

Lebanon's pact: prelude to a postmortem

By Michael Young

Daily Star staff

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What is left of Lebanon's confessional democratic system as the country pursues its cold civil war? At no time in the recent past, even during the conflict years, has the system been so threatened, its foundations so fragile. With the Syrians knocking again at the door, there is a real danger that Lebanon as we know it could disappear, with nothing to replace it.

Lebanon's problems transcend [constitutional issues](#), even if these are central to the country's current problems. In the past year, it is the opposition that has mostly emptied the Constitution of its meaning. The assumption that the Siniora government is unconstitutional because Shiite ministers have resigned from it - although the Constitution says no such thing - has been shorthand for imagining Lebanon as a confederation of sects. That's not how the political order was set up. No system could escape permanent stalemate if it were built on the principle that decisions had to derive from sectarian unanimity.

Michel Aoun applied the same logic when presenting his outlandish scheme to get a [president elected several weeks ago](#). Aoun offered to appoint the president himself, while Saad Hariri was to appoint the prime minister. The idea was that the strongest Christian had the right to bring in the president, while the strongest Sunni could do the same to the prime minister. But such a vision would only transform Lebanon into a loose amalgam of sects somehow stuck in the same place, but never collaborating in a common enterprise. Aoun's abandonment of an election altogether, his view that sectarian leaders should simply name officeholders, revealed how easy it would be for a confederation of sects to descend into sectarian autocracy. Yet the only guarantee of Lebanese democracy, or what remains of it, is the reality of shared participation by all in the state, even if the state remains weak.

The parliamentary majority is hardly innocent either when it comes to chipping away at the foundations of Lebanese sectarian democracy. The abuse done to the Constitution to turn the army commander, Michel Suleiman, into a president will have disastrous repercussions, regardless of Suleiman's merits or demerits. From now on every army commander will consider himself a president in waiting, and will cite the higher interests of the state (just as March 14 has) to lobby for the post. Lebanon, once a country markedly different in the Arab neighborhood thanks to its preference for disposable, usually civilian presidents, now seems incapable of circumventing officers. Surely, the Maronites have better to offer. And if they don't, then this is a damning indictment of their present contribution to Lebanese democracy, which alone has ensured the community's survival.

Social contracts, whatever their value, are useful as formal [stepping stones](#) to something better (or worse). The 1943 National Pact, though challenged by politicians from all sides, survived long enough to hand off to the Taif Accord. The problem today, however, is that many in the Shiite community as well as not a few Christians, particularly Aoun's followers, have no liking for Taif. Unhappy Christians see the accord as the source of their marginalization, while unhappy Shiites see it as an obstacle to their greater representation. Both groups are entitled to question Taif's tenets within the framework of a constitutional reform process. But much more disturbingly, they have tended to question the validity of the accord altogether, allowing no possible springboard toward a Taif-II.

On top of that, and in defiance of the principles of sectarian equilibrium, the Shiite community is armed to the teeth - a situation blocking all talk of political reform. Hizbullah will argue that its weapons have never been turned against other Lebanese. This is both historically false and irrelevant. In a society governed by minority paranoia, everything is about perceptions. A gun in the closet is still a gun, and no one will discuss handing the Shiite community more power while the community is so strong militarily.

This creates a paradox: Hizbullah's weapons are the major obstacle to better integration of Shiites into post-Taif Lebanon. And the party has systematically exacerbated and exploited feelings of Shiite alienation to build up a communal wall in defense of its weapons.

Christians are in a more debilitating dilemma. They are so convinced of their terminal decline that they are actually accelerating the process. Most of what the Christians have done to fight irrelevance in the past two years, since the Syrian withdrawal, has been ruinous to their fortunes. In 2005, following the deplorable quadripartite electoral agreement between [Walid Jumblatt](#), Saad Hariri, Hizbullah, and Amal, they put their faith in Aoun, even though the general, along with Samir Geagea, was responsible for the vicious inter-Christian war of 1990 that devastated the community. Christians, particularly Maronites, have also believed that their salvation would come from a new president. Yet the infighting over the

presidency has been so divisive that Syria has taken advantage of this to gradually re-impose its hegemony over Lebanon.

For Christians to survive as a community, they must accept that the only way to do so is through reform of the confessional arrangement within the framework of Taif. This means abolishing sectarian quotas in Parliament before this becomes a demand Christians cannot deflect. The community can be compensated through establishment of a Senate on a 50-50 Christian-Muslim basis to deal, as Article 22 of the Constitution specifies, with "major national issues." The presidency, rather than being a safeguard of Christian advantages, now embodies Christian failings. Replace it with a rotating system in which the communities can serve in different senior posts in the state, so that a sense of common purpose is created.

Unless Christians grasp the necessity of deconfessionalizing Parliament, they may find themselves facing a new reality where the Sunni, Shiite and Christian communities are each represented by a third of parliamentary seats. The disadvantages are obvious: Christians would be the ones surrendering the most power; but more significantly national solidarity would be lost. A great deal would be decided on the basis of a two-thirds majority - in other words, by those two communities able to impose their will on the third. The result would be the perpetual estrangement of the loser. What kind of system can long last that is based on resentment?

Resentment is Lebanon's life force these days. The country is in need of overhauling its political relationships, and yet domestic hatreds and Syria's efforts to return with its army make this impossible. Without a new national pact, no pact at all is likely. And that only makes Lebanon unlikely.