

J' accuse, the Lebanese Citizen!

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Despite the euphoria felt in Lebanon over the withdrawal of Syrian troops, it should not be assumed that this is the prelude to far-reaching change. The latest events in Lebanon have attracted the world's attention. Global news networks, with around the clock reporting, are airing the latest from Beirut. Front pages of local, national, and international newspapers are bearing witness to a new array of monochromatic revolutionary colors. After the 'Orange Revolution of Ukraine' comes the 'Red Revolution of Lebanon'. However, while many Lebanese citizens believe that change is coming their way, questions remain. Where does this change emanate from? How legitimate are the present agents of change in a consociational democracy? Is the Lebanon citizen capable of assuming and sustaining this change?

It is significant that the protests over Syria's presence in Lebanon surfaced not in a natural, home-grown fashion from the people's will to challenge the 'occupation' but rather as a result of the dramatic shock of Rafik Hariri's assassination, combined with western pressure through UN Security Council Resolution 1559 and the US's 2004 Syrian Accountability Act.

Three months ago, it would have been surreal to conjugate the Syrian presence in Lebanon in the past tense. Syrian military forces have been in Lebanon for nearly three decades. They first came as a peace keeping force in 1976, called upon mainly by Christian Lebanese and endorsed by the Arab league, to end the so-called Lebanese civil war. Lebanese society has been divided ever since over the nature of this presence - as it was divided over every foreign presence in the country through history. The Ottomans, French, Palestinians, Israelis and most recently the Syrians all secured a Lebanese ally, often a confessional faction, to legitimize their military presence and help mould the country's political system. The role of the Lebanese citizen in determining the country's history of independence has traditionally been timid, subjugated to external regional 'power play' in determining the withdrawal of foreign troops. It is not a coincidence that many Lebanese reformist scholars argue that the country's 1943 independence from the French was not genuine and that its terms still need revising. Many issues have been perpetually debated and left unresolved - Arabization versus Lebanization; the constitution; power sharing formulas.

It would be illusory to believe that it is '*change from within*' that has freed Lebanon from Syrian military presence, which has always been an option under the Taif Accord of 1989. Once more the Lebanese have shown how much they remain divided on issues related to foreign intervention and the role it plays in shaping internal national politics.

It would also be mistaken to believe that George Bush's 'either-or' formula is a viable solution for much-needed change in a perplexed country like Lebanon. The Red western-powered Revolution presented many Lebanese citizens, especially those who are against the old confessional and sectarian establishment, with unenviable dilemmas:

'Either you are with UN resolution 1559 or you are with the Syrians...the terrorists'.

'Either you are with 1559 or you are with Hizbullah...the terrorists'.

'Either you are with the 1559 or you are against democracy, liberty, sovereignty and independence'.

And crucially, either you are 'with Syria' or with an opposition made up of warlords, corrupt decision makers and feudal leaders – many of whom for a long time sustained their political careers by acting as sub-contractors *for* Syrian interests in Lebanon.

Western policies have ostentatiously aimed at the revival of Lebanese consociational democracy and the rule of law. But those leading the movement for political change in Lebanon are not imbued with a strong democratic tradition. The West continuously preaches that democracy can only be achieved by rotation of power, renewal of the political elite, participation, free elections and a vibrant dynamic civil society. But this is not what is happening today in Lebanon. If there is rotation of power it is among different warlords and corrupt decision makers.

Indeed, Lebanon's political elite has been remarkably stable for many decades, based on the internal intra-elite consultations and balances that underpin the consociational democracy developed in the 1940s. In the midst of the current wave of change in Lebanon, both the West and the Lebanese citizen in fact risk contributing to maintaining the same figures on the political scene precisely by supporting many of the 'usual suspects' as 'the agents of change'.

It is deeply ironic that a politician like Walid Jumblat, leader of the Druze community and associated with sectarian cleansing in Mount Lebanon against the Christians during the war, has become the "Prince of Freedom" and a prominent figure of the Red Revolution. Samir Geagea, former chief of the Lebanese Forces - a Christian militia leader responsible for many massacres against Christian and Muslim Lebanese who is currently in jail for the assassination of former president of the Liberal party - has turned into a symbol of heroism. The supporters of the Red Revolution are considering his release, supposedly as a key ingredient of national reconciliation. And, the former commander-in-chief of the Lebanese Army and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, General Michel Aoun - who engaged in a 'supremacy of power' war against the Lebanese Forces in 1989 causing the death of thousands of Lebanese - considers himself as the godfather of the Syria Accountability Act and UNSCR 1559 and was welcomed as a national hero on May 7, 2005 after his fifteen years of exile in Paris.

In the three legislative elections held in Lebanon since 1992, the Lebanese citizen has voted according to the criteria of sectarian affiliation and personal economic interest, usually in the form of bribes from the incumbent to the elector. There have been few uncorrupt candidates to vote for. Citizens have had to vote for the 'best of the bad' rather than not vote at all. Political coalitions between factions have never been based on shared values or political principles, but rather simply the mutual winning of seats in parliament. The alarming factor in today's process of change is that both loyalist and opposition members of the ruling elite had long ago been dismissed by the Lebanese population as lacking integrity.

Amidst the joy associated with Syria's withdrawal and pro-democracy demonstrations, it should be remembered that the challenge remains fundamentally to renew Lebanon's political elite. Lebanon still needs a political class that responds to citizens' aspirations and, without this, the goal of revitalizing Lebanese consociational democracy will be in vain. As it stands today, the main question to be addressed by the Lebanese citizen remains, "What's next?"

Just how cosmetic has been the change so far, and just how much underlying class imbalances need to change, is neatly demonstrated by the story of a Sri Lankan maid sent out to demonstrate by her patron and heard to cry in Martyr Square: "Madame wants Syria out"!

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