

CREATING A LEBANESE CENTER FOR A SECULAR CIVIL INITIATIVE

Since independence in 1943, a big number of Lebanese citizens have been attempting to promote a secular political system in Lebanon. As it is well known, the country political system is based on the distribution of civil and military power between the various religious groups. This is a system that emerged in the 19th century when France and Great Britain were competing to acquire influence in the Ottoman Empire through extending their support to the various local religious groups, namely the various Christian churches and the Muslim creeds not belonging to the Sunni majority.

In this context, the different Lebanese religious communities became the basis for any political formula for local power-sharing under the tutelage of the European nations. In 1840, the old feudal trans-sectarian political system disintegrated totally and a new sectarian based system emerged that was formally instituted in 1861 under the sponsorship and the control of European nations and the Ottoman Empire.

During the period of the French Mandate on Lebanon (1919-1943) the system was not basically altered. The 1926 constitution endowed Lebanon with modern democratic institutions, but the distribution of civil and military official posts continued to be based on sharing power arrangements between the leaders of the main religious communities. At independence, a National Pact was designed between the two main country leaders, one Christian, the other one Muslim.

Under the presidency of General Fouad Chéhab (1958-1964) the power-sharing agreement of 1943 was enlarged to become fairer in the distribution of administrative and political posts between Muslims and Christians. The Muslim participation was substantially enlarged. President Chéhab also improved the integration into the system of non-predominant communities through modernizing and upgrading the recruitment system in public administration and through more social spending.

In spite of these reforms, the political and administrative system of Lebanon remained constrained by the sectarian distribution of power and discontent grew dangerously in the seventies of last century. In 1975, Lebanon entered a long period of violence and sectarian and political fragmentation involving local militias, the Palestine Liberation Organization and many foreign armies which ended only in 1990. However, constitutional reforms introduced in 1989, although contributing to appeasement, reinforced the logic of sectarian distribution of power. In addition, the amendments were implemented in a way that systematized the distribution of economic power between the main leaders of the religious communities. Corruption became generalized in Government and Public Administration.

Since the end of 2004, and as the regional crisis erupted again, sectarian tensions re-emerged dangerously in Lebanon fuelled by this new crisis. The Syrian army had to withdraw from Lebanon under UN and Western pressure and the country was shaken by a series of assassinations. Sectarian tensions reappeared, but this time more based on sharp differences between the Sunni and the Shi'a leadership inside the Muslim

communities, than between Christian and Muslims, as was the case in the previous domestic tensions and crises. By the end of 2006, the domestic political crisis turned into a full constitutional crisis with the resignation of the ministers representing the Shi'a community. A dangerous stalemate became solidified when the Parliament was not convened and the Sunni Prime minister refused to resign to open the way for a solution to the crisis.

It is in this context that the Initiative for a Secular State was launched in Beirut by a group of independent Lebanese personalities on July 10, 2007. This group is composed of both political personalities (former or actual parliament representatives and ministers) and personalities from the civil society well-known for their adherence to the principles of separation of the State from religious communities.

This was the good timing for the launch of this initiative that has been in preparation for the last twelve months. It was preceded by the request presented to the Ministry of Interior of several persons belonging to this new secular movement to delete the mention of their religious affiliation from the official Registry of citizens' birth, marriage and death. In Lebanon, marriage, death and inheritance are not governed by a single unified law, but each citizen has to submit to the specifics of the religious community to which they belongs. There is no possibility to contract a civil marriage inside Lebanon. In addition, when two persons of a different religious community want to marry, one of the two has to abandon its religious community to join the community of the other (especially between Christians and Muslims). There have been many attempts to introduce a law allowing civil marriage and governing such marriage and inheritance – the last one being in 1998. However, they all failed in front of the opposition of religious leaders and of political personalities who play on sectarianism to remain in power.

The launch of the initiative came at a time when the Lebanese sectarian political system was again proving that it does not work adequately and can lead to serious domestic crises fuelled by foreign interventions when the regional situation is tensed, as is presently the case. The Center that is being created to support the initiative has as a main objective to promote a secular system of government in Lebanon that will consolidate the sense of citizenship and belonging and allow the proper functioning of the Rule of Law and of the democratic institutions of the country.

The system envisaged is not designed to suppress the religious communities and suppress expression of religious and cultural pluralism that is the essence of the Lebanese society. Rather, the aim is to limit the role played by these communities in the political and civil life of the country. A unified civil law governing personal status should be enacted but should not be compulsory if a person would like to continue to submit to a specific religious law governing marriage and inheritance. The creation of a Senate should allow for the opinion of religious to be heard on certain key issues, but the Chamber of representatives should be freed from their distribution according to religious community affiliation as is presently the case. The electoral system should be reviewed to become proportional – instead of the present majority system – so that all political and cultural opinions could be well reflected.

It is important to note that among the promoters of the Initiative we find the former President of the Chamber of representatives, Mr. Hussein El Husseini, a highly

respected figure who played a key role in the eighties to prevent the disintegration of the State and the functioning of the Parliament under the worst war conditions that Lebanon was enduring at that time. He was also a promoter of the Taif agreement that paved the way to the constitutional amendments in 1989 and that contributed to the end of the long period of violence from 1975-1990. We also find Mr. Najeeb Mikati who was chosen as Prime minister during the very difficult period after the assassination of Rafiq Al-Hariri and the 2005 parliamentary elections. The group of initial promoters includes also many well know figures defending human rights and the rule of law.

Georges Corm is Professor at the Institut de sciences politiques at Saint-Joseph University in Beirut. He is also by profession an economist and financial consultant. He has been Minister of Finance in the Government of Dr. Salim El Hoss (1998-2000). He has published various books on Lebanon and on the Arab World and its relations with the Western powers.

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