

## Lebanon needs a real third party, not another version of the current ones

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Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir's comments on electoral matters have initiated another helping of the regurgitated gruel that passes for political debate in Lebanon. The particulars of what he had to say are less important, though, than the fact that his comments indicate something of surge in support for the idea of a third party that would defuse tensions between the March 8 and March 14 lineups - and perhaps even displace them.

The notion is a pleasing one, and privately officials from both sides acknowledge that their own studies indicate considerable disaffection from within their respective ranks. But a third party must be more than the combination of a few chips off the same old blocs gathered under the wing of a godfather like Metn MP Michel Murr: The last thing Lebanon needs is another squirming mass of politicians with nothing new to offer the public in terms of well-defined policy proposals. To be sure, we need sustainable consensus positions on defense in general, and on stances regarding Israel and Syria in particular. Crucial to the long-term success of any such endeavors, however, will be the formulation and implementation of domestic policies that forge healthier relationships between the citizen and the state.

To be worth the effort, any third party will have to stress specific priorities that so many Lebanese have recognized for years but which their political representatives have enthusiastically avoided. Sweeping reforms are required to make Lebanon viable in the 21st century if it is to avoid reprises of the crises that plagued it in the 20th. A third party, therefore, should be built on bold ideas to finally rid this country of the slow but steady fratricide known as sectarianism. In addition, it must devise methods of fighting the culture of corruption that has infected the public sector for decades. To make any of this worthwhile, it will need to make the independence of the judiciary something more than a slogan. And for any of it to be possible, the electoral machinery needs to be retooled for proportional representation: Will people like Sfeir and Murr put their money where their mouths are on this score?

In short, offering the Lebanese voter a real alternative to the two choices currently available means going far beyond appearances. The necessary changes are ones of substance, not style. The coming months will reveal whether the country's political class is up the task.

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