

Can the Maronites reinvent themselves?

Contributed by Michael Young, Opinion Editor of THE DAILY STAR
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In the shambles that is the Maronite leadership, Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir has over the years been a beacon on the matter of Lebanon's sovereignty. His inflexibility has served the country well, and this was demonstrated again in the blunt remarks he made this week on Hizbullah's weapons. However, Sfeir made two other statements that showed that his inflexibility can be a double-edged sword, and that Maronites may suffer in consequence.

On Tuesday, both in Bkirki and later on after visiting with President Michel Suleiman in Baabda, Sfeir repeated that he did not see any possible coexistence between the state and Hizbullah, or more precisely between a sovereign national army and Hizbullah's militia. Only a national army, he insisted, was entitled to defend the country. "Is it possible that there be a regular army and another army outside the legality [of the state] which one day points its weapons at the enemy, and the other points them toward the interior?" Sfeir asked.

The patriarch was only stating the obvious, which political Lebanon, in its inimitable capacity to sustain mirages, has been carefully ignoring as the government prepares a Cabinet statement legitimizing the existence of Hizbullah's arms. So loud are the voices supporting counterfeit concord, that Sfeir is shouting in a desert. Faced with the impossibility of disarming Hizbullah, the politicians are justifying the party's retaining its weapons, as if rationalizing an absurdity could make it more reasonable. The patriarch abruptly tore the veneer away.

One could argue that Sfeir enjoys the luxury of criticism because he doesn't take the hard decisions. Yet there was much more to the patriarch during the latter two decades of the Syrian interregnum than talk. Under considerable threat during that time, isolated amid a craven political class at Syria's beck and call, Sfeir was the Maronites' only real leader, a debt that his critics, above all Michel Aoun, never acknowledged, so absorbed were they in their own authority. The patriarch understood that omission could be as powerful as action, and rejected Syrian invitations to Damascus, even as the Syrian-dominated security services found ways to intimidate the church by blackmailing its more corrupt and sensual clergymen.

But right after shattering the jar of complacency on Hizbullah, Sfeir was asked about the abolition of political confessionalism. And here the patriarch fell back into a disposition that showed why, for all his qualities, he is no innovator. He, quite correctly, stated, "What is the advantage of abolishing political confessionalism in [national] texts before doing so in [people's] minds, if everyone says 'I'm a Maronite, or a Druze'?" And when asked about Walid Jumblatt's proposal for a communal rotation of the three presidencies, Sfeir responded that he did not understand it.

Jumblatt's proposal was intentionally ambiguous. Did the Druze leader mean that all communities would benefit from being rotated into the three top posts in the state, or that the rotation would occur between the Maronites, Sunnis, and Shiites, who already hold those posts? The Taif Accord outlines the abolition of confessionalism, but it does so in parallel with the establishment of a Senate which would retain a sectarian breakdown, and which Jumblatt would like to see led by a Druze.

Sfeir is not a politician, so his evasiveness was defensible. However, his uneasy response showed he was still thinking, in a most conventional way, that the Maronites' final protection remains the presidency. It's true, confessionalism cannot be abolished in law before the outlook of the Lebanese is transformed. However, that line of reasoning is self-reinforcing. Unless you abolish confessionalism institutionally somewhere, unless you change laws somewhere, nothing will ever alter the confessional mindset. But what is needed is a gradual, self-sustaining process of change, where you modify texts to help modify minds, in a way that those who feel most threatened by such change find simultaneous compensations, institutional or otherwise, elsewhere.

Take the Senate. Regardless of whether it is headed by a Druze or not, such a body would be a valuable corresponding institution to a deconfessionalized Parliament, and according to Article 22 of the Constitution should address "major national issues." The aim of a Senate would be to reassure those expected to lose most from deconfessionalization, namely the Christians, who continue to benefit from a 50-50 ratio in the legislature even though they make up less than that in the population. Sooner or later Christians will face challenges to the ratio. Better for them to negotiate a new formula from a position of strength than to obstinately defend a system that, if Sunnis and Shiites ever reach agreement, may be forcibly overturned in their disfavor.

What of Jumblatt's rotation plan? Sfeir's mistake, and that of many Christians, is to read too much into a

Maronite presidency, whose powers have been depleted. In fact, the presidency has brought only woe to the community. Competition for the post has divided Maronites in a way the prime ministership and speakership of Parliament have not. Sunnis and Shiites. The powers of the president are by and large less proactive than those of his Muslim partners. Therefore, why remain so unyielding toward a plan that would give Maronites a taste of political positions often more effective than the presidency, thereby offering them a chance to transcend their sense of communal decline; a plan, also, that might rejuvenate the political order by creating more frequent openings for fresh leaders?

The symbolism of being head of state is important to Maronites, but it is also an illusion. The presidency has power, but on a day-to-day basis, in the formulation of long-term policy, its latitude is more limited. Instead of resisting this, the patriarch, like all Christians, should consider new ways his community can reinvent itself in a Lebanon that is changing rapidly, where Christian irrelevance is, alas, becoming ever more flagrant.

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