Lebanon: An End to Sectarian Politics?

By Rannie Amiri
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"To encourage vast participation in political life, a national committee should be established and charged with abolishing political sectarianism." – Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, in a televised address on the eve of the nation's 66th anniversary of independence, 21 November 2009.

"Political sectarianism is blocking the development of the Lebanese political regime and standing as an obstacle in the face of a democracy ... We want a Lebanon that is united through its land, its people, its state and institutions." – Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, in a news conference announcing the party's new manifesto, 30 November 2009.

Lebanon's entire political structure and climate revolves around sectarianism. The country's 128-member parliament or "Chamber of Deputies," is based on a confessional distribution of seats, divided equally between Muslims and Christians irrespective of political affiliation (as is the prime minister's cabinet). In parliament, the Christian side is further subdivided in a fixed allotment among seven dominations, and the Muslim half among four.

The country's top three political posts – president, prime minster, and speaker of the parliament – must be assigned to a Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shia Muslim respectively. Sectarian quotas have even found their way into the public sector, the military and the security services.

None of the above is based on actual demographic information, of course. Indeed, there has been no official census conducted in Lebanon since 1932. The equal allocation of parliamentary seats between Muslims and Christians mandated in the 1989 Taif Accord was nevertheless an improvement from the status quo ante, which gave Christians more seats despite a Muslim majority. The Taif Accord put an end to the country's 15-year civil war, in part, by allowing for just representation in parliament between the two religious groups.

The new configuration of political sectarianism set up in Taif was still meant to be a temporary one, with the ultimate goal being its demise. As stated in Section G:

"Abolition of Political Sectarianism: Abolishing political sectarianism is a fundamental national objective. To achieve it, it is required that efforts be made in accordance with a phased plan. The Chamber of Deputies elected on the basis of equal sharing by Christians and Muslims shall adopt the proper measures to achieve this objective and to form a national council ... The council's task will be to examine and propose the means capable of abolishing sectarianism, to present them to the Chamber of Deputies and the cabinet, and to observe implementation of the phased plan."

Refreshingly, both President Suleiman and Hassan Nasrallah have come to similar conclusions: it is time to move past the current (and outdated) system which has paralyzed Lebanese politics for so long, abolish sectarianism, and establish a government based on proportional representation. In essence, Lebanon would be transformed into a single electoral constituency.

Parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri pledged to establish the national committee called for by Suleiman and " … embark on a legislative push that centers on implementing the long-awaited Taif Accord provisions of administrative decentralization and the abolishment of political sectarianism."

The reaction to the bold proposition?

Uproar.

From charges it would "distort Lebanon's pluralistic character" to Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir's bizarre assertion that institutionalized sectarianism should not be eliminated by law before it can be "abolished from the souls," it was met with both opposition and anger. Several MPs implicitly chided the supporters of Hassan Nasrallah for following a "sectarian leader" while making tangential references to Hezbollah's arms.

The majority of voices balking at the proposal have come from the ruling March 14 coalition, comprised mainly of Sunni Muslim and secular Maronite Christian parties.

There is no doubt Taif put into place an arrangement that has managed to keep the peace in Lebanon for 20 years. But, are some of the circumstances that led to the outbreak of violence and civil strife in the 1970s and 1980s, namely skewed parliamentary representation poorly reflective of the population at large, present once again? What are those opposed to Suleiman's progressive call really afraid of?

Simply, that the least privileged, and historically most politically marginalized of Lebanon's people – the Shia Muslims – will come to power. Now believed to form the single largest plurality among Lebanon's confessional groups, they have long played "third fiddle" to the country's Sunnis and Christians in government in relation to their numbers.

Again, we must remember that the discrepancy found in parliamentary seats and power, whereby Christians were overrepresented in relation to Muslims and were the politically privileged class, was a significant factor that led to a long and painful civil war.

Shouldn't such recent lessons be heeded if this imbalance is once again apparent?

Suleiman, a Maronite Christian himself and widely considered to be evenhanded, recognizes the present situation cannot continue; as a result of the confessional distribution of seats, the ruling March 14 coalition won a majority despite clearly losing the popular vote. It then took Prime Minister Saad Hariri *five months* to be able to form a cabinet.

A clarion call has thus been issued for Lebanon to advance beyond its sectarian nature and adopt a political structure which eschews sectarianism and instead implement one based on equitable, and proportional, representation.

It is time for Lebanon to embrace it.

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