Is there hope for Lebanon?

by Camille H. Habib

Like The Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and similar states, the Lebanese republic is a conjunction of paradoxes and contradictions. As a country, Lebanon was created by accident rather than by design — at least not by the design of its people in becoming a French zone of influence in the era that followed the First World War. As a polity, Lebanon was and is archaic, inefficient and divided. It was and is Western and Arab, Christian and Moslem, modern and traditional. Despite these inherent contrasts and contradictions, Lebanon — from the time it obtained its independence from France in 1943 until 1975 — had shown a remarkable ability to survive. Many claim that its survival was due mainly to the politics of accommodation, known also as consociation, which the Lebanese had adopted as their approach to government. Only when this approach failed to adapt to the external and internal changes of 1975 did the Lebanese system collapse and civil war erupt.

Visibly, the war has brought great losses in human life, massive physical destruction, the reduction of the Lebanese government's control to a small part of Beirut, and the division of Lebanon's territory among external forces (Israel and Syria) and local baronies. Yet the war continues and shows no sign of being contained. At one level, the crisis is an ethno-religious one. At others it is military, political and socioeconomic; and all these internal problems are linked to the overall situation in the Middle East.

Historically, policy analysts have listed three "ideal-type" methods of conflict management in a plural society: consociational adjustment; partition; and integration. Almost all of these measures have been tried during the twelve years of the Lebanese impasse. Unfortunately, none of them ever acquired enough support from all factions for its success. Nevertheless, an examination of the failure of these reforms can prove helpful in developing a new formula for future efforts.

Internal initiatives

On February 14, 1976, Sleiman Franjieh, then President of Lebanon, announced a reform package that would update the consociation formula of 1943. The "Constitutional Document," as his reforms proposals are known, provided for the equal representation in parliament of Christians and Moslems, the abolition of confessionalism in civil service appointments, the selection of the Sunni prime minister by parliament and the maintenance of confessional distribution within the main offices of the state (the presidency, the premiership and the speakership of parliament). Although the Document required that the Christians concede some of their prerogatives, it did not satisfy the Moslems. They were demanding full political participation in the functions of government and now rejected Franjieh's reforms because they left the presidential powers intact and maintained the presidency as a Maronite (Christian) preserve. As one Moslem leader complained: "The Constitutional Document does not provide a fundamental solution to the Lebanese crisis and the reforms it proposes are not commensurate with the sacrifice that has been made."

What consociational adjustments would the Moslems accept? During the conference of national dialogue in Lausanne, Switzerland, in March 1984, their leaders called for the creation of an Upper House or Senate in which the major religious communities would be represented equally. They also demanded: the abolition of confessionalism from the civil service only after the rights of the under-represented communities were met; the adoption of a non-confessional system in parliamentary elections by taking the whole country as a single constituency; a shift in power from the president to the prime minister; and the constant involvement of religious laws in the citizens' personal affairs (e.g., marriage, inheritance and divorce). This formula quickly was rejected by the Christians on the grounds that it was a sectarian demand for sectarian gain in the form of transferring certain powers from the president to the prime minister, that the numerical majority was political rather than confessional, and that the rights of all communities could only be guaranteed by a structured power-sharing formula.

The second alternative for conflict management in a plural society is partition — or, in this case, repartition. It suggests that such a "solution" might come about at the cost of human suffering and material loss. This proposal was rejected by the majority of Lebanese, Moslems and Christians alike, on the ground that partition would eliminate tension in Lebanon by eliminating Lebanon, and it would not necessarily eliminate tension in the region. They argued that a mountainous Christian mini-state would not be economically viable and that the coexistence of Christianity and Islam in Lebanon gave the country its unique role in forging an understanding between the two monotheistic religions.

Finally, the third option is integration, that is, reunification on the basis of secularization. This formula is rejected in Lebanon on the ground that secularization can survive only in a homogeneous society, not in a sectarian one; that the rule of numerical democracy can be applied only when the majority is political rather than confessional; and that Islam and secularization are mutually exclusive. This is not to suggest that the Moslem Lebanese are set on establishing an Islamic state. Rather, their stand on the issue of a secular Lebanon underlies their rejection of any change in the present system that does not consider their numeri-

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