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Post-war Lebanese communities in search of reconciliation

Fifteen years have passed already since the Taif conference of October 1989 where some 70 Lebanese MPs agreed, with heavy pressure from Saudi Arabia, Syria and the United States, to put an end to fifteen years of civil war in their country.

At the time of the signature of the Taif agreement, there were great expectations among exhausted civilians who had been the primary victims of foreign armies and local militias. There was a general aspiration to return among emigrates, and more-over for several hundred thousands of internally displaced persons, some of whom had fled Israeli invasions of the South, or Syrian bombings of Beirut and Tripoli, but whose large majority had fled inter-sectarian assassinations such as on the “Black Sunday” of December 1975 in East Beirut, or inter-sectarian fighting such as the “War of the Mountain” between Christian Phalangist “Lebanese Forces” and Druze “Socialist Progressive” combatants in 1983-4.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the two catchwords for all Lebanese were “reconstruction” and “reconciliation”. This article will leave aside the issue of physical and economic reconstruction, and of its controversial assessment. It focuses on “reconciliation”. Interestingly, the word is polysemic. It may refer to criminal/victim relation, to the general reconstruction of social link after a period of anomy such as a civil war, or to the adoption of a new political pact between elites. When it comes to Lebanon, it always bears a religious dimension.

An understanding had to be reached about the bases and the methods for national reconciliation. In the past, Lebanon had been a model of prosperity and intercommunal balance; now “Lebanonization” denoted a state in disarray, marked by ethnic conflicts. How could diverse communal group identities be respected without undermining the democratic functioning of the rule of law? And how was it possible to reconcile respect for pluralism with respect for the common legal and policing rules that are the basis for the functioning of the state?

The renewal of communalism

In Lebanon, according to the model of “consociational democracy” proposed by Arend Lijphart,¹ altogether a descriptive and a normative model, political power is not distributed according to majority rule. Rather, its sharing is the result of an agreement between elites of the 18 religious segments that divide the society. This is why it is labelled *siyâsa tâ’ifiyya*, “sectarian politics” or “political communalism”. Moreover, since Lebanese independence in 1943, political power has been organised within the bilateral framework of a tacit agreement for power sharing between Christians and Muslims.

1 The Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart formulated the concept of consociational democracy in the clearest and most exhaustive manner. Lijphart 1977. Under the influence of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and through the work of Theodor Hanf, Lebanese intellectuals especially refer to « *Proportzdemokratie* » or « *Konkordanzdemokratie* » as theorised by Gerhard Lehmbruch.

After the civil war, the principles suggested by Lijphart – governmental coalition, segmental autonomy, proportional representation and the right of veto - remain the very same which guided the framers of the Lebanese Constitution in May 1926 and of the Electoral Law in that same year,² then the leaders of independence at the time of the adoption of the National Pact in 1943. These principles were again endorsed at the time of the adoption of the “Document of National Reconciliation” at Taif in 1989.³ In the aura of satisfaction of peace recovered and with the conviction that common misfortune had at last forged a Lebanese national identity,⁴ the reconstruction of the Lebanese political system thus consisted in a restoration which the pre-war liberal elites would not even have dared dream of.

The most salient feature of Lebanon's post-war political system is thus the solidification of political communalism. Although demands for its elimination still hovered, the members of parliament preserved the famous article 95 of the constitution, which stipulates, "in the transition period [which has persisted since 1926] . . . the communities shall be equitably represented in the ministries."⁵ Communalism has not only been reinforced but also enshrined. For while the National Pact of 1943 only evoked the unwritten rule of communal coexistence, now a "pact of shared existence" was made explicit, and the government's legitimacy was based on this new pact.⁶ At the same time the principle of political communalism was somewhat modified, since the 54:45 balance of parliamentary seats was split evenly 50:50 between Christians and Muslims, and parity extended to high-ranking posts in government and the public sector.

The 1989 Taif inter-Lebanese agreement that ended the war, brought a new dimension to political communalism, it made official what had been tacit before the war. It fixed what had been relative and negotiable, before. After the war, and for the first time, the main power positions were *constitutionally* allocated to precise communities: the presidency to the Maronites, Prime ministry to the Sunnis, the presidency of Parliament to the Shiites, and so on. As a matter of consequence, the new Lebanese constitution adopted the following year does more than just reflect the resilience of the sectarian groups as the more immediately operative part of the Lebanese social structure. It is used to codify a deeper split between communities, and especially between Christians and Muslims, in such way that the new power-sharing organised in the Taif agreement has become, not an instrument for inter-sectarian accommodation, but rather a means of incorporating the society through communal belongings, and keeping it under the patronage of sectarian elites.

Also, in the post war period, religion has become the paradigm for the interpretation of norms, and the ruling of social behaviour. Lebanese citizens are caught in every dimension of their daily mundane life

2 Rondot 1957, 69. The fixing of the number of representatives and their repartition were settled by an order of the High Commissioner on March 1922, enforced in 1926.

3 Maïla 1992.

4 Hanf 1993.

5 *Al-Dastûr al-lubnânî* 1990.

6 See the eleventh and last general principle of the *Document of National Reconciliation*. Among the political reforms described in title II are equitable (among Christians and Muslims) and proportional (among the various sects) distribution of parliamentary seats.

into a web of religious symbols⁷ and into networks of sectarian belongings. Settlement, education, even in government schools, leisure and, of course, civil status (marriage, heritage, parental authority) are still organised along rules inherited from the Ottoman *millet* system, that all stress the sectarian identity of the self. There is a constant search for same communal neighbourhood in order to avoid conflict between groups at the local level. Inter-sectarian accommodation is built on a living memory of tradition differences and past conflicts.

Truly, the civil war resulted in the deepening of the sectarian divide, through a combined process of social withdrawal on primordial identities, and political manipulation of fears and utopias. In the post war period, secular culture, shared ethical references, and trans-sectarian political projects that had been gaining ground in the 1960s and 1970s, gave way to the display of public and often intolerant demonstrations of religious belief and sectarian solidarity, beneath the existence of a dialogue between religious hierarchies and intellectuals, and despite the usual denial of sectarian division. Two emblematic examples are worth mentioning here.

The first is the re-invention of a Shiite tradition, '*Ashûra*, the celebration of the ten days of Husayn (prophet Muhammad's grand-son)'s martyrdom in 680 of our era. '*Ashûra* had long been commemorated by Lebanese Shiis, especially in South Lebanon. It was taken over by *Hizbollah* after 1982, and, since then, the political anti-Western and anti-Israeli slogans chanted during the mourning demonstration are permeated with anti-Jewish, and also anti-Christian messages.

The second is the renewal of the monastic life among Christians of all denominations in connection with the past commitment of powerful monastic Orders and convents on the side of Christian militia groups during the war.⁸ While there is in the post war decade a remarkable renewal of mystical and theological life, and religious studies we can also observe that several Christian militant groups are attracting young Lebanese because of their refusal of, or lack of faith in, a shared Lebanese national identity, and because of their strong feeling of estrangement from their Muslim environment (to the point of denial of their Arab identity). As a matter of consequence, the cultural and political socialisation by each community, its clerics and its confessional schools provides young generations with a strong ideological structure of differences – the inspiration for potential aggressive relationship with the people of other sectarian groups. Their religious involvement is taken as a refuge from what they dread as an external danger. Even more, in a few cases, their new religious involvement is connected to a political and military project inspired by the ideology of war of cultures, or religions in conflict.

The Taif document was as much an imposed formula as the reflection of a dominant, war-induced popular notion of communal identity. As a matter of consequence, the new constitution adopted in September 1990 codified communal groups interaction. In contrast with the 1970s, when secular customs and aspirations had become widespread, and standardised urban culture had developed,

⁷ Geertz 1973, 87-125.

⁸ Picard 1994, 152.

cultural identities are now stressed and celebrated, group particularities defended. The refusal to abolish political communalism not only lifted the taboo against communal socialisation but also presented it as the norm. Insecurity, dispersion of families, generational differences, the loss of socio-economic markers at a time of paralysis, and subsequent break-up of the state structure—all contributed to the revaluation of the religious community as final criteria of identity. Communal differences became the guiding principle of ethical analysis all the more so since the changes of the post-modern world also played a part: Replacing bipolar conflict as the dominant global dynamic in what Samuel Huntington called the "clash of civilizations" in which ethnic groups are drawn together to form communities and demand political representation or even a territorial homeland.

As a result, under the Second Lebanese Republic, the questions of communalism and consensus democracy are the object of controversies whose stakes are far from being merely intellectual: Conflicts of power between the former and the new elites, and conflicts concerning the future of a political construction whose rationale seems to consist more in making itself permeable to external interferences than to the realisation of a common project. For, notwithstanding the importance of external factors in the destiny of a country like Lebanon (as made clear in the formula «the strength of Lebanon lies in its weakness»), these domestic factors are decisive.⁹

In search of national reconciliation

Nothing illustrates better the obstacles and flaws in national reconciliation in the years following the war than the interrelated questions of demobilisation of armed groups, and the granting of political amnesty.

The dissolution of the militias and the integration of a number of militiamen into the military and civilian branches of the public service were swiftly but only partially implemented. A decision was taken by the Council of ministers to disband all militias except Hizbollah. It was made effective in March 1991. In October 1993, when the results of the first - and only - wave of integration were made public, 6,000 ex-militiamen only (out of an estimate of 50,000), and a few dozen officers had joined the regular forces.¹⁰

Once this limited demobilisation implemented, there was a legitimate need to turn the page by issuing a general amnesty. While this amnesty was designed in principle to foster national reconciliation and to favour the regeneration of a common and peaceful political culture, it was implemented in a problematic manner since the demobilisation process remained unfinished. Moreover, it was selective, and thus hampered the task of social reconstruction: The dividing line between those who benefited from the amnesty and those excluded from it, far from rehabilitating and reaffirming the basis of a common identity, on the contrary, ran the risk of deepening the cleavage between irreconcilable conceptions of national identity.

⁹ Zolberg 1980, 749. On these interactions in Lebanon, Owen 1976.

¹⁰ Picard 1999.

It is not possible to engage here in the complex juridical debate over the criteria that qualified actions falling under the Amnesty law. It is enough to acknowledge that it posed a number of problems both in principle and in practice. With regard to principles, it erased a number of crimes committed across communal lines, much like the memories of the events of 1860 - the war that took place over a hundred years ago between Maronites and Druze – had been erased. As a corollary it excluded from the process of reconciliation the losers in the civil war, now demoted to the level of the enemy - namely the South Lebanon Army militia that collaborated with Israel during more than 20 years of occupation, but also segments of the (Christian) Lebanese Forces who did not accept the Taif agreement.

In Lebanon like in many war-torn countries, the granting of amnesty after a civil war was a political act par excellence, which aimed at reintegrating the greatest possible number of people by ignoring their crimes. The state evaded any question about the past conduct of most of the war's protagonists, in such way that post war political practices became contaminated by the militia spirit. Whereas many traditional leaders were dead or in exile, most of the post war political establishment belonged to new social categories. It was not only a generational change, nor was it simply the arrival of the new urbanised strata on the public scene. It involved the co-optation of sectarian militia leaders into the government, the parliament and the upper levels of the administration. Alongside Nabih Berri, Walid Jumblat, Elias Hobeiqa, and for a short time Samir Geagea (former leaders of Amal, the Druze PSP, and the LF, respectively) the political leadership also incorporated representatives of the Alawite militia of Tripoli, a leader of the *Ahbash* (the radical Sunnis of Beirut) and, of course, leaders of Hizbollah.

These militiamen who entered politics had a concept of public affairs different from that of the traditional communal leaders. Their objective was less about drawing an inter-sectarian consensus than of assuring a victory for their communal group's interest. In 1991, for example, Jumblat called for the creation of a "ministry of the Mountain" which he counted on to provide benefits for his Druze constituents, comparable to those Nabih Berri had derived from his "ministry of the South", created in 1984 for the Shiites. He obtained the post of minister of the Displaced Persons, with control over some of the public and private subsidies for resettling Christians in their native villages in the Druze Shuf. More generally, appointments in the state bureaucracy were the result of hard bargaining among the "troika" of the three presidents – of the Republic, the Council of ministers, and the Parliament – each one seeking rewards for his own clientele. The list of senior civil servants thereby reflects more than ever the sectarian balance. At the highest levels of the state, interminable negotiations gave way to thinly veiled pressures, aggressive declarations, and zero-sum games. The balance of power, in the crude military sense of the expression, has become a permanent fact of Lebanese political life.

Selective amnesty and amnesia are combined with deep social distrust, expressed through discreet but persistent segregationist practices. In place of the *'aych mushtarak* (common life) proclaimed by religious authorities, since the end of the war there has been a considerable segregation of communal groups: new homogeneous neighbourhoods, gated communities preoccupied with security against largely imaginary outside dangers, and a strong preference for sectarian schools. The most striking sign

of the deficiency in reconciliation can be seen in the failure of the return of the displaced persons: only a small number of the some 300,000 Christians who fled the Druze Shuf in September 1983, and of the 70,000 others who left the outskirts of Sidon in the spring of 1985 after the defeat of the Lebanese Forces, have returned to their native villages.¹¹ The enormous amount of money dispensed by the Lebanese state made it possible to rebuild churches in order to mark the sectarian identity of the land, and for each family to begin rebuild their house. But it could not convince people to return and live again in their original village. For the most part the process benefited political operators such as the minister of the Displaced Persons, who was more intent on distributing bounty to members of his Druze community than in promoting the return of Christians, despite his intent to block the territorial spread of the Shiites in his region.

On the whole, the general split between Christians and Muslims has not decreased. Beneath the dialogue between religious hierarchies, and despite the frequent denial of social heterogeneity and local divisions, an unspoken suspicion persists, perhaps more on the Christian than on the Muslim side, almost as though the Maronites felt the country was no longer theirs. In the social arena, conflicts of identity concealed since the end of the war permeate other areas such as music and sports, which offer symbolic spaces to foster communal mobilisation.

Between communal isolation and Islamist threat

Under these circumstances, it is hard to imagine how Lebanese society might accede to a common political culture that would make up the new basis for the Lebanese territorial state, not to mention the nation state. The reestablishment of the communal system under the aegis of the militias has made it possible to sidestep the debate on the identity and the future of the Lebanese state. It was a conservative choice, explicable in part because it served the ambitions of the state's new leaders, all concerned with strengthening the allegiance of their own communal constituencies. But the choice was also justified by the argument that adopting a non-sectarian method of representation based on a demographic majority carried with it the serious risk of a drift toward totalitarianism, as observed in neighbouring Arab states. In Lebanon, more precisely, behind the demands for secularisation and for adoption of majority rule, many feared the ambition of the representatives of a sociological majority – a Muslim, more precisely Shiite majority – who would be tempted to impose its values and its laws on all Lebanese citizens. However uncertain the demographic data, the Shiite community is universally recognised as the largest, and hence as a sociological majority.¹² The Shiite leaders might be prone to manipulate demands for non-sectarianism because it might in the end allow them to establish an Islamist political regime that would impose the *sharī'a*, including laws that prescribe an inferior status to the People of the Book -

¹¹ Naufal 1998.

¹² The electoral lists numbered 1,558,000 Muslims (56,55%) and 1,197,000 Christians (43,45%) in 2000. Considering a higher emigration of the Christians and the separate valuation of people under 21 years old by community, the Muslim/Christian ratio could be said to be 60 to 40, even 62 to 38 at the beginning of this century. Kassir 2000, 17.

Christians and Jews. By the law of numbers, a “secularised” Lebanon would thus risk being transformed into an Islamic Republic.

In Lebanon, Islamic radicalism developed following the failures of the left and the Arab nationalist movement during the earliest years of the civil war. The collapse of Arab nationalism, which had been the dominant ideology in the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s, and the disillusionment with the struggle for the liberation of Palestine that had become the mobilising myth in the 1970s, left generations that felt frustrated and betrayed by their leaders. In the first years of the war, the secularist National Progressive Movement proved unable to preserve its unity and to stop the haemorrhage of its militants, in face of the organisations and leaders primarily concerned with the defence of their community. De-confessionalisation of the political system as claimed by its leader Jumblat might have open the way to a political democratisation only if accompanied by a step toward the society's secularisation, i.e. by undoing the lock of confessional personal status and recognising the rights of secular Lebanese citizenship. If these two processes – de-confessionalization of the state and secularisation of the society - are not carried out simultaneously, the first alone, with the adoption of the majority system, amounts to imposing the political vision of the demographically dominant group. In the first years of the war, such a demand from Muslim constituencies worked as a lever for gaining acceptance of their demand for political "participation". Though, in affirming in a controversial article that an Islamic government was theoretically possible and ideally desirable, Husayn al-Quwwatî, director of Dar el-Fatwa, then the legal authority of the Sunni community, did not help, far from it, to remove all hindrances to the plans for de-confessionalization.¹³ Mûsâ Sadr himself, the charismatic leader of the Shiite movement *Amal*, fostered ambiguity by referring to a program of secularisation and intercommunal cooperation on the one hand, and to his a-historical vision of politics inspired by religious beliefs, on the other. The same ambiguity has been maintained by sheikh Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, the highest Lebanese spiritual authority after the war: while conceding that Lebanese society is not ready for the establishment of an Islamic state, he would not rule out the possibility of one.¹⁴

Toward federalism?

A communal society such as that of Lebanon cannot content itself with the individual federalism organised by the code of personal status and the Electoral law, whose devices, while relatively functional during periods of civil peace, have proved to be highly inefficient in the security field during a period of discord. Therefore, during the war a claim for regional autonomy, especially on the part of the supporters of «cultural pluralism» among the intellectuals of the (Christian) Lebanese Front,¹⁵ was put forward. For them, *ta'âyush*, Lebanese conviviality, requires voluntary choice, through a real

13 *Al-Safir*, 18 August 1975.

14 On the debate among the Lebanese Shiites on Ayatollah Khomayni's proclamation of the *wilâyat al-faqîh* -- the return of political power to the “just jurisconsult,” Sivan 1985. For the position of Ayatollah Fadlallah, Sharâra 1997, 121.

15 Fâris 1979. Entelis 1979.

autonomy of the communities, in other words without either physical or legal constraint from the central power over the communal segments. The stability of consensus democracy therefore involves the territorialisation of communal identities, which supposedly entails federalism being easier to apply. They strongly recommend not only the monitoring by each community of its educational system and cultural affairs, but even the appropriation and redistribution of local resources, and especially the control of its economic co-operation and political relations with foreign countries. Thus, they covet the regal prerogatives of the central State they consider at the very most as an authority for accommodation.¹⁶ The sovereignist option looms on the horizon of the federalist agenda, in contradiction with the choice of a centralised political system, supposed to guarantee a stable democracy in a society plagued with a fragmentary culture.¹⁷

After the war, the cantonisation of Lebanon initiated by its warlords has lost its impetus. Especially, the partition between a Christian «smaller Lebanon» and the rest of the country has failed, so that the local forces finally handed back its prerogatives to the central State almost everywhere. Theoretically at least, the right to reside wherever one pleases in the country and to call the legal government to account - two basic characteristics of democracy - have again been bestowed on every Lebanese.¹⁸ With a view to putting an end to the divisions of the war period, the federal formula was firmly rejected by the authors of the Taif compromise. At the most an administrative decentralisation «with a view to development»¹⁹ might be carried out. The spectre of separatism remains so formidable, and dissension so hard to manage for a power, which claims to represent consensus, that the limited decentralisation provided by the Taif accord, might just as well be emptied of its contents. As a matter of consequence, in the name of national unity, the possibility of promoting local democracy and revivifying grass roots political life in order to counterbalance the central power has seemingly been wasted.²⁰

In spite of the veto against federalism, the autonomy of communal segments and the right of veto which constitute the consociational guarantees of minority respect, are properly enforced in the Lebanese constitutional system. Indeed, Articles 9, 10 and 95 of the Constitution officially guarantee the constitutive elements of the autonomy of communal segments. The exercise of minority right of veto is guaranteed by Article 57. After the war, this principle has been under threat several times, as shown by the «exceptional» and «temporary» amendments imposed on the parliament to prolong the presidential mandate of Elyâs Hrâwî (October 1995) and to manipulate the Electoral Law (1992, 1996, December 1999), against the growing resistance from some deputies and many groups in the civil society. Notwithstanding these new unconstitutional practices, the revision adopted at Taif confirmed the principle of veto right, i.e. the requirement of a two-thirds majority for the adoption of important

16 Migdal 1988, 4, 237 & 264.

17 Lijphart 1968, 212.

18 It is however doubtful that all Lebanese enjoy this right equally and can benefit from it in practice, faced with discriminating real estate policies recommended by some communal authorities and practices of intimidation on the ground.

19 President Elyâs Hrâwî, cited by *Al-Hayât*, 13 December 1989.

20 Favier 2000, 12.

decisions both by the parliament and the government. The autonomy of communal groups and the acknowledgement of their veto right so definitely remain at the heart of Lebanese institutional logic, that we may wonder if the rule of pluralistic representation hasn't taken precedence over that of national integration.

Obviously, that hasn't appeased frustrations and communal fears. Minorities of all kinds have continually complained about being neglected, picked on, and even excluded from the Lebanese system, and this has been more than ever the case in the post war period. Today, members of the Christian minority are far from being sanguine about having lost their status as a political majority, tokenised by Maronite centrality in the state of Greater Lebanon, and embodied in the presidential function. The relative Shiite Muslim majority was legally consigned to the minority until the creation of its Higher Council in 1973, and politically until the revaluation of the presidency of parliament since 1992. The Druze minority, whose relative demographic weight has been diminishing for the past two centuries, is claiming for the presidency of a communal Senate, in the name of consociational democracy well understood. The Armenian minorities, which the collapse of the Soviet system has rooted in their Lebanese identity are now refusing to be marginalised inside it. etc. One cannot underestimate to what a degree the system is underpinned by inter-communal tensions. Not only was the war itself the indicator of such tensions and structural imbalances, but it moreover amplified them by giving birth to a particularly divided and agonistic social formation.²¹

How can the guarantees for minorities be implemented by the state, understood and accepted by society, if the reasons justifying them are concealed and the values founding them are denied? The representation of minorities within the political system has to be relayed by the mediation of a common political culture which organises the relations between state and society. But a political culture can't come into being on command. It feeds on a historical experience and is built up through the expression of differences, and negotiation over their settlement. Between the «culture of discord» denounced by Georges Corm²² and the official discourse of reconciliation, seeps the huge silence of amnesia which objects any expression of grievances and prejudices. Between the defence of particularisms and the acceptance of a common political order, there lacks the bond of civility which would enable the Lebanese to share an ethical basis for the respect of minority differences, and the recognition of their practical limits.

The paradoxical contradiction between the respect of the minority provided for in the constitutional text and its negation through the rejection of the Other, represents the first deficiency of the Lebanese political system with regard to the principles of political communalism. Some intellectuals and organisations of the civil society are aware of this, and are trying to remedy it through a work of collective memory (concerning missing persons, or the commemoration of main events of the war) and

21 On war as productive of social identities, Giddens 1985; Creveld 1991.

22 Corm 1992, 225.

inter-communal dialogue so as to instil a shared political culture as a foundation of the state's legitimacy.

The issue of numbers

Disagreement between Christians and Muslims on the content of national culture is often related to the logic of political representation which reflects not so much the demographic balance as the question of power ratio. Since the adoption of the Taif agreement, the Christians, while constituting less than 40% of the Lebanese living in the country, have half of the parliamentary seats at their disposal.²³ But we also know that the majority of the Christian deputies elected in 1992, 1996 and 2000 were so thanks to a number of Muslim votes and especially to the acquiescence of the «poles of power» (*aqtâb*), and are thus deprived of their veto power. A consociational adjustment such as the adoption at Taif of a Christian / Muslim parity is therefore the cause of a general frustration, since it in no way corresponds to the «reality» presented in a contradictory manner by the parties. It is in no position to safeguard the minority but has opened the way to alliances and coalitions, of which it has become the hostage. Precisely because the Lebanese political system is not a system of majority democracy, it is illusory to think that its improvement would only require a quantitative adjustment.

Such a quantitative, or demographic, adjustment for the imperfections of the Lebanese system would unfaillingly open a crisis between the majority community (or rather, the first of the minorities as no communal group can claim 50 percent of the nation) and the others. The democratic deficit remains inherent in a communal state. Firstly, because communalism affords a favourable ground for patronage which substitutes for citizenship relation. In such a system, the political decision belongs to a few patrons, *zu'âmâ'*, whose domination relies on the perpetuation of communal divisions. Secondly, because the community tends to impose its own form of totalitarian imprisonment onto the individual by denying him a free will and the right to exist outside it. In order to hold onto its power over the polity, it denies individual freedom, especially that of unbelievers, and appeals to collective solidarity in the political realm.

Overcoming the obstacle of the fragility of the communal consensus therefore implies looking in another direction than numerical change in order to enhance the national dialogue, and finally move on to a stable democracy.²⁴ It is not enough however to acknowledge this requirement and expect that an «instrumental logic» will lead to an ineluctable development toward a more «real» democracy.²⁵ We can only observe that the new political share-out of Taif has been powerless to bridge the rift between communities or to re-enforce this «common good» which is the foundation of a political project. On the

23 Kassir 2000, 17.

24 Lijphart 1968, 211.

25 Contrary to what Ghassan Salamah suggests. Salame 1994, 132.

contrary, it contributes, once again, by delaying and even banning the access of people (*ahl*) of each community to the political arena, to upholding the communal social order (*tâ'ifi*).²⁶

Political elites and the instrumentalisation of the communal divide

Beside the communal consensus, the Lebanese formula requires the implementation of a government coalition. In Lebanon, such a coalition had depended on a carefully balanced proportional representation between the seven largest communities (Sunni, Shiite and Druze among the Muslims; Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Armenian Orthodox among the Christians). Thus has been sought for and laboriously enacted the requirement of a multiple balance of power. Moreover, since independence in the 1943 it rested on a Maronite-Sunni agreement, the National Pact of 1943, which introduced a kind of partnership between the Maronite president and the Sunni Prime minister. It was an unequal partnership, between an unaccountable executive leader and a government leader threatened by parliamentary wrath and popular revolt but the undeniable advantage of this arrangement was that a logic was then imposed onto Lebanese state-building – the logic of a Maronite *hegemon* – although the sense of national interest was generally lacking. After the war, the troika of the three presidents was substituted for the government tandems and the veto mutually exerted by the Prime minister, by the president of the Republic and the president of the Parliament are considered as evidence of a systematic seeking for consensus, for the greater equality within the troika introduced by Taif means that Lebanon has become a little more consociational.

But then the question of the meaning of such co-operation arises. The Lebanese communal consensus rests on (to say the least) normative premises according to which the inter-elites agreement negotiated since the beginning of the 19th century has reflected the expectations of the grass roots of each community and not only the alliance of powerful families who are hardly representative of such a social base. In a highly hierarchical society, one in which the distance between the *khâssa*, the elite, and the *'amma*, the people, is deeply programmed into collective consciousness, these masses have constantly been subjected to the communal framework, while the edification of a national identity has been hampered, and the existence of a general interest ignored. The objective of the National Pact in 1943 was nothing more than to ensure the structural predominance of the elite, to the exclusion of all other social groups - when all is said and done, to perpetuate an oligarchy. In the recent period the replacement of the traditional notables at the head of each community by militia lumpen-elites was in no way a break with the formula of sectarian consensus, but rather the strategic outcome of the manipulation of identities and communal memories in the interest of these same elites. The people of each communal group responded to these manipulations by promoting even more radical elites, who drove the segmental logic to its outer limits: The closing off of the communal territory, the rejection of the Other, the reduction to servitude of the communal subject. Thus, the decommissioning of militias and the adoption of a law of amnesty which was presented as a return to the pre-war «civic» communal

26 Maqdissi 1996.

consensus, corresponded in fact to a contrary logic: That of the re-integration into the very core of the communal system of the militiamen who had originally sown the seeds of discord, enabling them to grab their slice of the benefits of power-sharing, within the framework of a reconstruction process whose financial stakes are by far in excess of anything that the pre-war communal elites had been accustomed to fighting over.

Heirs to the traditional oligarchy / ex- militia leaders covertly in sworn complicity with a foreign power / venture capitalists operating at the confines of a privatised state. Such is the trilogy toward which the coalition of communal elites has allowed itself to drift, as the sole winners of a war, which has destroyed the state and atomised society. After the war, the restoration of communalism was precisely chosen to bring a society torn by deep divisions to settle back into pre-existing categories.

Can religion substitute for politics?

Considering the kind of blockade that paralyses the dynamics of the Lebanese system altogether *top-down* (through political instrumentalisation of communal divides) and *bottom-up* (due to societal withdrawal on primordial solidarities) the post war period appears a period of renewed importance of the clerics of all sects, and their upsurge on the political scene. This process is not completely new in Lebanon where secular elites and clerical elites took turns, and competed for country leadership during the past century and a half, with strong Maronite Patriarchs taking a national role in periods of crisis, such as Patriarch Howayek during WW1, and Patriarch Meouchy during the 1958 civil war.²⁷

What can be observed in the post war period is a similar phenomenon. As old notabilities and pre-war political leaders have been nearly annihilated, and warlords strongly discredited, the people within each communal group found no recourse but in clerical leaders for moral, but also political advice. Without going into details, the two emblematic figures of today's Lebanon are without doubt Patriarch cardinal Boutros Nasrallah Sfeir (the highest Maronite authority) and Sayyid Husayn Fadlallah, a Shiite *marja'* (source of imitation) whose advices are sought beyond the borders of Lebanon (especially in Iraq). Without denying the conciliatory role often played by clerical elites and religious intellectuals, their role in the sectarian division of the society has to be examined.

Sometimes for the good, sometimes with a negative tone, the substitution of clerical elites for secular elites has the effect of confessionalising any public issue in Lebanon. As a result, the wording and solving of political, security, economic issues are each time turned into inter-sectarian competition. Their solution implicitly involves the victory of one community over another (or one religion over the other if we think in terms of Christians/Muslims divide). Most of the time, public issues are stuck in a stalemate because of inter-sectarian competition, even in issues that have nothing to do with religion.

Two examples are worth mentioning here: First, there is a consensus in post war Lebanon about the necessity to revise the Electoral Law adopted in 1926, and especially to reshape the Lebanese electoral

²⁷ Picard 1998.

map in order to remedy to two major flaws – namely the monopolisation of parliamentary and municipal seats by traditional notables and their heirs (the Frangiehs and the Hamadas, or today the Lahouds) on the one hand, and the over-representation of mountain and rural areas while 60 percent of the population lives in greater Beirut, on the other hand. While these issues have nothing to do with communal identities, the post war debate on electoral reform remains focused on the issue of the size of the electoral constituency. Why? Because it is a means for either comforting the independence of Christian MPs (in small constituencies, the *qadhât*) or making them dependent from a larger Muslim electorate (in large constituencies, the *muhâfadhât*).

The second example of the confessionalisation of public issues relates to the debate about the presence of several hundred thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and their possible final installation (*tawtîn*) in the country. To make it short, the issue arouse hot debates in 1994 after the Oslo Israeli-Palestinian agreement was signed, and again since the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000. The issue of Palestinian settlement in Lebanon boils down, in every public debate, to the question of accepting the integration (at least socially, if not by granting them citizenship) of an important Sunni population in a country where Christians already represent less than 35 percent of the Lebanese residents. Religious divines of all denomination took a strong stand in the debate. However, instead of reasoning in terms of human rights, democracy and collective development, they interfered in mundane and political tactics such as land purchase and the organisation of protest or support rallies. The guiding principle at work in the clerics' involvement into politics is the struggle for hegemony: The fall of the Maronite *hegemon* through the war, and its possible substitution by a Muslim *hegemon*.

Clearly, the substitution of clerical elites for secular elites has the effect of polarising not only social but also political loyalties around sects. Before the war, consociational politics had been organised by and around moderate leaders - Raymond Eddé being the paragon, and his forced marginalisation in 1978 a sad indication of the limits of the process. In the past decade, on the contrary, the inscription of political and social life under the banner of communalism contributes to the revival of sectarian intolerance. It gives rise to new extremist leaders such as the young Sammy Gemayel among the Maronites, or Sunnis fundamentalist clerics such as Salim al-Islam Shahhal in Tripoli. While programmatic parties have been eradicated by militia take-over, and trans-communal mobilisation systematically suppressed by confessional leaders, today within each sect, secular moderate elites are systematically marginalised: The Christian Qornet Chahwan group of reformists has not been able to gain legitimacy in front of its Christian constituency, nor among its pairs from other sects. Among the Shiites, Amal and Hizbollah antagonise intellectuals like Jihad al-Zayn or secular leaders like Ali Husaynî. Nawaf Salam, the heir of the big Sunni family, is blamed for not involving enough in community affairs. Safia Saadé's secular stand is denounced as heresy in her Orthodox community, and she is utterly marginalised, etc. The only exception to this negative picture can be found among young and fragile trans-sectarian movements such as students' organisations, ecologists, and human rights advocacy groups.

The problem today is that it is difficult, nearly impossible, for a Lebanese, to identify himself with a leader from another sect, or to put his trust into a leader from another sect. An exception worthy of note was the figure of Patriarch Sfeir during the summer of 2001 when he toured Mount Lebanon and especially the Druze regions, calling for national reconciliation, and a common political struggle for national independence (meaning from Syrian presence, for Israelis had left a year before). At that time, he received a large trans-communal support, and people from all regions and denominations hailed him as a national hero. But soon after, his national image shattered when the Druze leader Jumblat reconciled with Syria, and denounced Sfeir's collusion with Christian extremists from the diaspora.

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Fifteen years after the adoption of the Taif agreement, the restoration and strengthening of political communalism has failed to bestow a consensual foundation in Lebanon. The national life remains hampered by religious and sectarian divisions. Such a conclusion calls for a critical reappraisal of consociational democracy, a political system adopted by Lebanon since the birth of the state, and favoured in other countries characterised by religious pluralism such as Bosnia (in 1994), and tomorrow Iraq and Sudan. It also draws attention of analysts and policymakers toward the kind of institutional and practical responses to offer to popular demands in the wake of domestic conflicts expressed in terms of religious identities. Namely, the urgent need of recognition, rule of law, and security.

Today, some Lebanese clerics advocate adoption of "religious secularism", i.e., further institutionalisation of religious parties, and their participation in the political game in due respect of its rule. However, the comparison they draw with Christian political parties in Western Europe (in Italy, Germany, and France) and with AKP in Turkey is irrelevant. In a country marked by institutionalised communalism, religious identities lack flexibility. They become tools in the political competition rather than bases for compromise and cooperation. In a country where the individual is submitted to the rule of the community, the civil society remains segmented and powerless in front of the state. Beyond the respectable endeavour of clerics from all denomination in favour of national reconciliation, the Lebanese need a gradual reform of their political institutions, through the introduction of non-sectarian professional and political representation. They also need to adopt a clear distinction between the religious and the political, the private and the public, spheres.

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