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Lebanon in the Eye of the 'Arab Spring'



The slogan “The people want to bring down the regime” had been echoing across Arab countries for some months before it reached Lebanon in February, 2011, with a small amendment: “The people want to bring down the sectarian regime.” On the 27th of that month more than 2,500 Lebanese citizens marched in the capital Beirut demanding that the country’s controversial confessional system be replaced with a secularist approach. The demonstrators later released a public statement outlining their grievances:

We as Lebanese citizens are:

- Against the sectarian regime and its warlords and leaders
- Against the regime of quotas and political succession
- Against social and economic exploitation, unemployment and migration
- Against poverty
- Against imbalanced regional development

- Against racism and discrimination

A week later, on March 6, around 8,000 people protested in Beirut to call for the dislodgement of the sectarian system. Word then spread of weekly protests and some Lebanese youth started two open-ended sit ins in Sanaye' district of Beirut and the southern city Saida. A third rally followed on March 10. The protesters marched for three hours from the national museum to the center of the capital, chanting “revolution against the regime, against corruption.”

For a moment it appeared that the 'Arab Spring' might spread to Lebanon and change the unchangeable. However, after several more smaller rallies, the anti-system movement withered and the winds of the Arab Spring passed without any conspicuous change in Lebanon.

Since then, different outlets have hypothesized as to why Lebanon has been immune to the events sweeping the region. Indeed, the Lebanese case has taken many observers by surprise. If you ask me, however, I would say that the surprise would have been far greater had Lebanon succumbed to the Arab Spring and experienced an uprising. Traditional politics in Lebanon have focused on sectarian identities and sectarianism had long been institutionalized—under the Ottoman Empire, the French Mandate and since independence. Thus, security, for each of the communities, has been equivalent to a zero-sum game and securing sectarian identity continues to be the main referent. It is only by fathoming the complexity of this sectarian structure that we can begin to understand why Lebanon has eluded the Arab Spring - until now at least.

To make the task more manageable, I will focus on the three primary reasons that define the Lebanese case:

First, is the general absence of ideal conditions for an uprising in Lebanon.

If we look closely at the Arab uprisings of 2011 we would immediately discern at least three common features:

1. The existence of an oppressive regime;
2. Broad disillusionment with the system and the power-holders in charge of it;
3. An absence of democratic processes.

These features do not exist in Lebanon, at least not to the same degree as they did in the Arab states where the uprisings have taken place. The

Lebanese political system, for all its flaws and shortcomings, is neither oppressive nor static. In Lebanon there is no single dictator to confront. Political power is distributed among the country's religious communities under a system in which the groups can check the power of each others.

The relatively dynamic freedom that exists under this system has given room to a more unhindered development of public discussion and the formation of various channels that facilitate a stable interaction between the power-holders and their constituents. Hence, the scope for venting political frustrations under the Lebanese system is far greater than what it would be under a one-party regime.

It is true that there is wide disillusionment in Lebanon. However, this disillusionment is somewhat disjointed and polarized, directed mainly at the existing political blocks and figureheads rather than at the system itself. It is this 'polarization' or what Georges Corm has labeled as 'torn identity', that has 'plugged' the possibility of a system change in Lebanon in the past and today, amid the Arab Spring. While the political landscape is bifurcated between the various sects it is difficult to claim the existence of a 'collective' and without a 'collective' it is difficult for the population to rise up in a common cause. The results, as one analyst has observed,

... are sub-state realms of sovereignty where 'all' within a society are rarely considered relevant. Instead several sub-national spheres of interest are garnered, that are informed by 'instinctive' relationships like religion and sect. These 'bubbles' individually frame the rationalities behind the articulation of the national realm, its identity and its character. (Somdeep Sen, "Lebanon: The 'Lee-Side' of the Arab Spring." <http://www.opendemocracy.net/somdeep-sen/lebanon-lee-side-of-arab-spring>)

Of course, we cannot assume that the national realm is thus rendered irrelevant. Pockets of resistance to the system do appear every now and then, as happened at the start of 2011 for example, but these usually happen at the prompt of the secular parties and the nascent civil society movement, which are utterly ineffectual and live on the margins of Lebanese politics. The 2011 demonstrations to bring down the sectarian system failed basically because the 'collective' opposition to the system was no match to the sectarian and fractured identities that dominated the Lebanese political terrain, and still do.

In the Arab states which experienced political uprisings, such as Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt, power and authority were unified and thus provided the population with a centre to rally against; in Lebanon power and authority are fragmented which means that there is no centre to rally against. This fragmentation has been and continues to be an important impediment to organized and wide-scale calls for change in Lebanon.

The second factor that helped to shelter Lebanon from the Arab Spring is what I would call 'self-contentment.'

There is a widespread feeling among many Lebanese that, well before the start of the Arab Spring, their country had already experienced its own 'Spring' in 2005 when thousands demonstrated for a month at Martyrs Square and demanded a Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon and an overhaul of the Syrian-dominated Lebanese political order. With a large segment of the press and media in Lebanon behind them, these Lebanese have succeeded in convincing themselves and others that Lebanon was the originator of the Arab Spring and that the liberation impulses in the Arab world in 2011 were merely an extension of their own popular success in 2005. This view has received qualified endorsement from non-Lebanese as well, among them the renowned Middle East journalist and author Robert Fisk. Speaking to the Journalism Foundation in Tunisia, Fisk drew a continuity between the 2005 revolt against Syrian influence in Lebanon, the protests against the fraudulent elections in Iran in 2009, and the series of uprisings following Tunisia's ouster of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. He concluded that the Arab Spring, or the "Arab awakening" as he preferred to call it, actually began in Lebanon in 2005.

One should not dismiss this view lightly. At least four salient realities of Lebanon's 2005 Intifada have been replicated in the Arab uprisings of 2011:

- the use of a public space for protest;
- a demand that those in charge of the instruments of repression be replaced;
- resort to foreign help to counterbalance the regime's clear advantages;
- a tendency to question the accomplishments of the revolts in light of their potentially unsatisfactory aftermaths.

The main point here is that since potentially half of Lebanon believed that 'Spring' has already been and gone in their country then the chances of an uprisings in Lebanon is automatically reduced by fifty percent. It means, as well, that the other fifty percent, assuming it wants an uprising, have to think

twice about such a dangerous undertaking in the presence of a potentially strong opposition.

Conversely, the dissemination and wide acceptance of this theory - that the 2005 uprising against Syrian hegemony was the first spark in the Arab Spring - fostered a false sense of security that Lebanon's political problems were due to Syrian hegemony. This, in turn, has deflected attention away from the political system as the actual source of the country's enduring problems.

The third factor is the geo-political remoteness of the Arab Spring.

Up until the outbreak of violence in Syria, the countries in which the uprisings had occurred are geographically separated from Lebanon and exercise nominal influence on the Lebanese social fabric. Tunisia's traditional relationship with the Lebanese state is largely cultural and economic. The country does not play any direct or significant role in Lebanese politics and the Lebanese generally see Tunisia as a prototype of their own country on the shores of north Africa. The Yemen is out of the way as well and its influence on Lebanon is immaterial compared to Saudi Arabia for example.

During the Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1990, Gaddafi's Libya was actively involved in Lebanon, supplying arms and money to leftist Lebanese, but after 1990 its role diminished and Gaddafi's reputation suffered not only among the Shiites, who despise his regime and hold him personally responsible for the disappearance of the charismatic Musa al-Sadr, but also among a large sector of Sunni and Christian Lebanese who found his chameleon-style politics too hard to handle.

As for Egypt, its uprising did not strike a strong chord in Lebanon despite Mubarak's constant meddling in its politics. Back in the mid-1950s, the Nasser revolution galvanized a considerable sector of the Lebanese people into a revolt against the regime of Camille Chamoun; the 2011 uprising against Mubarak did not have quite the same effect on Lebanon not so much because most Lebanese disliked Mubarak (with the exception of Seniora), but because they did not see another Nasser on the horizon after Mubarak's ouster.

This geo-political irrelevance of the Arab uprisings was reinforced by two other factors:

1. The political uncertainty that transpired in the aftermath of the uprisings. It made most Lebanese understandably wary of inaugurating radical change in their own country when the countries where revolutions had taken place appeared to be going nowhere.

2. The intrusion of political Islam, spearheaded by the Muslim Brotherhood and various salafi groups. This development, which did not bode well with both Christian and Muslim Lebanese, inspired a quieter and more circumspect mood inside Lebanon due to the delicate sectarian balance in the country. Both March 14 and March 8, the two dominant political alliances in Lebanon, refused to co-opt political Islam for political reasons associated with the confessional structure of each group.

In contrast, when the 'Arab Spring' moved geographically closer to Lebanon, to neighbouring Syria, its impact began to be felt more directly by the Lebanese state. Syria and Lebanon share a common past and an intimate connection in almost all spheres of life. As well as that, Syria has a strong political stake in Lebanon and its influence on Lebanese politics is far more direct than the Arab states where uprisings have occurred.

This raises the question how much impact a successful uprising in Syria is likely to have on Lebanon. Along with Iran, Syria is the main patron of Hezbollah (the Shia militant group and political party in Lebanon), so its loss could have far-reaching effects on the balance of power in Lebanon. But will the impact be strong enough to cause a popular uprising against the system? My guess is that it will not. A successful uprising in Syria is more likely to lead to a civil war in Lebanon than to a system change. This is because the existing tensions in Lebanon is horizontal rather than vertical. Hostility between the Lebanese factions vastly outweighs internal hostility toward the system. Compartmentalized and tolerated, this factional hostility has and will continue to hamper the development of a collective will and the desire for system change.

Yet, one should be careful not to think that Lebanon has been completely immune to the Arab Spring. Although no direct political change has occurred, the Arab uprisings have had an ideological impact inside Lebanon stimulating debates on future values and aspirations. The uprisings have brought the issue of Islamism to the forefront of public discussions and facilitated the emergence of previously-discounted Islamist movements, especially in Sunni urban centres like Tripoli. This in turn has exacerbated the already tense relations between the pro-Syrian and anti-Syrian political Blocks.

Economically, the Arab uprisings have had a mixed effect on Lebanon. The fall in the export of Lebanese produce to the affected countries was offset by the increase in tourism with more Arabs spending their vacations in

the calmer atmosphere of Beirut, and by the flow of Arab money, especially from Syria, to the safety of the Lebanese banking system.

From this brief analysis, it emerges clearly that the Arab Spring has had only a modest impact on Lebanon. Instead of spreading to Lebanon and causing a popular revolt against the system, the Arab Spring has had the opposite effect of bolstering the Lebanese system by highlighting some of its positive features or bringing them into focus. Today, many Lebanese feel that they should hold on to their system at least until a clearer picture of the Arab Spring emerges.

At the start I said that had there been a popular uprising against the sectarian system in Lebanon it would have taken most people by surprise. Why? Because two civil wars in Lebanon (1958 and between 1975 and 1990), during which thousands died and many more were injured, could not dislodge the system. The only condition that could lead to a popular uprising in Lebanon, as happened elsewhere, is when a collective Lebanese will is able to develop and supersede the current amalgam of factional wills. After all, without the element of 'collective will' there would have been no Arab Spring and we would not be here talking about it.