Minority Problem in Lebanon

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I. Problem

The minority problem is, generally speaking, a question of tensions between a demographically larger group and a smaller group. In particular these tensions may result from equal access to participate in a certain type of field of social activities. The minority problem in Lebanon is atypical, as it is the largest demographic group which plays the most limited role in the national politics. And this group also is the least educated of all Lebanese sects, therefore poorly represented in the professional sector.

The Maronites are the ruling minority in politics, and insist on their legitimacy of their rule in order to maintain their power over all other Lebanese sects. However, the population profile in Lebanon has changed radically in the last two decades and the Shiites represent now the numerical majority. This upsurge in the Shiite population has important for the Lebanese politics, although the sect has not been integrated yet into a single confessional group. They are geographically segmented and divided into several social classes, in both rural and urban settings.

The Lebanese national charter, called “mithaq al-watan,” has been the sole source for formulating policy since Lebanon achieved political independence. The charter decrees that the government should consist of a Maronite presidency, a Muslim premier, and the members of parliament elected according to a ratio of 6 Christians to every 5 Muslims. Therefore the total number of the MPs has increased from in the 1940s 44, 55 in ’50s, 77 in ’60s, and 99 in ’70s. The last civil war broke out when the seat allocation among the sects was the hottest issue in the Diet. Two proposed changes include fixing the total number of seats at 110 or 121. The former would give an equal number of seats both Christians and Muslims at 55 each. While the latter would follow the old rule, with Christians holding 66 seats and 55 to Muslims. The old rule is still alive.

For the conventionalists, this change in the balance of power represents a violation of the established rules concerning political participation. A change in the power balance was unavoidable, however, considering the increasing aspirations of the urban middle classes for the political life had to be satisfied. The force of this pressure is evident in the previous stepwise increase in the number of MPs.
In addition, however, there was a behind-the-scenes struggle between the presidency and the premiership for the supreme power, as the old za’im politics in Lebanon was stunted because of the rapid urbanization and the changing international setting, in particular the appearance of the Palestinians as a new political factor.

II. Question of Political Maturity

The term of the political maturity is not a well established academic concept but it is useful to analyse the political changes in Lebanon. I use the term with special reference to Max Weber’s thesis described in his last lecture entitled “Politics as a Vocation” given in Munich in 1919.¹

In the judgement of political situation at the last stage of the world war II, the younger political generation of the Francophile in Lebanon was more matured than the old elitist Francophile, and established a national charter over the policy of the new Lebanon, although being not free from severe criticism on some issues. The first president Khoury was subject to a bitter attack by the new za’im class, especially in their pro-French handling of the international affairs. The new za’ims led by Chamoun chose a pro-American line in the world politics at the cold war stage. In his respect, Chamoun’s generation showed slightly more wisdom than then ruling elder za’im group. Both Khoury and Chamoun, however, had adopted a common policy to run their presidency for life time. This policy led to the political demise of both men.

The inner strife between the elder and the less elder za’im groups led to the first Lebanese civil war in 1958. The loosing of controls which followed had invited a fresh style in management of the state machines. Nevertheless, a new political leader of the Sunni camp was not supportive of this new style of statesman, and rallied against Shihab, who had appointed him to the premier. The Sunni leader campaigned for the majority (i.e. Muslim) rule in Lebanon and encouraged avatism of za’imism. With armed militia under his command, he had a protest against the “technocratic control” of the state; especially the national army was out of the za’im’s control and was no longer serving to protect their versed interests. The national army kept its neutrality throughout the civil war which was the reason why General Shihab was nominated president by unanimous consensus in the parliament.

The political maturity shown by General Shihab and his civilian supporters (consisting mostly of professional class) was gradually eroded by the za’im faction, who resisted and even openly sabotaged the government’s efforts, which were the evidence of their political immaturity. The only supporters to the Shihabism from the Maronites were Pierre Jamayyel and his followers of the urban middle and the lower middle classes. The degree of political maturity is differed according to the political generation and the social classes. The middle class, often considered to be the safety valve of a society, is still very small in Lebanon

and is concentrated to Beirut. Among the educated professionals living in West Beirut, there were many mixed couples who had crossed religious and sectarian lines, in 1960s to early 1970s. By contrast, both of the za’im and the urban poors have adhered to the traditional code of choosing a co-religious or co-sectarian marriage partner, regarding it as a matter of the privilege or honour of a family. The za’im was used to dwell in the old quarters amidst their co-religious clients. In exchange for vote and political support, the za’im helps the poor neighbours in areas such as employment, school enrollment, health care. Because of this reciprocal relationship, za’im type of political leaders are not free to leave for other district and the poors, in turn, are always in need of “protection” and helps from za’im, especially during the time of social unrest or economic recession. The self-reliant middle classes are relatively free from such a dependence on the za’im, but they are tied in other ways.

The enormous expansion of the urban settlements in 1950s and 1960s has weakened the za’im’s power, paving the way for a new political elite as well as for politics who were sometime agents of other Arab governments. Therefore, it may be safe to conclude that the state of political immaturity in Lebanon was due to the influence of two elements of the society; the landed aristocrats and the rural but mountain villagers, and the pushed-outs from them to the city sectors i.e. the urban poors. The old ethic and codes of behaviour characteristic of mountain village life are still deeply incorporated into the cultural substratum of these poor urban dwellers, leading to the eruption of violences in a certain socio-political condition. People living in harsh conditions tends to attack others, when they are weakened or less defensive. A slight shift in the power balance or the balance of fear may easily lead to a massacre.

The code of tha’r (vendetta) originates from a social condition which made all groups hostile to each other. Although the code was officially practised only by the male members of a family as part of the family duties. Female members are also keenly felt the desire for revenge as it is concerned their own honour as well as their family reputation. Since females are not allowed to carry out vendettas, the duty of revenge could be entrusted to others. It would be transferred to the relative firstly and then to the co-villagers. The Lebanese village is composed of the co-religionists, and each dai’s has branches in the urban centres in and out of the country. Such branches are organized mainly along the sectarian lines and used to come under the leadership or control of the za’im. The old culture of the transferred revenge was transplanted into the urban setting, resulting in eruptions of violence in case of social disorder. This culture of the transferred revenge can also considered a hidden element of the civil wars in Lebanon. The Shibabits demonstrated their political maturity in this respect as they transferred the duty of revenge to the machine of nation state and expressed their political goal as that of building “a nation state from a state of nation.”

However, their efforts were in vain because of the za’ims and the lower bureaucrats installed by the pre-modern political leaders. The lower the rank of the official, the less disciplined and more corrupt he would be. The only za’im who actively tried to reform the Lebanese political system to the standards of the modern nation state was the late Kamal Jumblatt. But his influence was very limited since his Druze origins isolated him from both camps of the Christians and the Muslims. Therefore, there was little hope of having his
policies implemented and he himself was not taken as a statesman but a communal leader. The fate of General Shihab and Kamal Jumblatt are an indication of the political immaturity of the nation as a whole. However, it may not be fair to ascribe this state of political immaturity to the Lebanese alone. The international setting has been prevented the nation from developing to political maturity.

III. The International Setting and the Major Powers

After the fall of the Ottoman empire, all of the major powers scrambled to try to obtain the lion's share of the former Turkish domain. To this purpose, they gave their patronage to the religious sects which comprised administrative units of the Ottoman provinces. The Maronites were clients of the French, and the Greek orthodox was of the Russians, the Druze was of patronized by the British, the Sunni was a slight Austro-German affiliation though they remained loyal to Turkey. The Shiites were not associated with the major powers. The inter-communal conflicts which had formerly fueled only by local power struggles, were now compounded by hostilities among the major powers that were backing the various sectarian groups.

For instance, the Kisrawan peasant revolt, which took place in the middle of the last century, was indeed a turning point in the social history of Lebanon. However, it was instigated by an English dragoman, who stepped in an earlier stage of developments to incite the revolt. The French, in turn, sent army to Beirut in order to "protect the Christians and the Holy City." In fact, this was only an excuse for ousting the British and furthering their own interests.

Under the French colonial rule, the Maronites established their supreme status in the greater Lebanon, and the Sunnis had lost the privileged civil position they had enjoyed in the coastal cities under the Ottoman empire. The Greek orthodox communities also had lost the foreign patronage after the decline of the Tsarism in Russia. At the same time, a large number of the Armenians, fleeing from Turkish persecution, flooded into Lebanon. They were protected by the French administration, which wanted to ensure that the Christians outnumbered the Muslims.

At this point, based on the first and the last census, the French had established the formula of 6 to 5 ratio in participation to the political activities. Now, however, every Lebanese would acknowledge that the Muslim population is larger than the Christian. It is also well known fact that the Shiites constitute the largest single community but they are allotted only a nominal share in politics; the speaker’s post in the parliament. The other thing the Lebanese government authorized to this marginal group was to establish and to run the Higher Council, which is independent from the Sunnis in handling of their legal affairs. These measures were designed to appease the Shiites, but they were ultimately insufficient, and they organized their own militias during the last civil war. The Shiites now are also aided by the foreign countries; they were not politically matured enough to integrate themselves into a nation-wide organization or political party.
IV. The Atavism to the Tha’r Code

Some of the most militant elements in the Maronite camp took unprecedented measures against their real and perceived enemies in order to protect their vested interest in polity, which is the source of their economic dominance. According to the view of the militant Maronites, known as the Kata’ib, the Palestinians presence was tipping the scale of power in Lebanon in favour of the Muslims. The Kata’ib resented the swelling ranks of the Shiite population seeing them as the most underdeveloped and poverty-stricken sector of what was the “most civilized nation” in the Middle East. Accordingly the Kata’ib decided to eliminate the Shiite slums which clustered around the port areas. They were encroaching on the most fashionable zone of the metropolis and the Kata’ib wanted the tourist industry to be able to save face. The Shiites were constituting the lowest income groups along with the Palestinians in a society which is under the control of commercial and financial capitalists.

Dealing with poverty is a question of welfare policy issue which every government has to handle. But in the eyes of the militant Maronites, it was also a question of the religious belief and ethnicity. Some radicals of the Maronites militia have even said that if Jesus were alive in Lebanon today, he would have to be killed because he was a Palestinian. In order to protect the Maronite ethnic culture in Lebanon, they tried to justify the elimination of all non-Maronite elements. They saw Lebanon as a sanctuary of them. Their zealotry and their total denial of others is evidence of their political immaturity. Such a stance easily led them into a total war against all other citizens except themselves. During the civil war, under the leadership of young militant Maronite, Bashir Jamayyl, the old code of tha’r in its transferred form was revived and intensified. His approach is nothing more than the extension of the transferred revenge code to the Lebanese national politics. Bashir Jamayyl and other Maronite leaders showed no reluctance in forming an alliance with the Israelis. They collaborated in the killing of their common enemy the Palestinians.

V. The Background of Tha’r Revived

It is not only the Lebanese who has preserved the old family code of the vendetta. The code still remains in many Mediterranean and some East European countries, in specially on the island and in mountainous regions. The question can then be asked, what conditions lead to the revival and revitalise the old code which lies dormant in the foundations of their culture? I have proposed that in the Lebanese case, drastic social changes occurred, which shook the system to its foundations. In the face of these changes, there was no mechanisms built-in to the system for successfully dealing with resulting social tensions and conflicts. The situation in Lebanon was especially difficult because of the many divergent social groups and strata involved.

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2 On the transfer of revenge (die Verschiebung der Rache), see Max Weber “Religionssoziologie” Bd 1. ss 96-97 English version by T. Parsons, the Scribe Library, p. 223.
In such a case, it is natural to resort to the methods of social management which have always been used, however, inadequate they may be. Unfortunate for Lebanon, the available strategies were not sufficient for dealing with the issues. The scope of the issues which have burdened the small and new nation has sometimes been far beyond its capacity. Yet it is the right and responsibility of the Lebanese themselves, rather than outside powers, to make decision about their internal problems. The outsiders can help the Lebanese as attempt to solve these problems by their own initiative. In order for this to occur, a national consensus must be reached among the heterogeneous components, and these groups must work together to form a commonwealth. Michel Chiha,3 the ideology behind the mithaq al-watan, has described just such a scenario. He said that diversity is Lebanon’s destiny and a rich resource for to the future of the nation. His sincere idealism will surely be realized once Lebanon achieves political maturity.

In this respect, industrialization can serve to eliminate the narrow minded communalism which is prevalent and deeply rooted in the impoverished micro-community: the technical interlinkage requires a greater division of labour among the diverse elements of a nation. This lesson, drawn from the experiences of other nations, needs to be implemented in a uniquely Lebanese manner. The nation should be free from a heavy dependence on the service industry, the financial sector and the trades. We should not forget the fact that the wealth generated by the petroleum industry was not absorb into the Lebanese economy and did not promote its growth. The existing scale and structure of the Lebanese economy is not enough to mobilize the oil money. As a result, it ends up in the industrialized countries, and will not return. This brings to mind a fact that industry needs and feeds political stability based on maturity: political maturity is a source of prosperity. This is a conclusion we can draw from the analysis of the civil war in Lebanon. Finally it is also true that a nation with an advanced economy can recover very quickly after the disaster.

Reference

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