

The magic has gone

Contributed by Now Lebanon
Monday, 15 February 2010

The stacks of plastic chairs said it all. The traditional seating for political meetings and rallies up and down the country has also become a metaphor for rent-a-crowd, partisan tedium. It is fitting therefore that in the last week they have come to represent the buildup of an event held by a movement that has lost its momentum, passion, energy and even, dare we say it, credibility.

Five years ago on February 14, 2005, the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, arguably the most seismic single event in Lebanon's short history, ignited an explosion of people power, the likes of which had never been witnessed in the Middle East.

One month later, on March 14, those Lebanese who had already voiced their fury at political violence and the ongoing Syrian occupation gave a stiff rebuke to the stage-managed, pro-Syrian rally held on March 8, 2005 that tried to lend legitimacy to Syria's 29-year sojourn by dressing itself up as a thank you and farewell to Damascus. Whatever the March 8 bloc could do, the advocates of sovereignty, independence and freedom could do better.

But what made the Cedar Revolution so magnificent was that its followers were not just the card-carrying members of the Lebanese Forces, the Progressive Socialist Party or the Kataeb. They were not only made up of the diehard supporters of the exiled General Michel Aoun, and they did not solely march from Tarek al-Jdeideh to pay homage to a slain Sunni leader.

No, the element that produced the whiff of magic was the participation of ordinary people; the professionals, the businessmen and the young idealists who would not ever have been so politically engaged had it not been for the bloodbath at the St. Georges Hotel, and who, a month earlier, had been resigned to living their lives in the shadow of the Baathist jackboot and the cronyism that defined Lebanese politics. They had looked at revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia and said "it's a pity that nothing like that can happen here. If only we could mobilize like that."

Well we did. It took an outrage that saw Hariri and 21 others blown to bits by a 1-ton bomb to do it, not because death is a stranger to the streets of Lebanon (he knows us well), but because Hariri was a man who, despite his ability to play the game, represented modernity. He wasn't a warlord; he was a businessman, a tycoon who surrounded himself with people who carried laptops, not machine guns; he relied on advice from MBAs, not goons. And this is why, when he died alongside Bassil Fleihan, another man who represented all that was good about Lebanese talent, there was such a massive reaction from people who would not normally have set foot in the arena of political activism.

We felt part of something. We felt we were affecting change. And when Samir Kassir and then George Hawi and then Gebran Tueni were murdered less than one year after Hariri was, we honored these modern martyrs by redoubling our efforts to sustain the momentum of reform. We saw May Chidiac bravely fight her injuries and defiantly return to work; and all the while the bombers tried to chip away at our resolve.

We also saw the arrests of the four generals. Surely this was proof that the gloves were off, that old order was crumbling before our eyes. Men who to all intents and purposes ran the country, who wielded power above and beyond the official remit of their office, were now answerable to Lebanese justice. The Special Tribunal for Lebanon was established, and we saw what we thought was another brick in the wall of nation building and accountability, all underwritten by international support.

Now it's all over. War, blackmail, civil violence, regional horse-trading and even bare-faced hypocrisy have put an end to the dream. Hezbollah is still armed, the drums of war are once again beating, the speaker of parliament was reelected by the very politicians his gunmen tried to topple, the tribunal is going nowhere fast, and, last but not least, the arm of Syrian influence once again reaches into the very heart of Lebanese power. The end came in 2009 when, on polling day, millions of Lebanese voters said "yes" to prosperity, democracy and sovereignty and "no" to the forces for whom violence is the final option, only to have these votes ripped up in their faces.

The people who made the Cedar Revolution so different and special and who believed that they were present at the birth of a new nation will in all probability not be at Martyrs Square on Sunday.

They have had their fill of white plastic chairs.

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