

WHAT NEW POLITICAL PACT IS THERE FOR LEBANON?

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Abstract: While talks about a Third Republic in Lebanon continue, different ideas are circulating in the Lebanese public sphere with regard to the need for a new political pact: abolishing the sectarian system, instituting administrative decentralization, (con)federalism, active neutrality, the tripartite power-sharing model, up to the partitioning of Lebanon. The brief will outline these propositions and address their political context and the communal reactions they reinforce. It argues that these propositions remain a political rhetoric, lacking mature formulations and the conducive regional and international conditions for materializing at the moment. Yet, the discussion around these proposals should not be curtailed, and the sentiments underlying these proposals are important to attend to, as they lay ground for Lebanon's future should the regional deadlock end.

Immediate background

A year ago, the October 17th uprising - or "Thawra"- broke out across the geographical and sectarian landscape in Lebanon, manifesting the unthinkable within the Lebanese socio-political context. What began as protests against tax hikes culminated in a country wide uprising against the political system. The year marking the centennial of "Great Lebanon" was marred by a historic financial collapse, a scandalous decay in the political life, the collapse of state institutions, the COVID-19 pandemic and the tragic explosion of the Port of Beirut on August 4, 2020 destroying a sizeable section of the capital. This latest, but not last, humanitarian disaster rocked the center of Beirut, killing more than 190 people, injuring around 6000, rendering more than 300,000 people homeless incurring losses estimated at 15 billion dollars. A hundred years after its establishment, Lebanon is witnessing the protracted death of its "Second Republic".

International and regional actors found in the tragic explosion a window to press for political change. The twin visits of the French president Emmanuel Macron as well as the Turkish Vice President attracted a lot of media attention. David Hale, a high ranking U.S. diplomat, as well as the Iranian Foreign minister were visited Beirut simultaneously. On October 14th in Beirut, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker facilitated the start of landmark negotiations between the Lebanese and Israeli governments regarding maritime boundaries.¹ With the explosion, Lebanon has entered a phase of internationalization where the internal political scene is increasingly becoming dependent on the dynamics between regional and international forces.

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Macron attempted – yet has so far failed - to regain a French initiative in the country in his first visit days after the explosion, and rightly stressed the need for a “new political pact”, insisting that the dysfunctional and corrupt system cannot continue. This bold invitation stirred major controversies and invited various interpretations as to what a new pact would mean, leading Macron to retract the invitation and avoid mentioning it in his second visit. Contrary to the hopes borne by the October 17 uprising, any new political pact is not to be interpreted as a step towards the demise of the sectarian power sharing model in Lebanon. There have been several propositions as to what the new political pact should look like: abolishing the sectarian system, instituting decentralization, (con) federalism, active neutrality, a tripartite power-sharing model, and even the partitioning of Lebanon. Political and religious leaders from different sectarian groups have supported different suggestions in accordance with their respective position. These suggestions will be discussed in the following brief.

The need for a new political pact in Lebanon has been spoken of at various instances in the past five years, with demands for the establishment of “the Third Republic” being repeatedly invoked.² However, it only entered popular discussion with the October 17 uprising that took place in 2019 being voiced by some of the protesters who demanded the demise of political confessionalism. The debate re-gained momentum with the Beirut port explosion.

The Taif agreement, which ended the 15-year long civil war (1975 – 1990), is the last signed agreement amending the constitution and outlining the Lebanese political system of what came to be known as the “Second Republic”. However, the political system in practice is shaped more by customs and raw power rather than the constitution. The political practice instituted during the control of the Syrian regime and after the withdrawal of the Syrian troops in 2005 is far away from the vision stipulated by the Taif agreement: rather than ending political confessionalism, it was further consolidated and complicated with the Shia political parties (Hezbollah and Amal) enforcing a veto power on the government and the bipolar Christian - Muslim power-sharing model.³

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Previous Political Pacts

In the Lebanese consociational system, the political scene has long been organized around sectarian leaders, parties and movements. This system is rooted in the mutasarrifiya, prior to the creation of Greater Lebanon in 1926, where the Ottoman state relegated local governance in Mount Lebanon to communal leaders. The sectarian political balance in Mount Lebanon was to be maintained between the Maronite and the Druze elite. However, upon the establishment of Greater Lebanon by the French authorities, the incorporation of new geographical and confessional communities altered the power sharing model to a Christian – Muslim configuration with the Maronite and Sunni sects representing the majority within each constituency.

The first national pact organizing the new reality was an unwritten pact struck between the president at the time, Bishara al-Khoury, and the prime minister Riad Al Solh in 1943. The agreement, commonly known as “the National Covenant”, announced the nascent Lebanon as a “neutral” country whereby Muslims would abandon unity projects with Syria and the Arab world, while Christians would not seek special ties and military protection from the West, namely France.⁴ According to the custom initiated by this agreement, the main three offices of the Presidency, Prime Ministry, and Speaker of the House were to be divided between the main three sects: Maronite, Sunni, Shia respectively. Representation in parliament was also divided by a ratio of 6:5 Christians to Muslims. This agreement effected thus the move from confessional groups to political confessionalism and drew the early outlines of the Lebanese consociational system.

The National Covenant however collapsed under the weight of various internal, external, and structural problems along with demands for ending political confessionalism, culminating in the 1975 civil war. The Taif agreement ended the Lebanese civil war in 1989, on the basis of “No Victor, No Vanquished”, and stipulated changes in the system ushering in the phase referred to as “The Second Republic”.⁵ Accordingly, the representation formula in the parliament shifted to a 50:50 balance between Christians and Muslims. Some of the presidential powers were transferred to the prime ministry, and Syria was entrusted as guardian over Lebanon.

The agreement effectively decreased the majority influence of the Maronite sect in both state and civil services. Power instead shifted to a seeming equality between Christians and Muslims to reflect the demographic changes in the country. To its critics, the Taif agreement was considered a victory to the Sunnis ushering in a transition from political Maronitism (al-Marouniyyah el siyasiya) to political Sunnism (not to be confused with political Islamism) associated with the figure of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.⁶ However, for post-war Lebanon, Syria became the dominant power-broker, and the political practice translated into a tripartite system, also known as “troika”, between Christians, Sunnis, and Shia elite. The Shiite Sect would also wield the veto-power in the executive branch with enhanced powers given to the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri. This power garnered by the Shia political parties after the withdrawal of the Syrian regime following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005, was entrenched post-Doha agreement in 2008.

Since then, Lebanon has had extended periods of void in government, Presidency and other civil service departments. For 12 years, the state could not approve a budget hampering major decisions on public spending and failing to deliver to its citizens the most basic services such as water, electricity and sanitation. Governed through a model of corporate consociationalism, Lebanon has fallen into decay.⁷ The consensual nature of the system and the veto powers given to each sectarian community have granted occasional peace and guaranteed rights to the various sectarian groups. However, it has rendered political life ineffective creating an undelivering system rampant with corruption, turning politicking rather than policy-making into the modus operandi. The sectarian organization of political life has also resulted in a failure to develop a national identity and cultivate citizenship as each community relies on its own social and security networks mediated through sectarian leaders. Plagued by social and political insecurity, communities turn to find support beyond Lebanon’s borders, opening the door wide open for external interference and meddling through foreign patronage networks.⁸

One of the main proposed reforms was the move towards a bicameral legislative system where sectarian representation is relocated from the parliament to an upper house Senate that guarantees the protection of communal interests around vital affairs.

To end, amend or implement the Taif Agreement?

The October 17 uprising at its essence was an expression of the failure of the practiced customs, pacts and agreements that have shaped the Lebanese political landscape. While economic grievances are the main driver behind the eruption of the protests, many of the protesters demanded a change to the political system, with the demise of political confessionalism being a prominent slogan.⁹ Some protesters found in the reforms stipulated by the Taif agreement a possible roadmap to that change and demanded their implementation. The Taif agreement articulated that “abolishing political confessionalism is a fundamental national objective.” To that end, it provided a list of reforms and called for the formation of a national committee to discuss the transition to a non-sectarian power-sharing system. One of the main proposed reforms was the move towards a bicameral legislative system where sectarian representation is relocated from the parliament to an upper house Senate that guarantees the protection of communal interests around vital affairs.¹⁰ The agreement also called for administrative decentralization. These reforms were never implemented.

The Maronite Patriarch Beshara Botros al-Rai'i announced his support for the full implementation of the Taif Agreement along with the creation of the Senate and the adoption of full scale administrative decentralization. Yet another voice within the Maronite constituency, President Michel Aoun and his party the Free Patriotic movement (FPM), were demanding the end of the Taif agreement on the basis that it deprives the Christians of their rights by reducing the power of the presidency and giving it to the office of the Prime Minister. Aoun had boycotted the signing of the Taif agreement at the time and has remained in opposition to it until now. Supporters of Aoun protested against the then Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir and denounced his support for the agreement. This stance has allowed Aoun and his party to shift any blame or responsibility for the ongoing political and economic crises away due to the limited powers of the office of the presidency. It also served to show the party as champions of the Christian cause that other Christian political parties have given up on.

Similarly, Shia leaders have long been critical of the Taif agreement for having sidelined the Shia constituency, especially with the changing demographic reality.¹¹ Cornering the critics of the status quo dominated by the Shiite duo, Amal movement and Hezbollah, Shia figures¹² have proposed two alternatives: the ending of political sectarianism, or the negotiation of a new tripartite model between Maronite, Sunnis and Shia instead of the Christian – Muslim division.¹³ A day prior to Macron's second visit to Lebanon, the secretary general of Hezbollah responded to Macron's call for a new pact saying that he is open to any discussion around it provided there is consensus on a new political model. Otherwise, “the fears of certain communities should be respected,” he added.

In order to neutralize revisionist claims to power based on demographic changes, calls to partition – in various forms – have been circulating in the Christian public sphere for a while.

In fact, the proposed alternatives drive the Maronite constituency's fear of losing their privileges and protections that constitute the founding spirit of Great Lebanon as a safe haven to the Christians in the region.¹⁴ The patriarch al-Ra'i delineated the boundaries accepted by the Maronite patriarchy: no political pact can change the consociational nature of the Lebanese system. In his words, "Change, however deep, must be based on our democratic system, our constitution, our national charter, and our national constants." Thus, announcing the patriarchal stance that any change needs to remain within the boundaries of the founding National Pact, preserving parity between Christians and Muslims.

Partition, (Con)Federalism or Decentralization

In order to neutralize revisionist claims to power based on demographic changes, calls to partition – in various forms – have been circulating in the Christian public sphere for a while.¹⁵ These proposals are not new: they date back to the civil war when the creation of cantons was proposed by President Camile Chamoun. In 2015, Michel Aoun expressed his intention to propose a "federal system" in Lebanon to protect and guarantee the rights of the Christians.¹⁶ His parliamentary bloc also picked up the proposal and started advocating for it.¹⁷

After the October 17 uprising, the demand to a federal system was popularized again. Various Christian activists dedicated their efforts to advocating for granting governing autonomy to each sectarian community within cantons.¹⁸ Akin to a divorce, the demand highlights a loss of faith in and a willingness to end the framework of "shared living" (al-'Aysh al-Mushtarak) that constitutes the essence of the National Covenant.

This sentiment is understood by the Christian leaders across the political spectrum and has figured in various instances in their speeches expressing support for different forms of decentralization or confederalism.¹⁹ On the occasion of the discussion of a new political pact, the leader of the maronite Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea, asserted that his party will demand a full administrative decentralization or even confederalism in case Hezbollah demanded a renegotiation of the power-sharing model.²⁰ However, up until now, these statements remain in the domain of political rhetoric rather than actual projects.

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The call for administrative decentralization is the least controversial suggestion amongst the political class and it enjoys the support of the patriarch as it was included in President Aoun's inauguration speech.²¹ Having been in circulation since 1977, the proposal was set down in the Taif agreement in the form of a strong centralism alongside decentralism.²² However, it remained unimplemented given the lack of clarity around what it entails.²³ All of that said, decentralization does not promise a solution to the Lebanon's political turmoil because it will bear the same governance problems if not realized in tandem with other reforms.²⁴

Active Neutrality: a Third Republic following the Swedish model?

Amidst calls for different forms of federalism or dissociation that have risen within the Christian public sphere, the Maronite patriarch Beshara al-Ra'i adopts a less radical but more confrontational proposal for the much needed new pact.²⁵ On July 5, a month prior to the explosion, the Patriarch announced his political initiative termed "active neutrality". He appealed to the United Nations to reaffirm the independence of Lebanon and implement all relevant UN resolutions, and agree to announcing the "neutral" status of Lebanon to safeguard it from regional turmoil.²⁶ After the explosion, the Maronite patriarchy became more determined in its demand to adopt neutrality status, releasing a memorandum called "Lebanon and Active Neutrality" warning that it is the only way to protect Lebanon from disintegration.²⁷

The patriarch stands behind the call for a strong state that can only be made possible through the status of "active neutrality". At its heart, this call is a radical attack on Hezbollah's arms and foreign policy, accusing it of having sabotaged the state and jeopardized Lebanon's sovereignty and security. Asserting that neutrality is foundational of Greater Lebanon and was the spirit of the National pact, the Patriarch considered the Cairo agreement to be "the original sin".²⁸ By drawing clear parallels to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the context of the civil war in 1975, Hezbollah's arms and foreign policy are the new culprit bringing about the crises of Lebanon and isolating it from the regional and international community.

Lebanon's neutrality came up earlier in 2012 during the Syrian civil war, when the internal politico-sectarian divisions (mainly anti-Assad and pro-refugees Sunni stance in opposition to pro-Assad and anti-refugees Shia stance) threatened its internal security and stability. Back then, Lebanon's opposing political-sectarian camps agreed on the principle of State neutrality regarding the Syrian crisis (Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the UN 2012). However, Hezbollah did not abide by this principle with its military involvement on behalf of pro-Assad forces in Syria. The Maronite patriarch Beshara al-Ra'i, elected in 2011, was not an ardent opponent of Hezbollah's arms like his predecessor Nasrallah Sfeir, nor did he oppose the alliance between the FPM and Hezbollah founded through the Ashrafiye agreement like patriarch Sfeir. This memorandum of understanding signed in 2006 was popularly translated as follows: the FPM provides Hezbollah with recognition of the legitimacy of its armaments in exchange for protection of the Christian community. With the existential threat that Christians felt from ISIS and other radical groups in the Syrian war, the patriarch did not oppose Hezbollah's role in Syria then: Hezbollah's fight against ISIS was considered a protection for the Christians.

However, the explosion of Beirut's port in August reshuffled the cards. Having destroyed Ashrafiye and the main Maronite quarters of Beirut, the explosion seems to have also dismantled the Ashrafiye agreement tradeoff in the eyes of the Christian constituency. Irresponsibility and corruption are the main causes of the calamity that has befallen. Christians now felt that they were endangered rather than protected by Hezbollah's arms.

The birth of the Third Republic also requires conducive external conditions, unavailable in the current prevailing regional and international deadlock. Most importantly, it cannot be delinked from any settlements and alternatives that will be advanced in Syria and Iraq.

Patriarch Al-Ra'i has, with the deepening of the political and economic crisis and the unfolding of events since the October 17 uprising, become more vocal about his opposition to Hezbollah. Moreover, with the Christian political mood heavily affected and shifting Hezbollah has lost the garb of "cross-confessional consensus." The political front of the Christian parties opposing the foreign policy of Hezbollah and supporting Maronite Patriarch's position in favour of preserving the country's neutrality appears to be growing.

The Shia Mufti Ahmad Qabalan attacked the call for neutrality considering it impossible to be neutral towards those who want to siege and attack Lebanon.²⁹ The Sunni Mufti, however, responded to the question of neutrality with the inverse line of reasoning that: "We may not need neutrality if we establish a strong and just State, reinforced by unity, social cohesion, justice, and crowned with safe coexistence." Rather than neutrality being a road to sovereignty in and of itself, he asked: "What is the value of neutrality if officials do not give weight to the concept of independence and sovereignty?".

Conclusion

Talks about the Third republic in Lebanon date back a decade at least. The persistent political deadlock along with the cascade of political, economic, health and humanitarian crises have sealed the fate of the Second Republic. The October 17 uprising has amplified and popularized the need to discuss proposals for a new pact that can salvage the ailing nation. However, reforming the political pact lacks the necessary will from amongst the political elite, especially with the imbalance of power between the various sectarian communities. The birth of the Third Republic also requires conducive external conditions, unavailable in the current prevailing regional and international deadlock. Most importantly, it cannot be delinked from any settlements and alternatives that will be advanced in Syria and Iraq.

Endnotes

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/world/middleeast/israel-lebanon-sea-border.html?auth=login-email&login=email>
- 2- <https://bit.ly/2FAHk9o> ; <https://bit.ly/31cUBMm>; <https://bit.ly/3k5slCM> ; <https://anbaaonline.com/news/35040>
- 3- Bachar Halabi & Rabih Jamil, "Lebanon: From the 1984 Intifada to the 3rd Republic", ISPI, 27 February 2019. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/lebanon-1984-intifada-3rd-republic-22402>
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- 5- Bachar Halabi & Rabih Jamil, "Lebanon: From the 1984 Intifada to the 3rd Republic", ISPI, 27 February 2019. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/lebanon-1984-intifada-3rd-republic-22402>
- 6- For a detailed discussion of Rafiq Hariri's project see: "Citizen Hariri and Neoliberal politics in Post-war Lebanon"
- 7- Imad Salamey, "Failing Consociationalism in Lebanon and Integrative options", International Journal of Peace Studies, Volume 14, Number 2, Autumn/Winter 2009.
- 8- Ibid.
- 9- According to a study conducted by Lea Abou Khater and Rima Majed, 48% of the protesters demanded structural changes to the political system. See: "Lebanon's 2019 October Revolution: Who Mobilized and Why?", The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, http://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/o/8/4/8o84984o/leb-oct-rev_v.1.3-digital.pdf
- 10- For scholarly studies that discuss these measures as possible solutions to the ailments of the Lebanese consociational system See: Elias I. Muhanna, "Establishing a Lebanese Senate: Bicameralism and the Third Republic", Center on Democracy, Development, and The Rule of Law, Stanford University https://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/arabreform/publications/establishing_a_lebanese_senate_bicameralism_and_the_third_republic; Imad Salamey, "Failing Consociationalism in Lebanon and Integrative options".
- 11- No official census has been conducted since 1932. However, according to The International Religious Freedom Report of 2012, the most recent demographic composition is as follows: 27% Sunni, 27% Shia, 21% Maronite, 5.6% Druze.
- 12- In 2012, the secretary general of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah had called for a "Constitutional Convention" (Mo'tamar Ta'sisi) for Lebanon in order to discuss the foundations of the state. The leader of Amal Movement, Nabih Berri, had also suggested a tripartite representation in the parliament between Sunni, Shia and Maronite rather than the Muslim – Christian formula. The Jaafari mufti Ahmad Qabalan has attacked the National covenant and its leaders, Beshara el-Khoury and Riad el-Solh, accusing them of sectarianism.
- 13- Joseph Kéchichian, "Does the Lebanese constitution need a facelift? Implementing Taif has proven to be challenging as Hizballah demands special privileges for its 'sacrifices.'" Gulf News. <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/does-the-lebanese-constitution-need-a-facelift-1.1879280>
- 14- Francisco Salvador Barroso Cortés and Joseph A. Kéchichian, "Lebanon Confronts Partition Fears: Has Consociationalism Benefitted Minorities?", Contemporary Review of the Middle East 5(1), 5–29.
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- 16- <https://rb.gy/s7jh9a>
- 17- <http://archive.almanar.com.lb/article.php?id=406076>
- 18- For example: Alfred Riachi (<https://www.facebook.com/TheContinualFederalCongress/>; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1qAzzsxmMY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1qAzzsxmMY;)), Toni Hadchiti (<https://bit.ly/3j9jxdS>; <https://bit.ly/31fJjD>)

- 19- Fady Noun, « L'État civil proposé par Aoun sous les projecteurs », L'Orient Le Jour, September 11, 2020, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1232246/letat-civil-propose-par-aoun-sous-les-projecteurs.html>
- 20- Ibid.
- 21- <https://rb.gy/7a6tz2>
- 22- See Ta'ef Agreement - —III. Other Reforms: Administrative Decentralism. https://www.un.int/lebanon/sites/www.un.int/files/Lebanon/the_taif_agreement_english_version_.pdf
- 23- <https://rb.gy/hzg7ay>
- 24- Ibid. Also see Imad Salamey, "Failing Consociationalism in Lebanon and Integrative options".
- 25- The Maronite patriarchy maintains a legitimacy in representing the Maronite community, not only in a spiritual capacity but also in a political capacity. The patriarchy is regarded as the creator and defender of the "Lebanese" project since its inception with the efforts of the patriarch Elias el-Hwayek. For more on the politics of the Maronite patriarchy, see: Fiona McCallum, "Walking the Tightrope: Patriarchal Politics in Contemporary Lebanon" in *Leaders et partisans au Liban* (2012), p : 353 - 375
- 26- <https://bit.ly/3jcyxaQ>
- 27- <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/274237>
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