

Democracy in Lebanon - Challenges and Prospects

Shafakat Hassan Mirza

M.A. Kashmir and South Asia Studies

ABSTRACT: Democracy refers to the rule of the people. It is a system of representational government wherein people have the right to determine their social, economic and political course. Over the past centuries and decades, as the world has been embracing democracy, as a political ideal, some parts of the globe lag behind. Middle East, with its unique history and geographic importance being one among them; remains the center of discussion. Within the Middle East itself, Lebanon enjoys a very special position; not only for geo-political and economic reasons, but more so for its peculiar demographics. Divided among 18 recognized confessions, Lebanon offers a rich blend of fracture and unity. It is this mix of a small yet diverse society, limping its way towards an inclusive and successful polity that has been put to light in this paper. With its internal nuances and external flavors; Lebanon offers a test for the metal of democracy. The challenges it has and is still facing, and the prospects it enjoys for the future have been delved in this essay.

KEYWORDS: Lebanon, Middle East, Democracy, Hezbollah, Syria, Arab Spring, Confessionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Why democracy? Why Lebanon?

As far as the former, may I quote the words of Amratya Sen,

‘Nevertheless, among the great variety of developments that have occurred in the twentieth century, I did not, ultimately, have any difficulty in choosing one as the preeminent development of the period: the rise of democracy’. (Sen, 1999)

I completely second the Nobel Laureate Economist. Not far back in human history, a polity based on equality, a state based on the notion of serving people; *for the people, by the people and of the people*, would not only have been ludicrous, but also unimaginable. Nonetheless, democracy did come – though not all of a sudden. It came partly, slowly, sometimes with a thud and sometimes neatly creeping through various layers of human organization. In any case, democracy did arise. The idea that people ought not to be ruled, but governed. That government is not a divine institution, but a human one – for the welfare of humans only. That no one is above law and that all are equal in the eyes of the state; has taken firm roots, at least in political discourse.

As democracy gained a firm foothold in the Western countries, some parts of the world, even till date, lack in democratic institutions; free, fair and timely elections, independent judiciary, vibrant civil society, free media, law and order etc. Among them, Middle East – for its peculiar history and geo-economic-political location carries an intriguing position. Political scientists have been trying to decipher as to why Democracy could not flourish in the Middle East, and why the region is still characterized by broken states, tribal alliances, and lack of order, dictatorships and brazen human rights violations.

In the Middle East itself, lies our second question, put forth at the beginning of this paper; Why Lebanon? Among all of the Middle Eastern countries, why this country? The reason being, that Lebanon in so many ways is an amalgamation of divergent trends and ideas. Unlike other parts of the Middle East is has a demography divided on sectarian lines, with almost equal strength – that has been an essential factor in Lebanese politics. It is the confluence of major historic and religious traditions of the worlds. It has seen a bloody civil war, as well as a democracy; both in its recent part. Parts of it are as modern as any Western nation, and parts still very traditional and anachronistic. Not only that - even in terms of its economic organization, it is the only part of the erstwhile Ottoman Empire to have witnessed feudalism (Pelham P. M., 2019); considered by a major section of scholarship as a necessary prelude to industrialism and eventually democracy. But, most of all, as a region which has seen brutal dictatorships, religious wars and persecutions, Lebanon offers a tremendous potential as a democratic society – that despite its chequered history and sectarian past, overcomes itself to become a vibrant multicultural democracy.

Hence, a study of Democracy vis. a vis. Lebanon - is a study of the potential that democracy has in a region and society ridden with conflict and war. It is a futuristic study of the region and what it offers as a political lesson to rest of the world.

THE MAKING OF LEBANON: FROM THE NATIONAL ACCORD TO THE TAIF AGREEMENT

The recent political history of Lebanon has been ridden with a mix of conflict and reconciliation. Right from its inception, Lebanon has been a hotbed of a love hate relationship among various political forces. Despite, the French protection of the Maronite population, the mercantile class of the Christians and the Muslims resolved to form an independent Lebanon (Pelham P. M., 2019). Since then, in 1943; the year of independence, the political landscape of Lebanon has been marred by sectarianism. Immediately after independence, in an unwritten 'National Accord' the parliamentary seats were divided 6:5, among Christians and Muslims respectively (Lebanon: The Legacy of Sectarian Consociationalism and the Transition to a Fully-fledged Democracy, 2013). This arrangement, also referred to as Confessional Democracy, has worked in providing a power sharing arrangement among the contending parties. As such, it has allowed for at least a fair semblance of democracy, in an otherwise undemocratic region. But, it has not been able to prevent the fissures appearing in the fault lines; eventually leading to a civil war from 1975-1990. Though the arrangement gave way to a democratic setup, it did not bring about a democratic society, which remained divided on the lines of faith. As such, the internal factors for the bloody civil war were: a change in respective religious populations, outdated the National Accord, with Muslims demanding a proportionate share in power and the lack of a common Lebanese identity leading to a variance of foreign alliances; with Muslims naturally favouring Palestine, and also giving refuge to many Palestinians after the 1967 war, while Israel in turn making alliances with the Maronite Christians. (Khalil, 2013) The war finally ended under the terms of the Taif agreement, however retaining a sectarian, through slightly different polity. (Khalil, 2013). Joseph Bahout rightly points about the agreement,

'The agreement was organized around three guiding principles: the establishment of a new balance between the unity of Lebanon and its political system and the diversity of the country's political and social structure; the transfer of executive power from the presidency of the republic to the Council of Ministers as a collective body; and the principle of parity between Muslims and Christians in the parliament, the cabinet, and the higher echelons of the civil service, regardless of future demographic developments' (Bahout, 2016)

If one analyses the Taif agreement, one can feel the subtle way it deals with contending issues; like political demarcation, the Lebanese army and Syria. As a well crafted agreement; it did bring an accord among the contending parties. Lebanon has seen somewhat fair elections and governments, but a completely unified Lebanese entity still remains elusive. Fawwaz Traboulsi goes at length to analyze the agreement,

The Document of National Understanding adopted in Ta'if had envisaged a solution to the Lebanese crisis in two stages. The Second Republic it gave birth to was to lead to a Third Republic in which political sectarianism would be abolished. Article 95 was modified to commit the first elected Parliament to create a special council for that purpose, without fixing a time limit for the achievement of the abolition. The Third Republic, liberated from political sectarianism, would be inaugurated by the election of a non-sectarian Parliament. The sects, would be represented in a Senate similar to that of the 1926 constitution, which would have a decisive vote on issues of a national character. However, the council for the abolition of sectarianism is yet to be created, faced with open opposition of the Christian leaders and tacit opposition from the rest of the sectarian leaders.

He continues,

In practical terms, the Ta'if regime reproduced the sectarian system, but with a sizeable modification in the balance of power among its constituents. To begin with, parity between Christians and Muslims replaced the previous 6:5 ratio in the distribution of Parliament seats, which were increased to 128, and of cabinet portfolios. In addition, sectarian quotas were abolished in civil service posts, the judiciary, the army and the police. The only exception to this was 'degree one' posts, that is, the general directors of ministries, where a system of parity and rotation was to be applied so no degree-one post would be reserved for a specific sect. More importantly, the prerogatives of the president of the republic were severely curtailed in favour of the prime minister, the cabinet, and the Parliament and its speaker, all confirmed in their representation of the Maronite, Shi'i and Sunni sects respectively.

Summarizing the result of the accord, he says,

In that sense, the Ta'if Agreement merely created another system of discord. (Traboulsi, 2007)

BEYOND TAIF

Taif did signal an apparent end to the conflict, but the fissures remained and the fault lines sustained themselves. New developments arose creating new rifts and fresh calculations. Shias, who were usually a marginalized community, had slowly started to assume prominence. With their growing population, in a fragile demographic environment, and raising awareness created by the likes of Imam Musa al Sadr and Hezbollah, Shias started emerging as a strong force to reckon with. People who were usually confined to the South of Lebanon, the suburbs of Beirut and in the northern Bekaa valley and Hirmil region, usually under the patronage of their 'Zuamaa'; leaders, started anew with vigour - that in due course would set new precedents not only for Lebanon, but for the region itself.

Israeli occupation had given a genuine reason for a resistance group like Hezbollah to exist. The Israeli military intervention in Lebanon began in 1978 with the 'Litani Operation', intended to push the Palestine fighters north of the river. Despite UNSC resolution, Israel sustained a security zone inside of Lebanon for 22 years; withdrawing in 2000. During these years, especially since the 1990's, Hezbollah came up as the major resistance against the occupying forces. Though the period between 2000-2006 was one of detente – peace crumbled when in July 2006 war broke out between Hezbollah and Israel (Norton, 2007). Hezbollah performed beyond expectations. The force, far from the stated Israeli objective of being dismantled, came out stronger. While some inside Lebanon would go on to raise serious apprehensions as to how a non-state actor can be allowed to wage a private war, which left much of the post civil-war reconstruction in disarray, Hezbollah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah; came out as eventual heroes. Not only in the Shia world, but the Muslim world in general expressed emotions that went far beyond sympathy for the militant organization. As the ratings of Hezbollah skyrocketed, a news paper in Cairo epitomized is by hailing Nasrallah as the new Nasser (Pelham P. M., 2019).

This event came in between two other major events, that did not go well for the 'across the lines' support base of Hezbollah. In 2005, Rafiq al Hariri was killed in a car bomb, which provoked mass uprising against the Syrian forces. And, by April 2005, the last Syrian soldier had left Lebanon, ending a three-decade presence (Pelham P. M., 2019). These protests also referred to as the Cedar revolution gave rise to two contending alliances: the March 8 alliance – a pro-Syrian alliance including Hezbollah and March 14 alliance – an anti-Syrian alliance, led by Sa'd al Hariri the son of Late Rafiq al Hariri.

The other event came in May 2008, when government ordered the seizure of Hezbollah's internal telecommunications system, prompting Hezbollah to take over central Beirut. The government and its forces could not do much, while Hezbollah appeared to be stronger than the national army. An agreement was eventually signed in Doha, to resolve the issue. Hezbollah translated a military victory into a political one. It withdrew from West Beirut, in exchange for enough seats in the government to veto any unilateral decision by the March 14 alliance (Pelham P. M., 2019).

What is worth noting is that though the confessional system has fixed the fault lines, the fixation has been makeshift. For a Lebanon that is both democratic and prosperous, a unified Lebanese identity has to be created, to which the present set-up seems to be a hindrance.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ACTORS

While conversing about Lebanon, one can neither wish away local nor foreign actors. As we discuss Lebanese democracy, it is not only the politics within the borders of Lebanon that matters, but beyond the borders as well. Staring with Syria, out of whose body politic Lebanon was drawn out, has ever since being a major factor in Lebanese politics. Syrian army in the past has been in Lebanon, only to be withdrawn after the Cedar Revolution (Bahout, 2016). And still, the Syria civil war has spilt over its borders in Lebanon; not only in military terms, but also the million or so refugees, who had to be somewhat accommodated in a country with a population of less than 5 million. The Syrian civil war has also somewhat divided Lebanon, with Hezbollah whom most Lebanese have usually considered a legitimate resistance against Israel (Chuciar, 2006) taking active side with the Syrian regime. Though many, especially among the Shias, still consider Hezbollah to be a resistance force, their involvement outside of Lebanon, has created a serious dent to their support base inside and outside of Lebanon. Muslims countries where its popularity was very high, has witnessed a steep decline; after its support for the Assad regime (Norton, 2007).

Hezbollah which owes existential help from Iran and Syria (Sousa, 2014) in itself has evolved over the years, from just an uncompromising revolutionary militia, to a democratic and welfare political party (Sousa, 2014) – a transition that can be clearly seen from the uncompromising 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Strategic Manifesto (Norton, 2007). Hezbollah is no more just a revolutionary, idealistic militia, but a body that is involved in every aspect of the Lebanese society. From running successful

elections campaigns, to providing affordable health care; Lebanon has changed Hezbollah, as much as Hezbollah has changed Lebanon.

Associated with Syria and Hezbollah is the third point in the triangle i.e. Iran. With Israel as an arch enemy, Hezbollah fits perfectly into the geo-strategic chessboard of Middle East. Bordering Israel and having fought with extreme success in the 2006 war, Hezbollah acts both ideologically as well as militarily as an extended arm of Iran; and the road that connects al-Junub to Tehran goes through Damascus. In terms of a democratic Lebanon, the natural implication would be that both Iran and Syria would wish for an armed Hezbollah. While Lebanese parties are divided as to how the UN resolutions on disarming Hezbollah need to be implemented – what cannot be contested is that (eventually) a democratic country cannot have private armies, and that the Lebanese army would have to take command under a civilian leadership. When this will take place, only time shall answer!

Talking about political actors, before we discuss other foreign players, it might be apt to further some points about the local actors. A brilliant analysis of the same, in the current context has been given by Nizar Hassan in his study of the political manifestos and agendas of various Lebanese factions and parties, ahead of the 2018 Parliamentary elections. A comparative reading, as has been made by the author, gives a very profound understanding of Lebanese politics. Though, one can see differences on certain issues; from the Amal and Hezbollah taking a strong stand for resistance against Israel, and the FPM headed by Micheal Aoun supporting the liberation of Lebanese lands, to the FM headed by Saad al Hariri explicitly mentioning that arms shall be solely held by the state – a tacit disapproval of Hezbollah carrying arms, etc. (Add to this numerous other, smaller parties, including Sab'aa, which has vehemently campaigned from human and women's rights). But, what remains worth noting is that there is a broad agreement about the contours of the Lebanese state – an inclusive and welfare state (Hassan, 2019). And, this broad consensus, I consider, is what gives genuine hope for a vibrant democracy in Lebanon.

As we talk about Iran and Syria, let us not forget that there are no less, if not equally important, actors in Lebanese politics; including Saudi Arabia – which has usually sided with the Hariris. One gets the idea of the clout that the Saudis have, or are trying to have, over Lebanese politics, by the recent fiasco with Sa'ad al Hariri; who was kept 'hostage' by the Saudis. (C.M, 2017). While Saudi Arabia has usually looked at Iran as an arch-nemesis; post 1979, the obsession has taken new heights under the leadership of Muhammad bin Salman. As such, Lebanon is one of the arenas where the two heavy weights of Middle Eastern politics i.e. Iran and Saudi fight their battles. With Iran pushing in one direction and the Saudis in another, the prospects for a vibrant and inclusive democracy get bleak. But, recent protests in Lebanon, spearheaded by the youth are a very positive indicator that the new generation is fed up of the old alliances and wants a new Lebanon – a Lebanon that is both prosperous and inclusive.

Besides Saudi Arabia, Israel and USA are also important players in the geo-political chessboard of Lebanon. Lebanon has witnessed a brutal occupation and invasion of its territory by Israel – which is the *raison d'être* for the existence of Hezbollah in the South. But, over the last decade, with Israel vacating South Lebanon and both sides showing willingness to delineate its maritime borders, peace can be expected in the long run – though popular sentiment in Lebanon is still very much against Israel and its policies.

In case of USA, the report card isn't either filled with stars. Lebanese, to say the least, take USA with a pinch of salt. The traditional US support for Israel has had few takers in Lebanon. Especially, with Israel invading and occupying Lebanon, and helping perpetrate massacres like the one in Sabra and Shatila (Baylouny, 2009). But at the same time, Bilal Y. Saab from the Brookings claims vehemently, as to why and how US sees Lebanon as a potential model for democracy (Saab, 2010).

PEOPLE ON THE STREETS

In the most recent elections, the good performance of Hezbollah was a major point of discourse. But, there were more important observations to be made. Tamara Cofman Wittes, rightly points out some (Wittes) – like the peaceful conduct of elections and the political preferences of voters. But, another point worth laying more stress is the decreasing number of people participating in the electoral process. Down from 54%, only 49% cast their vote. Despite, colossal issues at hand, a majority staying at home on the Election Day, cannot be a good sign. The hopelessness, as we can realize, was released through the anger on the streets in 2019; also called as the 'October Revolution'. Sparked by new tax proposals, the protests spread wide. With the famous slogan, *all of them mean all of them*, the protests continued with a wide base. Commenting on the demands of the protests, a early write-up in Foreign Policy remarks,

The decentralized nature of the protest movements across Lebanon, and the diversity of political views, means that demands vary. However, there are a series of overarching demands that have resonated among the vast majority of protesters.

They first called for the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's cabinet, insisting that it be replaced with a downsized and independent technocratic government. Although there is not a consensus on what that would look like, many protesters have called for it to be made up of people coming from outside the established political parties. They have also called for early parliamentary elections with a new electoral law for elections that are not based on sectarian proportionality. Finally, they have called for an independent investigation into stolen and misappropriated public funds.

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There have also been calls for the resignation of other top officials, including Aoun, as well as calls for the direct popular election of the president, who is currently selected by Parliament. (KAREEM CHEHAYEB, 2019)

Though there have been many resignations and new governments have formed - the issues remain unsettled, and people continue to resort to street protests. As the economy worsens under covid-19, the future of Lebanon seems to be in dire crisis, with the World Bank offering several pessimistic assessments of Lebanese economy,

Lebanon's GDP is expected to decrease by 19.2% in 2020, compared to its 6.7% decrease in 2019. Tourism has been hit particularly hard by the virus; tourist arrivals fell by 71.5% in the first five months of 2020. Inflation rose 120% from January to August and private sector activity has shrank considerably.

By 2021, more than half of Lebanon will be in poverty, according to the World Bank. (Al-Monitor, 2020)

While Lebanese government seeks a bail out from the IMF; both IMF (Al-Monitor, 2020) and friendly countries (Farhat, 2019) demand widespread reforms, that seem hard to come by. For one, vested interests would prove serious obstacles to any reform actions. Second, austerity measures by government will take a heavy toll on an already ailing population (Hamdan, 2020). Though there are elements of sectarian affiliation present in these protests, even Hezbollah has not shied away in accepting that the country is in dire crisis and needs reforms. Speaking of tackling corruption as Lebanon's priority (Azar, 2019), and even partially agreeing to IMF help, albeit conditionally (talib, 2019), Hezbollah and its support base does not contend the issues at hand. As Nasrallah derided the idea of another change in the government, he did not back off from the idea of putting the house in order,

Let this government continue but with a new spirit and new way of working and let it learn its lessons from the last two days of popular outburst. (Al-Nahar, 2019)

As a deadly explosion rocked Beirut in August 2020, killing at least 100 and injuring another 4000, some called it the Chernobyl moment of Lebanon (Hashem, 2020). It summarized everything that was wrong with Lebanon – security crisis, private interest, contending political actors, foreign influence and a dying economy.

Still, we see people hoping and fighting for change; for a future where they are free from hunger and despair. In the present deadlock the keys to the solution seem hard to find, but by and large, people know where to find them - In an inclusive and vibrant democracy.

CONCLUSION

As has been explained in fair detail, Lebanese democracy cannot be measured only in numbers. The implications it has, in terms of the region, and the world, are far greater than a mere head count. As such, a study of Lebanon and its polity; both past and future, is a study in human organizational potential. It is a study for the test of democracy in itself.

The question we are dealing with is – What challenges have been and are still faced by a multi-sectarian Lebanon in its full transition towards a democracy. And, what prospects lie ahead of it as an inclusive democratic country.

In this study, I have, though very briefly, made an attempt at deciphering the multiple trends and shades of Lebanese history and culture, its politics and thought; as to how they shape what Lebanon is today and how they will construct what Lebanon would be tomorrow.

To summarize what has been said, Riad al-Khoury, elegantly points out the present and future of Lebanese democracy. While he rightly argues that Lebanon is a quasi-democracy; with some features being democratic, while some others not so, he also advocates creative measures like a non-confessional house of representative, while retaining the confessional senate, decentralization etc. to further the democratic process (al-Khoury, 2006)

As of now, while we have seen the fallouts of the Arab Spring, the future of Lebanon looks potentially both dark and bright (I prefer to believe the latter) – Since on one side, there is a looming economic collapse; with one after another government failing to fulfil the demands on the street. While the popular protests have set in motion a transition of sorts, the way out seems to be blocked, with International agencies not willing to bail out Lebanon, without reformative action; action that would require political unity, tough

decision making, and some more hardships (at least for a while) - all of the three seem least coming. As such, Lebanon seems to be on the edge of a precipice; the ultimate epitome of which was the signing of petitions in Lebanon; calling for a French mandate (Pollet, 2020). But, having said that, I also assert, that Lebanon has a tremendous economic and political potential - Times may be hard, but they are only the labour pangs of a new Lebanese polity. The strength of Lebanon does not lie in its political oligarchy, but the people of the country – especially the educated youth bulge: with a median age of 29.6 and literacy above 95 (Human Development Reports - Lebanon, 2020); which will eventually force the political elite to bow for their own survival, setting forth the dawn of a new Lebanon.

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