible reality, the "terrible beauty" of the Middle East will become yet more terrible.

Endnotes

1. N. Shehadi, "War in Lebanon means war in the Levant", the Daily Star, 18 April 2005, p.10.
2. P. Salem, "The Future of Lebanon", Foreign Affairs, p.24.
3. S. Saadeh, The Social Structure of Lebanon: Democracy or Servitude?, (Beirut: Editions Dar An-nahar, 1993), p.116 .
4. K. Salibi, "The Historical Perspective", in W. Shehadi and D. Mills, (ed), Lebanon: a History of Conflict and Consensus, (London: Centre for Lebanese Studies and I.B. Tauris&Co. Ltd, 1988), p.12.
5. S. Saadeh, The Social Structure of Lebanon: Democracy or Servitude?, p.118 .
6. Ibid., p.119 .
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., pp.121-122 .
9. Ibid., pp. 110-123 .
10. Ibid., p.125 .
11. P. Salem, "Thoughts On a Truly National Dialogue", the Daily Star, 16 September 2008.
12. Ibid.
13. R. Hariri, Statesmanship in Government, (Beirut: Arab United Press Co., 1999), p.74.