

The Lebanese “Secularist” Movement in the Shadow of the Arab Democratic Movements

Standing before the democratic movements that have come to reign across the Arab world, the Lebanese find themselves in the midst of a spiral of change and protest against the paradigms practiced by the Arab political authorities in dealing with their populations. Protest movements have moved from one country to the next. One rejectionist protest movement brings down one regime and time barely passes

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before the momentum of that success is passed onto another, similar movement. Where are the Lebanese in all that is taking place around them?

By virtue of the very nature of their lives, the fact that indignation and resentment exist amongst the Lebanese, the majority of the Lebanese, does not urge debate. We suffer from a lack of justice and security. We suffer from neighborhood bullies who impose their authority over the peaceful residents of their neighborhoods. We suffer from a lack of democracy and individual freedoms. We suffer the repercussions of state corruption and the corruption of public administrations every day of our lives. We suffer from economic hardships, favoritism and nepotism. We suffer from deterioration in the quality of our public

services and of our public education system.

All the Lebanese share in protest against the way they live. However, they differ, to the extent of antagonism, on whom to blame for the nature of their suffering, now, and on whom to blame for the stress of what may lie before them in the days ahead. The Lebanese are divided. There are the Lebanese who follow their communities of sects and who have renewed their pledge of allegiance to the leaders of their sects. And, the compass of their criticism has lost its direction in a reality where sectarian fiefdoms have obscured any central authority to which one could direct blame for its policies. Other Lebanese count amongst the outcasts, who have chosen to estrange themselves from sectarian loyalties, and who have ambitions to live under a system that respects their human dignities. The former are much bigger than the latter. But, even amongst those who have rejected sectarianism, there is a sense of loss about who to blame and against whom one should direct one's indignation and resentment.

The best that the Arab popular intifadas (uprisings) have been able to offer, in the Lebanese context, is that they have laid waste to Lebanese narcissism. They have stripped the Lebanese of the claim that they are the most democratic of their Arab neighbors, and have stripped this claim of all the legends that some of its intellects have wrapped it in. These uprisings have indeed bestowed upon all their real size.

And, the best that the Arab intifadas have been able to offer, in the context of each local movement, is that those who have risen up finally feel that they are human beings, deserving a life of dignity to the extent possible, at least.



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The masses who took to the street threw external policies behind their backs – these policies that violated their dignities with their pretexts for so long. And, instead, they focused their targets on internal politics and policy:

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freedoms, democracy, and rejecting favoritism, nepotism and corruption.

Some of these Arab intifadas have already succeeded, and soon other intifadas will succeed. That is because their authorities have a concrete form, shape and place to which the people's anger can be directed, and they can be blamed for the miserable situations they have created. These masses do not need to conclusively define their demands, nor do they need to work on what they want, positively. They can merely suffice with the negative, that they reject this reality and this status quo.

In Lebanon, authority is not centralized. Authority in Lebanon is distributed amongst fiefdoms defined by sectarian zoning. We cannot suffice with rejection and with the negative. The curse of our sectarian political system imposes upon us that we define what we really want – or, in other words, define the positive and affirm our needs.

In Lebanon, there are secularists, or those who deem themselves secular, who have been infected with the Arab “intifada” contagion. They established groups that communicate and connect through Facebook. They took to the streets in rejection of the sectarian system, and defined future steps contingent upon taking to the streets once again. Yet, these groups are diverse to a point that is worrisome. The concept of secularism amongst the Lebanese is so elastic that it includes everything and everything's antithesis.

There are the revolutionary secularists, who wish they lived in the time of the Paris Commune so that they may find the link between their convictions and reality. And, there are those who are secularists that reject sectarianism, but are in awe of their sectarian leader, on the pretext that the leader is part of the resistance, or that the leader is a socialist, or that the leader advocates loyalty only to Lebanon, and so on and so on... to a point that is almost nauseating. Then, there are secularists who truly seek the establishment of a civil state in which the relations between the people and the authorities are defined by the notion and tenets of citizenship. These are not so few. They may be a minority amongst the secularists of Beirut's Hamra and Gemmayzeh districts. But they are numerous in other, more remote Lebanese cities, towns and villages, where people are genuinely fed up with slogans and futile mobilizations empty of any meaning and content. These people are frustrated by changes they were once convinced would happen, but never materialized.

The latter are the people we worry about today, and whose disappointment and frustration we fear. We fear and worry for them, against those who claim they will rise up against the power of the 18 sects, but cannot even name the leaders of these sects. We fear and worry for them, against those who justify pledging allegiance to their sectarian leaders by manufacturing legends that acquit certain leaders of any guilt for our dismal, deteriorating reality. We fear and worry for them, against sweeping slogans that try to equate a “minority sect”, such as the Ismaili sect, with sects that belong to hard-core leaders, such as the Shiite, Sunni, Maronite and Druze, and to which one could even add the Catholic and Orthodox sects.

Here, we want to address the “civil” Lebanese. And, we will speak to these Lebanese about the “civil” and the “civic” because we do not want to burden Lebanese secularism with yet another notion. This way, the demand for civil marriage can remain the



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major link between secularists – and, so be it that secularism may remain in their minds a sexual concept that fears penetrating the realms of the political and sociological.

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We address these Lebanese, offering the following points:

First: The popular revolutions taking place in the Arab world demanding democracy cannot be compared to and do not conform to the political and social conditions in Lebanon. The populations rebelling today in the Arab world are homogenous to a great degree, unlike the heterogeneous Lebanese society. The regimes of the countries under revolt today are also far removed from the arena of direct struggle with Israel, which is unlike the case of the Lebanese reality. Thus, we are obliged to find national commonalities that transcend the diversity of the Lebanese and of Lebanon. And, we must not allow our right to live as safe, secure and “civilian” citizens to come at the expense of the idea that we alone must resist Israeli aggression.


Second: Those who deem themselves secularists in Lebanon, based on their notion of secularism, choose to ignore the reality of Lebanese society. They are calling for a secular state without defining, preparing or even thinking about the transitions and the transitional period required to take us from our sectarian reality to a civil and civic reality. They prefer to feign purity, and avoid delving into any real thinking about the barrier of

sectarian obstacles that hinder the reform of our political system. And, they forget the fact that penetrating politics and society is only possible from positioning oneself from within the realities of our societies and communities. Moreover, our society, our system is sectarian, to the core.

We reject this reality, yes; but we have no choice but to consider all options for reform. We do not want slogans that frighten those who still cling to the folds of sectarian thinking in protective fear for the “sect’s interests”. Rather, we want these persons to let go of these folds and instead embrace the idea of the nation, which treats all its citizens as equals and does not discriminate against citizens due to sectarian considerations.

Third: All of Lebanon’s sectarian leaders share in the responsibility for the dismal, deteriorating situation we have reached – all of them, with no one leader more innocent or more guilty than the other.

Fourth: The state that we want is a civil state that, first and above all, preserves and protects the rights of individual citizens; and only as a second priority, pays heed to the specificities and unique character of the sects – and not the leaders of these sects or the parties that dominate the members of these sects –, except for in matters that are contrary to the one nation under which all citizens are united. And, the state we want is a state where all arms are centralized under the auspices and authority of the state’s official security apparatus, which is vested with the power to maintain and protect the security and dignity of its citizens. The state we want is a state whose authorities and governing bodies work towards developing Lebanon, economically; and, is a state that understands the economy as a productive process and not a rentier agent for securing the interests of the most powerful and the interests of the networks and individuals associated with them.



Fifth: We must think about reforming our political system from within our current and prevailing reality, not from what we wish was our reality and other aspirations that are empty of tangibles. Non-exhaustive examples of such possibilities include: demanding and insisting upon an electoral law based on proportional representation and on the basis that the country be treated as one electoral district; demanding and insisting upon restricting electoral spending and expenditures; demanding and insisting upon reforming social security; demanding and insisting upon a fair, just and impartial judiciary, uninfluenced by the powers-that-be; and, demanding and insisting upon the reform of our public educational system and state universities. These are far more fundamental, tangible and serious than the empty claim that we reject sectarianism and we demand a secular state, without defining what that really means and what we really want.

Let us all be “*for the nation*”¹.

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¹ “We are All for the Nation” is “*Kuluna lil Watan*”, the title and first phrase of the Lebanese national anthem.