Like a Bumblebee. Politics, Society, and Security in Lebanon

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In a comment made immediately after the parliamentary elections, BBC correspondent Kim Ghattas tweeted on 8 May, 2018: "Here's my take on Lebanese election results, as someone once said: 'if you think you understand Lebanon, someone's just explained it badly to you.' Lebanon is a country of nuance, not black and white. Maybe bleak, but not black and white." I guess this point is certainly true about Lebanon and probably about all countries. So at the risk of painting it black and white, I will attempt to give a brief overview of developments in recent years in Lebanon, and readers can feel free to fill in the nuances and colours they believe are missing.

Historical Background

After the First World War, Lebanon came under the control of the French Mandate of Lebanon and Syria and, following military conflicts, the French carved out what is today the territory of Lebanon. In 1943, a new elected government abolished the French Mandate but allied forces kept the new republic occupied during the Second World War, and Lebanon only obtained its independence in 1946.[1] However, from 1943 the establishment of Lebanon as a multi-confessional republic took place based on an unwritten agreement, the National Pact, which divided executive power and political institutions along confessional lines. The idea behind establishing the new republic as multi-confessional by giving different groups and constituencies a predetermined representation in government and parliament, so-called consociationalism, was to secure all groups in the highly divided Lebanese society a share of the power and the ruling of the country, thus avoiding internal conflicts or even civil war. The philosophy was that by giving all publicly recognized confessions, of which there are 18, a part in the political power, through their leaders, it would ease tensions between the groups.

When conflicts arose, first in 1958 and again in 1975, the latter leading to a 15-year long civil war, the system did not exactly fulfil its aim. Foreign interventions and interference from Syria, Israel, Iran, the US, and France, as well as the presence of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, including the leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), also contributed to intensifying the conflicts leading to the civil war. However, negotiations in the Saudi Arabian city of Taif in 1989 paved the way for an agreement that ended the war in 1990. With some significant amendments, e.g. representation in the Parliament was changed from the original 6:5 in favour of the Christians to a 1:1 ratio between Christians and Muslims and a reduction of the President's executive power, the consociational system continued to constitute the basis for the post-war political system.[2] The Taif agreement also stipulated that foreign forces were to withdraw, but Israel continued to occupy southern

[1] D.K. Fieldhouse. *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958,* London: Oxford University Press 2006, pp 304-334
[2] Arend Lijphart. "Consociational Democracy," *World Policy*, Vol. 21(2): pp 207-225 (1969); Lars Erslev Andersen. "Arrested Development in Beirut: Migration, Security and Dilemmas of Consociational Democracy," December 2017 in *International Relations and Diplomacy* 5, 10, p. 594-606; Kenneth Vaughan: "Who Benefits from Consociationalism? Religious Disparities in Lebanon's Political System," *Religions* 2018, 9, 51

Lebanon until 2000, while Syria had forces on the ground until 2005. Only after a US and French-sponsored UN Security Council resolution in 2004 and heavy demonstrations in the streets of Beirut following the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in a bomb explosion in 2005, did Syria leave Lebanon. The Taif agreement further demanded all militias to disarm, but the Shia Muslim party Hezbollah, which Iran established during the civil war, refused and is today stronger militarily than the Lebanese Armed Forces. The consequence of the crisis and the major demonstrations that followed the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005 was the formation of two main blocs in Lebanese politics named after the days of the demonstrations. The first one is the March 8 bloc, comprising Hezbollah, (Shia Muslim) Amal, and the Free Patriotic Movement, a Maronite Christian group headed by the present President Michel Aoun. The second is the March 14 bloc, headed by the Sunni Muslim Saad al-Hariri, son of the murdered Prime Minister, leader of the Future Movement, and supported by the (Christian) Lebanese Forces (LF) and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party.

Politics

Tensions between especially the Sunni Muslims, headed by Saad al-Hariri, and Hezbollah culminated in a direct confrontation in 2008 which was settled by an agreement in Doha in Qatar. From then on, it was clear that neither of the blocs had the strength or could totally dominate the other, a kind of national consensus on security developed. The priority for the power-sharing elite, many former warlords from the civil war, is to sustain their own power and part of the Lebanese cake leading to a massive gap between the State, run by the elite, and society. As a consequence, society is more or less left to its own devices and relies on private initiatives to solve the many social and economic problems that haunt the ordinary Lebanese people, be it reliable electricity and water supply, access to health and education services, unemployment or problems related to the presence of Syrian and Palestinian refugees. Added to that are widespread corruption and a *wasta* (personal network) system, which is an unavoidable precondition for anyone navigating through the bureaucratic labyrinths of the public institutions to obtain state-authorized documents.[3]
The result is a feeling of mistrust among the Lebanese towards the State, the public institutions and the political system, including the Parliament. Instead, most people rely on their local leaders or family members in the system to get things done. This mistrust became all too evident during the Garbage crisis in the summer of 2015. When the authorities failed to reach an agreement for a new landfill contract to replace one that had come to an end, garbage piled up in the streets of Beirut. The smell was unbearable but the politicians were unable to come up with any new and sustainable solutions. Under the slogan *You Stink*, young people started organizing demonstrations, which gathered tens of thousands in central Beirut from all over Lebanon.

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Their agenda was a non-sectarian protest against government corruption and inefficiency and the political elite reacted by getting together, creating patchwork solutions to the garbage problem, not really solving it, crushing the demonstrations and intimidating the youth movement by accusing it of sectarianism and even of being infiltrated by jihadists. The crisis ended with no sustainable solution to the garbage problem, a smashed youth movement, and a city centre, where the Parliament and presidential palace are located, completely deserted because of restricted access, enforced in an effort to avoid new demonstrations. The elite survived but the problems continued.

[3] In *Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2016*, Lebanon is ranked 136 out of 176 states regarding corruption.

However, the success of the *You Stink movement* in mobilizing massive support inspired other civil society activists, university professors, journalists, artists, human rights advocates and many others to form a list under the name *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut, My City) to run for the municipal elections in Beirut the following May in 2016. They gathered around a non-sectarian agenda against corruption and insisting on the city's sustainable green development and solutions to the infrastructural problems. History repeated itself: the list garnered strong support among the Lebanese people, but the Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, whose party, the Future Movement, controls the city council, stepped in, backed by the rest of the political elite, and, through legal and, according to civil society sources, non-legal measures, secured victory for his party. Again, the established parties and their leaders from the elite survived the challenge from a civil society-based opposition, while essentially nothing was done to solve the many problems in the capital.[4]

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The panorama remains unchanged: the elite busies itself with internal power struggles in the power-sharing political system, while saving necessary reforms for an unclear future date. The multiple postponements of parliamentary elections is another example: in 2013, the reason was a disagreement over a new electoral law; in 2014 it was due to the complex negotiations to find a new president as the current President's term came to its end. The leaders took two years to discuss what many had anticipated would be the result right from the outset; namely, that Hezbollah's candidate Michel Aoun would become the new President at the cost of appointing Saad al-Hariri as Prime Minister in 2016. Then, the discussion of the electoral law was again put on the table with the intent of changing the 'winner-takes-all system' with proportional representation. However, this could not come about without setting limitations on the proportionality, in order to secure the representation of the established parties' candidates and avoid any significant progress by independent candidates. At last, in June 2017, they agreed on the new election law and scheduled parliamentary elections for 6 May, 2018 – nine years after the last ones. Unsurprisingly, discussing this issue round the clock left little energy for resolving Lebanon's social and economic problems.

The elections took place as scheduled. Both Hezbollah and Amal got their anticipated victory, thereby enabling them to block all legislation they do not approve of in the new Parliament. Saad al-Hariri and his Future Movement lost seats, as expected, and not many independents made it into the Parliament – and those who did will probably not have much influence. Hezbollah's victory was cause for concern within the region, as well as speculations over whether the group would leave the unity government. However, a unity government with a weaker Saad al-Hariri as Prime Minister was a favourable outcome for them – after all, Hezbollah is now in control of the Parliament. When Saad al-Hariri, while on a visit to Saudi Arabia in November 2017, surprised everyone by resigning, under pressure from the Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman in Riyadh, it was Hezbollah and Michel Aoun that made every effort to get him back in. In war-torn Syria, Hezbollah and its patron, Iran, have gained a stronghold and will probably let neither internal sectarian conflicts nor a war with Israel endanger this year-long endeavour (but there is concern over the possibility of a new Israeli-Lebanese war in the near future). Analysts are therefore predicting that, despite its electoral victory, Hezbollah will show some restraint in both domestic politics and its actions re-

[4] Tamirace Fakhoury. "Lebanon's consociational politics in post-2011 Middle East," in Maximilian Felsch and Martin Wählish, *Lebanon and the Arab Uprisings. In the eye of the hurricane*, London: Routledge 2016; Maha Yahya, "The Summer of Our Discontent: Sects and Citizens in Lebanon and Iraq," *Paper*, 30 June, 2017, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut

garding Israel. Hence, after nine years of quarrels, discussion and negotiation and, finally, the holding of parliamentary elections, most things seem to be as they always have been in Lebanese politics, with the addition that Hezbollah is politically stronger than ever before.

Syrian Refugees and Social Problems

When the Syrian war sent a million refugees to Lebanon in less than two years, the Palestinians and Lebanese welcomed them. They were familiar with working with Syrians who often migrated between Syria and Lebanon for work. Nobody knows how many Syrians actually lived and worked in Lebanon before the refugee crisis but many estimate that the number is in the region of half a million. Today, many of these migrants have been termed refugees by the Lebanese and Palestinians, local residents therefore fearing these new 'refugees' will take their jobs, create inflation and are the cause of all kinds of problems in Lebanese society, today, such as a fast-growing drug problem and related criminality, including rapes and child prostitution.

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Thus, exposed to increasing unemployment and social problems, the Palestinians and Lebanese are buying into the government's discourse, which is that the cause of their misery is having approximately one and half million refugees living in their country. Their attitudes towards the Syrians have thus transformed from kind hospitality to mistrust, anger and enmity, which causes violence and tension between the different populations. The problems are especially manifest in the slums and in the Palestinian refugee camps where unemployment, drugs, and criminality are increasingly challenging life for the people who are most vulnerable in Lebanon. In addition, Lebanese citizens from the so-called middle class believe that Syrians are taking all the jobs in bars, restaurants and hotels. The response from the government is increasingly to work towards returning the refugees to Syria, and it has already deported thousands to so-called safe areas.[5]

Perspectives

Given the state of Lebanese politics in general, the emergence of a consensus across the government parties when it comes to national security might seem to contradict the ongoing political paralysis that prevails when it comes to reforms, the economy, infrastructure and social affairs. Political news in Lebanon is essentially a never-ending repetition of disagreements on the same issues. This is because all parties want their share of the cake, and none will give up what they already have, which makes Lebanon a very weak state when it comes to dealing with the enormous problems that face Lebanese society, whether that means the refugee crisis, poverty, infrastructural problems or social affairs. Left on its own with not much help or assistance from the State, Lebanese society is managing to get by thanks to the support of the international donor community, which has been the main actor in helping the refugees and in developing the health and education sectors. Thus, Lebanon is a strong state concerning security but a very weak state when it comes to managing a poor economy and increasing social problems. Looking at the vast amount of problems in the tiny republic, Lebanon is surprisingly stable and society goes on. Indeed, the country is not unlike a bumblebee: against all the odds it still manages to fly.

[5] Lars Erslev Andersen. *The Neglected Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the Syrian refugee crisis*, Danish Institute for International Studies: DIIS Report 2016:12