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Lebanon's Heartbreaking Predicament

By Amin Saikal

SYNOPSIS

Lebanon is in a dire situation. It is in a most difficult phase of its evolution as an independent state since the mid-1940s. Unless its system of governance is changed and regional interference is stopped, the country's future looks very bleak.

COMMENTARY

LEBANON IS heading towards an abyss. But this can be prevented, provided the country's power structure and political system are reshaped to be more representative of its people rather than the traditional, dominant elites, and outside interventionism is stopped.

How to achieve this objective has proven to be most difficult, and yet without it Lebanon cannot be bailed out of its current appalling predicament.

No Longer Jewel of Arab World

Lebanon was the envy of the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s. It enjoyed a liberal political and social environment, where Arab dissidents could find a safe haven and their joy-seeking counterparts entertainment. The country's economic growth and relatively balanced foreign relations had turned it into an arena for foreign investment and societal prosperity. These features were complemented by its dazzling landscape and entrepreneurially cultured people.

This is no longer the case. Lebanon is drowning in long-term structural turmoil. Its crisis is multi-dimensional, primarily rooted in its peculiar domestic power arrangement and external interferences. The country's political system has been based on proportional representation of various confessional groups whose elites have been able to run Lebanon according to their diverse interests.

The system, generated following Lebanon's independence from France in 1943, initially worked quite well as long as the elite leaders of the two main sects – Christians and Muslims – functioned consensually, and there was no major shift in the demographic composition of either group and little or no neighbourly geopolitical pressure. Lebanon thrived as a stable and progressive state.

However, from the early 1970s, the system was undermined by its vulnerability to elite patronage and corruption, the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts as well as rival interference by Lebanon's neighbours and wider regional actors. Growth in the Shia segment of the Muslim population also changed the balance.

Breakdown of Lebanon's Consociational System

The power elites' entrenchment could not allow an accommodation of the Shia expansion. Nor could Lebanon remain aloof from the effect of the anti-Israel and anti-US Shia Islamic regime in Iran, resulting from the country's revolution of 1978/79, which helped the Lebanese Shias establish their own paramilitary organisation of Hezbollah.

While growing as a powerful political and defensive force, in proxy ties with Tehran, Hezbollah built a determining role in Lebanon's domestic and foreign policy direction. Adding to the complexity of the situation were the rival interventions by Israel and Syria as well as some other Arab states.

They all contributed to the breakdown of Lebanon's consociational system and fuelled a devastating civil war that raged from 1975 until 1989. Under the Saudi-brokered Taif Peace Agreement, the warring groups ended their hostility, but again assumed power to run the country. A combination of those very internal and external factors that had paralysed the system remained in place, leading Lebanon down the path of political, economic and financial bankruptcy and leaving it vulnerable to regional interventions.

The Syrian conflict and the outflow of more than one million Syrian refugees into Lebanon, with Hezbollah joining forces with Iran and Russia to save Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship in Syria, exacerbated Lebanon's predicament.

The Lebanese people, especially the younger generation, who cross confessional/sectarian boundaries, finally had enough. They engaged in serious protests from mid-2019, demanding a complete overhaul of the system and an end to the corrupt inter-elite rule of the country.

Changing Leaders Without Changing System

While resisting the protestors sternly, the forces of the status quo agreed to the appointment of a new technocratic prime minister, Hassan Diab, in January 2020 to improve the situation, but without necessarily changing the system. COVID-19's savagery paused the protests, but the massive explosion in the Beirut port in August 2020 brought them back onto the streets with more vengeance than ever.

The incident's killing of hundreds, wounding of thousands and making thousands more

homeless as well as destroying the entire port at the loss of billions of dollars, plus the elite resistance to reform, caused Diab's government to resign.

It took nearly 14 months before the elites could agree on a new prime minister, Najib Mikati, who assumed office on 10 September 2021. Yet, he is facing an uphill battle to gain the support of the elite leaders to implement badly needed structural reforms.

President Michel Aoun, who walks a tight rope between different influences, rejected an earlier French-led call for an international probe into the Beirut explosion, and contended with ordering an internal investigation, which could not be immune from the influence of power brokers.

Darkest Days: Will People's Resilience Prevail?

Lebanon's darkest days manifested in the serious clashes between the Shia and Christian segments in Beirut in recent weeks when Hezbollah supporters opposed the presiding judge in a case as being biased. Several were killed and injured, raising fear of another civil war.

The Lebanese crisis is indeed very deep and wide. The country's economy and finances have virtually collapsed. Shortages of electricity, petrol, medicine and other basic necessities have brought a majority of the Lebanese people to the edge of massive political and social explosions. Yet, the power of the elites, not to mention regional actors' self-seeking behaviour, still remain focused on protecting their conflicting interests.

Lebanon now needs a system of governance which is mandated by the public, not the elite leaders – a system that could deliver national unity and prosperity. The forces of the status quo appear to be well entrenched in and over Lebanon, but so are the forces of change.

Lebanon has endured terrible times before, but now it seriously risks becoming a failed state, unless the resilience of its people prevails and the international community provide them the support that they badly need.

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