



THE LEBANESE PARADOX: BETWEEN SYSTEMIC COLLAPSE AND LACK OF ALTERNATIVES

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Was the tragedy of last 4 August in the port of Beirut the final piece in the crisis of the Lebanese political system, or else, after an ephemeral outbreak of anger, the parliamentary consultations will produce the unending reproduction of the identical situation, namely yet another cabinet of “national unity”, perhaps under the leadership of a revived Saad Hariri?

The practice with Middle Eastern issues should support what Claudio Magris suggested when speaking about Danube and its surroundings: let go of inflexible determinism and embrace the uncertainty principle, putting their minds at rest with respect to the difficulty of predicting the course of events with any reasonable degree of certainty.

In a country that is quite accustomed to crises linked to internal and external factors, the current situation is particularly dramatic. The severe devastation of the port of Beirut and of the neighbourhoods



occurred in a country that had been brought to its knees by the health and economic effects of the pandemic, and before that by the announcement of the outgoing Hassan Diab's government that Lebanon would default on the Eurobond payment.

The declaration of insolvency with respect to a bond that matured in early March, as I explained in an article a few weeks ago, resulted in a fall in the exchange rate between the Lebanese pound and the US dollar on the informal currency market, and also in a hyper-inflationary mechanism that caused the purchasing power of the middle class to collapse. The consequences have been captured quite well by plentiful press coverage reporting scenes of bewilderment and anger in various areas of the country.

Yet, paradoxically, the pandemic itself seemed to have offered religious parties, namely those that aspire to represent their own religious denomination politically, an unexpected opportunity to reaffirm control over areas of their traditional roots and to close ranks, providing basic necessities to a population exhausted by the quarantine and also the inability to access their bank deposits.

The spread of face masks and food parcels with party crests clearly evident seemed to represent cosmetically the roots of the Lebanese party system, which everyone says they dislike, but in reality difficult to bypass because it is related to the supply of and access to goods and services.

Lebanese "confessionalism", namely this peculiar model of division of power between sectarian parties and individual politicians, each of which claims to be the champion of a specific religious group, has for years been a topic of in-depth, meticulous and very lively academic discussions, political, historical and historiographical. Over the years, the "primordialist" current, which viewed the Lebanese system as politicisation and in many ways the natural consequence of atavistic identities, has declined in favour of the "constructivist" trend, which interprets the characteristics of



contemporary Lebanon as a response of local elites to the tensions produced by the arrival of European colonialism and by the entry of the Middle East into the economic system of global capitalism.

In recent years, this debate, which is often very theoretical, has included a line of study on the political economy of confessionalism. Studies such as those of Melani Cammett and Joanna Nucho have made it possible to highlight the distinctly clientelist nature of the confessionalist system, the dynamics between "patrons" and "clients", the networks of material dependence and symbolic subservience in which the latter often find themselves.

It is very important to keep in mind the combination of this clientelism and confessionalism because it also explains the nature and origins of the financial disaster of recent months. The default of last March was in fact, to a large extent, the result of the crash of what has been defined as a "Ponzi scheme". In 2017, Rosalie Barthier had already highlighted how the interlocking between government bonds issued by the treasury ministry, decisions by the Lebanese central bank, and the credit policies of major private banking institutions posed a series of disturbing questions about long-term sustainability. Doubts were further exacerbated by the contiguity between the political class as a whole and the shareholders of almost all Lebanese credit institutions, creating huge conflicts of interest that were simply shelved despite being glaringly obvious.

In other words, Lebanese confessionalism is not only and is not primarily a question of relations between the state (or politics) and religious denominations, but rather is an accumulation of economic, financial and political interests that are difficult to unravel. It is, therefore, unlikely that a cosmetic reform of the electoral law or of the composition of the executive could call into question a system that has displayed all its glaring inefficiencies. If the Lebanese population understandably has good reasons to



express their anger at the reckless irresponsibility of the storage of 2,700 tons of ammonium nitrate in a silo in the port of Beirut (regardless of all the assumptions and suppositions about the triggering, and related matters), some degree of perplexity regarding the identification of the resigning government as being principally responsible for the tragedy of 4 August would not be out of place. Moreover, Diab's government took office only in January and represented an attempt, which was ultimately largely unconvincing, to create a "technical" government in the wake of the street protests that had led to the resignation of the Hariri-two government, in its turn giving birth to nine months of "national unity" negotiations after the parliamentary elections of May 2018. These elections had taken place five years after the natural expiry of the mandate, scheduled for 2013, since the main political actors in parliament had not managed to agree on a mutually acceptable electoral system, amid recriminations regarding the composition and boundaries of the multi-member constituencies.

It would be better to stick to the results of 6 May 2018 to assess the difficulties of any Lebanese political transition: despite the huge unrest in "civil society" and the widespread protests that had already occurred in the summer of 2015 against the entire political class, just one seat out of one hundred and twenty-eight in the elections went to the lists that were alternatives to the confessional parties (and moreover only due to the competition between the two main parties in the quota of seats reserved for the Armenian component).

From the waterfront of Beirut to Tripoli's al-Nour square, and also other perhaps lesser-known places in the country, there is no lack of claims related to the economic crisis, unemployment, the absence of prospects for the future, as well as the disgust for the deplorable collapse of the country, its infrastructures and its services. What remains to be seen is whether the components of the civic opposition, represented by slogans such as "Citizens in a state", "We are all citizens", "Beirut my city" and other more or less



ephemeral lists, will be able to form a sufficiently stable syndicate with a shared and reasonable programme, overcoming the not insignificant differences on foreign policy and economic matters. These groups now bear the burden of overcoming the phase of slogans, the now customary cross-sectional criticism of the status quo, and of presenting a transitional programme that proposes a political alternative without the total collapse of public institutions.

The next few days and weeks will, in any case, be a test that will allow us to confirm those who truly believed in the protests against confessionalism and those who were simply using them, as has already happened in the past, to regain a prominent place in the political arena (as in the case of the Falangists) or as an excellent excuse to scale back Hezbollah and its role both within the country and also at the regional level.