

Lebanon: Between Democratization and Islamization

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In 2010, Lebanon yet again embarked on another round of “national dialogue” to formulate a comprehensive and unified national defense strategy, and to tackle the regulation of armed militias and “resistance” groups, including Hizbollah.¹ The process, which was first inaugurated in 2006, has highlighted the differences between the ruling March 14 coalition – advocating a normalization of the internal power distribution by disarming all armed groups – and the Hizbollah-led opposition forces, which reject this option and stress the need to preserve a defense model based on the concept of popular resistance. The chances that the 2010 talks will lead to a definitive agreement on this topic are slim, as Lebanon’s current political environment is still sharply divided and the elected government largely lacks the strength to impose its political agenda on the opposition forces.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the 2005 Cedar Revolution, which culminated with the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the country has been struggling to implement a democratization and national reconciliation agenda while dealing with the rise of sectarian particularism and societal Islamization. On the one hand, Lebanon has adopted a series of political reforms to increase the transparency and effectiveness of its political system, hoping to move beyond the limits of sectarian politics and foster national unity, which is essential both to ensure internal stability and to adopt a national defense strategy. On the other hand, the path towards implementing broad political reforms has been stalled by the inherent weakness of the elected

government and its need to preserve a delicate power sharing arrangement with the opposition forces. In addition, preexisting sectarian divisions and particularism have only grown stronger in the past years, fueled in part by the rise of a more active and confrontational Salafist movement. Thus, the prospects of inter-sectarian conflict and radicalization have increased.

Democratization, Electoral Reforms, and Elections: A Prolonged Stalemate

Since 2005, Lebanon has launched a series of badly needed electoral reforms, with the goal of overcoming the practical and logistical fallacies of the electoral system in place during the years of Syrian “tutelage.” This process, which started in August 2005 with the creation of Fouad Boutros’s National Commission for a New Electoral Law, ultimately led the Parliament in September 2008 to approve a new law based on the Commission’s recommendations.²

These electoral reforms constituted an important first attempt to devise a more transparent, accountable, and ultimately democratic political system. Among its key achievements, the new electoral law introduced more stringent media and campaign financing regulation,³ and it effectively repealed the Syrian-based demarcation of the electoral districts, moving beyond the politics of gerrymandering and replacing the fourteen electoral districts established by the 2000 electoral law with 26 smaller districts.⁴ In turn, this provision made seat allocation more proportional by preventing occurrences of one political group gaining all the available seats in large electoral districts by a small margin, thus leaving all the other groups underrepresented.⁵

However, despite these significant improvements, the new electoral law still suffered from several shortcomings. First, the law fell short of dealing aggressively with vote buying, an extremely widespread and destructive pattern that critically undermines the transparency and integrity of the elections,⁶ and that allows external actors – like Iran or Saudi Arabia – to meddle into Lebanese national politics directly by funding the vote buying campaigns of their local political allies. Vote buying is such a common practice in Lebanon in part because the country does not rely on unified, pre-printed ballots, leaving parties the right to distribute their own pre-

printed ballots to clients and supporters and making it relatively easy to ensure that the money invested in buying votes does not go to waste.⁷ While the Boutros Commission had suggested introducing official uniform ballots to minimize the chances of vote buying and guarantee voting secrecy (currently undermined by the fact that all pre-printed ballots handed out by parties vary in color, size, and print),⁸ the Lebanese Parliament failed to implement this provision in its newly revised electoral law.

Second, the new electoral law did not enact the Boutros Commission's most important recommendation: the introduction of the principle of proportional representation into the Lebanese electoral system. The draft law had recommended electing the 128 MPs on the basis of a mixed system, with 77 deputies selected according to the current majoritarian system and 51 representatives chosen with a proportional system.⁹ Instead, the approved electoral law left in place the preexisting majoritarian block vote system, thus forfeiting the opportunity of moving beyond sectarianism and of strengthening national unity. Moreover, the newly approved electoral law did not adjust the political system's anomaly whereby Shia representatives require far more votes to be elected into office than Christian candidates. Although the Shia community has been growing exponentially in the past decades, the number of political seats assigned to them has not been altered to meet this new demographic reality.

Despite these serious flaws, the process that led to the approval of the 2008 electoral law is a positive step towards the promotion of national reconciliation and effective representation. Furthermore, even in the aftermath of the approval of the electoral law, the debate on the necessity of introducing new legislation on the subject has not ended: in March 2010 President Michel Suleiman reiterated the need to adopt the principles of proportional representation and go beyond sectarianism, thus re-opening the political debate on the topic.¹⁰ Similarly, there have been regular calls from the civil society to enact a series of additional political reforms, including full implementation of the recommendations contained in the original Boutros Draft Law.

The newly reformed electoral law was first implemented in the course of the June 2009 parliamentary elections, won by the anti-Syrian March 14 forces led by Saad Hariri's Future Movement, the same political alliance

that had spurred the 2005 Cedar Revolution. Therefore, at first sight, the March 14 victory – read together with the ongoing push towards electoral reforms – seems to confirm a trend of growing democratization of the Lebanese political system.

Nonetheless, the Lebanese political landscape of 2010 appears to be more complicated than meets the eye. The first issue is a function of the electoral system, which produces systemic disparities between the number of votes obtained by each party and the corresponding seats allocated.¹¹ Thus although the March 14 coalition won 71 of the 128 available seats, it obtained only roughly 45 percent of the total electoral votes, while the Hizbollah-led March 8 forces, despite gaining the remaining 55 percent of the votes, earned only 57 parliamentary seats.¹² In other words, while the elections confirmed the political power of the March 14 forces, they simultaneously recognized the popular and political legitimacy of the opposition forces. This confirmation of the opposition's political strength eventually led Saad Hariri, the elected prime minister, to agree to form a national unity executive cabinet in November 2009, integrating ten members of the Hizbollah-led opposition and five independent candidates appointed by President Suleiman to the fifteen cabinet members chosen by the March 14 coalition.¹³ In turn, this power sharing arrangement dramatically reduced the effective power of the elected majority and lowered the chances of speedily implementing its political agenda and planned reforms. Moreover, in the months following its electoral victory, the March 14 coalition was further undermined by the drifting of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), headed by Druze leader Walid Junblatt, away from Hariri's camp and closer to the March 8 forces and Syria.¹⁴

This state of internal division and weakness of the elected government now challenges the possibility of implementing sweeping reforms and adopting a cohesive national position on delicate subjects such as the formulation of a national defense strategy. In this sense, the 2009 electoral results and the political process in play since then seem to confirm the state of profound division of the Lebanese political and social arena.

Second, while it is true that the March 14 forces maintain a generally pro-Western and democratic orientation, the democratization and liberalization agenda does not belong exclusively to the majority coalition.

In fact, it is the Hizbollah-led opposition that has been at the forefront of the political campaign to introduce proportional representation and abolish the sectarian political system, measures generally interpreted as necessary to improve the degree of internal democracy within Lebanon. Similarly, the opposition engaged (without achieving any substantial results in the short term) in a political campaign for additional substantial reforms of the electoral law.¹⁵ Hizbollah's campaign against confessionalism and in favor of proportional representation is clearly shaped by self-interest: a proportional electoral system would in fact strongly favor the Shia community, underrepresented in the current electoral arrangement. Nonetheless, the common assumption on a clear cut division between pro-democracy forces (the March 14 coalition) and reactionary ones (the March 8 opposition coalition) constitutes a gross oversimplification and exaggeration of the actual political alignments.

Thus while Lebanon has gradually embarked on a process of democratization in the aftermath of the Syrian withdrawal, the serious shortcomings of the electoral reforms implemented, the current semi-paralysis of the elected government under the "national unity" arrangement, and the persistence of strong confessional divisions within society all hinder the internal democratization process. Another element that further contributes to weakening the prospects of national reconciliation and democratic development is the ongoing rise of particularism and identity politics, as exemplified by the trend of growing domestic Islamization.

The Rise of Particularism: Islamist and Salafist Influence in Lebanon

Since its founding in 1982, Hizbollah has proclaimed itself the main political force within the Lebanese Shia community. In the years following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, a number of Sunni Islamist groups have also gained increased power and legitimacy. During the Syrian occupation, Islamist groups were closely watched by the Syrians and prevented from criticizing both the government and the occupation, thus reducing these groups' political status and their level of activities.¹⁶ It is therefore not surprising that in recent years the level of political activism of historic Islamist political groups, such as al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group),

the local autonomous branch of the Muslim Brotherhood,¹⁷ or Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islam (the Islamic Unification Movement)¹⁸ has risen steadily. In addition, in 2006 the March 14 government legalized a previously banned Islamist party, Hizb al-Tahrir,¹⁹ in line with Hariri's Future Movement's strategy to coopt Islamist forces to boost the unity of the Sunni community.

Concomitant with the rise of Islamist political parties, there has also been a trend of increased activism among Islamist-Salafist groups, both through social and political activism as well as through military-jihadist operations. Salafist groups have been present in Lebanon since the 1980s, but they also increased their visibility and activism in the aftermath of the 2005 Syrian withdrawal. The Salafist movement includes both armed organizations as well as non-violent, "mainstream" Salafist groups, such as the *dawa*-based, Wahhabi-inspired al-Harakat al-Salafiyya, and the more reformist Lebanese Islamic Forum for Dialogue and Dawa.²⁰ While the Future Movement never publicly endorsed these groups, it has in the past fostered links with them by relying on the common anti-Syrian and Hizbollah agenda in an effort to unite the Sunni community and ensure the political dominance of the party. Not surprisingly, these efforts have been repeatedly criticized for both enhancing existing sectarian divisions within the Lebanese society and for threatening to radicalize the Sunni community.

Furthermore, Sunni Future Movement leaders have also been accused of turning a blind eye with respect to the rising influence of violent Salafist groups, allowing them to regroup and receive assistance from Saudi Arabia. Jihadist Salafist organizations have in fact become more prominent in the past few years, in part because of the "Iraqi spillover effect," namely, the ongoing return of *mujahidin* who fought in Iraq to their home countries or to the neighboring countries where they had once found safe haven. Thus far the main jihadist Salafist organizations in Lebanon are Asbat al-Ansar, Jund al-Sham, and the newer Fatah al-Islam. All these groups are mostly concentrated in the areas around Tripoli and the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in the north, and in Sidon and the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian camp in the south, and they are largely composed of Palestinian militants, although their ranks also include Lebanese and foreign fighters.²¹

The growing presence and influence of Salafist groups within Palestinian camps has in the past few years led to increased internal polarization, resulting both in challenges to the historic authority of Fatah over the camps and in repeated internal clashes along the Salafist secular line. While defying Fatah's supremacy within the camps, jihadist Salafist factions also began to openly attack the Lebanese state. In turn, this trend has partially undermined the long accepted bargain between the PLO and the Lebanese government, whereby Beirut abstained from interfering in the camp's administration and allowed Fatah to be in charge internally, in exchange for preventing "spillovers" of internal violence into Lebanon.

To date, the most serious confrontation between Salafist forces and the Lebanese government occurred in May 2007, when following Fatah al-Islam's ambush of an army checkpoint near Nahr al-Barid, the two sides engaged in a bloody confrontation that lasted over a hundred days, claiming more than 400 lives.²² Although the Salafists' defeat in 2007 inflicted a serious blow to these groups, and despite the strengthened surveillance that the government has been exercising over them, as of 2010 violent Salafists have not been entirely pacified.

Following Hizbollah's armed takeover of West Beirut in May 2008, pro-government Sunni factions and the pro-Hizbollah Alawite community clashed repeatedly in northern Lebanon, causing more than twenty fatalities between June and July 2008. The Sunni-Alawite conflict, which also saw the involvement of groups such as the Palestinian Salafist Jund al-Sham, was finally resolved in September 2009 when the two parties signed a reconciliation agreement.²³ However, despite the current cessation of the hostilities, the sectarian tensions between the two communities have not entirely disappeared and they are likely to surface again in the future.

In addition, violent Salafist groups have not ceased their operations against the state, and thus clashes either within the camps or with the Lebanese Armed Forces continue to occur periodically.²⁴ For example, in September 2009, Fatah al-Islam-affiliated cells were discovered monitoring UNIFIL bases in Lebanon, in an attempt to repeat the June 2007 car bomb attack that killed six UNIFIL members and wounded three others.²⁵ In addition, Salafist groups have maintained international terrorist ties with groups such as al-Qaeda, and have continued to participate in the

recruitment and dispatch of fighters to Iraq. For instance, in October 2009 the Lebanese authorities indicted 21 Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese militants for their alleged ties with Bin Laden's organization and for providing assistance to military jihad in Iraq.²⁶

The relationship between these Salafist groups and the more established and powerful Hizbollah has been tense, alternating between phases of reciprocal animosity and stages of open conflict, often reenacting preexisting tensions along Shia-Sunni lines. For instance, Jund al-Sham conducted a series of operations directly against Hizbollah, including the killing of a Hizbollah official in July 2004 and an April 2006 foiled plot to assassinate Hassan Nasrallah.²⁷ Yet in any case, the Salafist movement does not currently represent a serious threat to Hizbollah. While the Lebanese Salafists still appear to be rather marginal, both from a political as well as from a military point of view, the Shia organization remains a primary political actor within Lebanon, as well as the most powerful and sophisticated non-state armed group in the region. Nonetheless, and despite their secondary status when compared to the Shia Hizbollah, the rise of Islamist and Salafist forces within Lebanon represents a noteworthy phenomenon and contributes to strengthening preexisting confessional divisions within the country, further encouraging particularism, radicalization, and greater chances for inter-sectarian strife.

Navigating the Trends

The road towards the normalization of inter-sectarian relations within Lebanon is strewn with difficulties. Lebanese politics continue to be conceived as more community-based than nation-based, and the rise of the Islamist and Salafist movements since 2005 has only enhanced existing confessional divisions and encouraged sectarian particularism and radicalization. At the same time, another confessional organization, Hizbollah, has asserted its role as central political player, both by performing well in the 2009 parliamentary elections and by leveraging its popular and political power to obtain the creation of a national unity cabinet, thus transcending the role of a typical opposition party.

The intra-Lebanese security implications of a prolonged state of internal division and ongoing radicalization are negative, and include a higher risk

of eruption of internal conflict along confessional lines and a potential threat to internal stability. This in turn could have regional implications. Likewise, as far as the State of Israel is concerned, the rise of an Islamist and Salafist trend, especially in its jihadist form, represents a potential source of concern, as these groups' anti-Israeli ideological orientation has already occasionally turned operational (for instance, sporadically participating in the firing of rockets into Israel). In particular, these groups could significantly step up their armed activities against Israel in the event of renewed hostilities between Israel and Hizbollah, or even attempt to trigger the next round of armed confrontations.

Moreover, the lack of comprehensive and effective political reforms hinders the legitimacy of the political system and limits its capacity to promote true national reconciliation and unity, both necessary to ensure long term domestic stability. In addition, the current elected majority's effective capacity to govern and implement political and social reforms is impaired by the need to maintain a national unity cabinet with the opposition forces, a situation that could easily lead to a renewed political impasse.

In the short term, this leaves little room for optimism regarding dramatic changes both at the confessional and at the political level, as well as regarding the possibility of moving towards the approval of a national defense strategy. From an Israeli perspective, this means that expectations that UN Security Council Resolution 1701 will be implemented, or that the issue of dismantling existing armed groups such as Hizbollah will be tackled in the course of the upcoming national dialogue, are at best unrealistic. This fact is particularly worrisome in light of the recent Israeli claims first made by President Shimon Peres in April 2010 that Syria has been supplying Hizbollah with Scud missiles.²⁸ Following these initial revelations, Kuwait's *al-Rai al-Aam* newspaper specified that the alleged weapons transfer may have included Scud-D missiles, as well as anti-aircraft missiles.²⁹ These allegations were also backed by anonymous US intelligence sources,³⁰ although official sources subsequently specified that they had no direct confirmation of Scud missiles being provided to Hizbollah.³¹ Even so, the Obama administration did meet with Syrian diplomats in Washington to voice their concerns over the alleged transfer.³²

Since the initial release of these reports, Syria has vehemently denied the claims, stating that Israel is aiming to disrupt ongoing US-Syria engagement efforts.³³ Within Lebanon, political leaders agreed to refrain from discussing the issue publicly, while the PM dismissed the reports as without merit.³⁴ Hizbollah has similarly avoided commenting, but the group's MP Hassan Fadlallah criticized the US for giving credit to the Israeli allegations.³⁵ Yet if these claims were to be accurate, this would additionally heighten the tensions between the parties and the potential for military escalation. Israel would have reason to be highly concerned about Scud missiles in Hizbollah's possession, as even the shorter range type has the potential of reaching most of Israel. In this context, the question of Hizbollah's disarmament assumes a new, even more critical dimension.

Notes

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