
1. Lebanon — Politics and government. 2. Religion and state.

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‘SECULARISM’ IN A MULTI-CONFESSIONAL LEBANON: RELIGIOUS OBSTACLES AND PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS

BERGE J. TRABOULSI
Haigazian University, Beirut

INTRODUCTION

From the outset, let us imagine ourselves listening to Radio news bulletins or reading articles in newspapers and Internet forums about Lebanon, sectarianism, and secularism. Without doubt, we will come across a dozen of slogans and terms that many politicians, journalists, members of civil society movements and NGOs activists, and sometimes religious officials, use as de facto lexis that need no further examination, analysis or criticism.

How is Lebanon presented? Lebanon is ‘the entity, the model, the nation, and the state’. It is ‘a sovereign, free, (Arab) and independent’ country. Lebanon is ‘founded on sectarianism, financial, religious and family’s political feudalism, caste system, regionalism, and factionalism’. It is ‘more than a final homeland for all its citizens’, it is ‘a message’. It is a ‘precious forum of world civilizations’; it is ‘the cradle of spiritual missions that have sparked in the Arab world’. It is a ‘national, Arab, Middle Eastern and universal necessity’. It is ‘a unique formula of coexistence among religions and confessions’. Lebanon is a ‘failed state’. ‘Consociation is Lebanon’s feature and the norm in its politics’. In Lebanon, ‘the religious community/sect (Taifa) is stronger than the State’, so if the sect is weakened, the State will be strengthened’. ‘What Lebanon do we want’?

*Is Sectarianism a problem?* ‘Fair representation of all sects should be granted based on 6-6 bis’. The Taif Accord (1989) has ‘reaffirmed and consecrated
sectarianism and the federation of religious denominations (Tawaif). ‘Parity between Christians and Muslims and proportionality between their denominations should be granted’. The sectarian system is ‘wrong and evil’; sectarianism is ‘a scourge’. It should be ‘abolished from the public administration, the electoral law, the judiciary and the military, and the various constitutional, legislative, and regulatory texts’. It should not be abolished because ‘it grants the basic rights of confessional communities’.

If Sectarianism is the problem, what is the solution? Fundamental actions should be taken to ‘strengthen the national affiliation’ and to grant ‘national fusion’ and ‘national unity’ in order to build ‘the civil society’ and ‘the modern state’ and ‘the secular state’. Several steps are proposed, such as ‘to adopt a common personal status law’, ‘to approve the optional civil marriage bill’, ‘to remove the religious confession from ID cards’, ‘to establish secular political parties across the country’, to implement the Taif Accord ‘in letter and spirit’ – before introducing into it any amendments, ‘to maintain the rights of the various confessional communities’, ‘to establish the Senate’ on religious representation principles, ‘to cancel the rule of sectarian representation in civil service jobs’, etc. But, since abolishing sectarianism is not an easy task that can be achieved in a short-run process, it is essential to have a ‘national consensus’ about it though it is not ‘the right time to do so’. ‘Sectarianism should be removed first from souls and then from scripts’. ‘Removing sectarianism from scripts is a means to remove it from souls.’ Secularism should become ‘the foundation of the secular, free and democratic Lebanon’ where ‘Religion for God, Nation for all.’

This paper will neither approve nor correct the aforementioned superficial slogans and clichés about Lebanon nor re-conceptualize some outdated terms, such as sovereignty, independence, Arab identity (or Arabism) which are insignificant and incompatible with the new terminologies of our century, the age of cultural, political, social, and economic globalization. Instead, it will reflect on the motives that lie behind the call for the ‘abolition’ of political sectarianism and for the implementation of secularism in Lebanon. The latter is seen by advocates of secularism as the solution to the country’s ‘sectarian’ problems. Finally, this paper will analyze the various religious obstacles that impede the abolition of political sectarianism and the development of secularism in Lebanon.

1. THE RELIGION-STATE REVISION OF RELATIONS

The declaration of the State of Greater Lebanon in 1920, the Franco-Syrian treaty of 1936, the National Pact of 1943, the Tripartite Agreement of 1985, the Taif Accord in 1989 and most recently, Lebanon 2005 and 2009 national
elections, constituted central landmarks that revived the religious sectarian/confessional sentiments and interests. Sectarianism—interchangeably used with confessionalism in this paper, is a consociational distribution of political power among supposedly representatives of the various Christian, Muslim, and Druze communities. This representation, by principle, should be fair and be maintained by the rule of law; in modern western societies, the rule of law usually protects and emphasizes (a) basic human rights, such as, justice, gender equality, freedom of religion, and freedom of expression and speech, and (b) good governance characteristics', such as, accountability, transparency, equity, responsiveness, etc. Unfortunately, justice and fairness in Lebanon remain relative and the rule of law is optional and subject to compromise. Since religion is a powerful force for preserving a sense of collectivism and solidarity, sectarianism will always constitute one of the main factors that strongly affect both social and political realities of Lebanon.

If political sectarianism can ever be abolished in Lebanon can this abolition happen in a country whose constitution is built on consociationalism and believed to be immutable? According to Sheikh Muhammad Mahdi Shams Al-Din, “This is my recommendation regarding the issue of abolishing political sectarianism in Lebanon... I came to the conclusion that abolishing political sectarianism... represents a major venture that might jeopardize the future of Lebanon or at least its stability... Therefore, I recommend the system of political sectarianism be kept and maintained as well as reformed. In this regard, I believe that the ‘Ta’if’ formula is exemplary and the Lebanese political regime based on it is a sound regime except for some errors in the drafting of the ‘Taif Accord’ and related [documents] and in their implementation” (2008, pp. 32-33). Actually, President Hafez Assad of Syria had objected, in 1976, to Kamal Jumblat’s request for a secular state in Lebanon on the ground that Muslims would oppose it because it is against Islam, and when it comes to religion, one must be extremely careful (Messarra, 2006, pp. 200-201). In 1977, Prime Minister Rashid Karameh said in his interview with Al Nahar, “We all seek a new Lebanon but on well studied foundations, free from pressure, intolerance, sectarianism, and factionalism ... I say that Lebanon should be built on love, unity, education, justice, and equality... We should not introduce any sectarian element in building the State. I wonder why some ask for a farfetched secularism when we ask for the abolition of political sectarianism” (Messarra, 2006, p. 21). Thus, it seems that the request to abolish political sectarianism and that to

establish secularism are opposing recommendations which I strongly doubt their achievements in Lebanon.

What is secularism? Although the French laïcité is translated as ‘secularity’ where the Church is no more in control of the political life and the French laïcisme as ‘secularism’ where religion is no more central in the society, both English terms are used interchangeably in this paper to denote Religion-State separation, i.e., to protect the government from the interference of religious officials (the clericals) and the religious institution from the intervention of politicians. Can secularism be the alternative to political sectarianism in Lebanon? In his most recent appearance on Murr TV, on June 29, 2009, Lebanese Shi’ite Scholar Muhammad Hassan Al-Amin calls for separation of religion and state. He says, “Lebanon is at a crossroad. Either it will opt for a modern civil state, or else it will move towards further disintegration and collapse, as long it adheres to such an extent to the sectarian regime... Religion must be separated from the state, and all the things that are presented as the absolute truth - that Islam constitutes both religion and state – have no foundation in Islamic thought or law. Islam is a religion.... And the state is the state. A state is a man-made entity, which is chosen by the people and represents them, whereas religion is sacred. How can you incorporate the sacred into a worldly matter, about which people have different opinions?” (MEMRI, n° 2491)\(^1\) The question remains, can religion be really separated from the state? Metropolitan Ierotheos Vlachos\(^2\) of the Church of Greece wrote, “The phrase ‘church-state separation’ is inappropriate. This is because the Church is not only the ecclesiastical administration and the State is not only the government administration, and thus, ‘church-state separation’ is meaningless in a democratic country where every regulated community must have some relationship with the State... For this reason, the phrase ‘church-state separation’ should be replaced with ‘the revision of the relations between ecclesiastical and civil administration’... This revision should be done calmly, respectfully and justly.” Moreover, he adds that the discussion should focus on two points: “First, it should be understood by all the clergy that we are obliged to respect the freedom of citizens, including members of the church who have other views on marriage, funeral, etc. The orthodox theology has always respected the freedom of the individual which God himself has respected. Second, it should be clear that the internal working structure of the Church should be neither controlled nor determined by the laws of the State” (Vlachos

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2. The Metropolitan of Nafpaktos and Agios Vasiliou.
2008). Actually, It is true that “secularism of states does not necessarily mean secularism of the citizens of the states” (Ezzati, 2002, p. 204). Therefore, is the majority of the Lebanese secularism-oriented?

On the other hand, Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi states that secularism is a Western and Christian formulation and, in fact, is alien to Muslim societies since “in Islam there is no Church, no Church hierarchy, no priest to control people’s consciences or to monopolize the mediation between us and our Lord, and no clerical rank to whom we refer, or to confess our sins and seek forgiveness... we do not need secularism which historically meant, liberation from the church authority... Secularism is not a necessity; it is harm. It is not a solution; It is a problem” (2007, p. 205). He also explains why its acceptance is improper: “For Muslim societies, the acceptance of secularism means something totally different. Since Islam is a comprehensive system of ‘Ibadah (worship) and Shari‘ah (legislation), the acceptance of secularism means abandonment of Shari‘ah, a denial of the Divine guidance and a rejection of Allah’s injunctions. It is a total falsification to claim that Shari‘ah is not proper to the requirements of the present age. The acceptance of a legislation formulated by humans means a preference of the humans’ limited knowledge to the Divine guidance: “Say! Do you know better than Allah?” (Al-Baqarah 2: 140). For this reason, the call for secularism among Muslims is atheism and a rejection of Islam. Its acceptance as a basis for rule in place of Shari‘ah is a downright apostasy. The silence of the masses in the Muslim world about this deviation has been a major transgression and a clear-cut instance of disobedience that has led to a sense of guilt, remorse, and inward resentment, all of which have generated discontent, insecurity, and hatred among committed Muslims because such deviation lacks legality.” (Al-Qaradawi 2002)

2. THE RELIGION-POLITICS INTER-RELATIONSHIP

The inter-relationship between religion and politics is an old phenomenon that goes back to ancient civilizations; it will remain a universal phenomenon for the following reasons:

- First, religion remains a major component of many countries worldwide, especially in those societies that still maintain a strong tie of solidarity and collectivism. These societies have never been challenged by those forces of change, similar to the principles of the Protestant Reformation (e.g., the Pope has no authority, and the priesthood of all believers), the French Revolution (Liberty, equality, and fraternity), and the US Bill of Rights, which laid the ground for individualism above collectivism. On
the other hand, however, Quranic Islam is a totality: it deals with multiple and varied social, political, economic, legislative, and cultural issues. Is there any possibility to find a common ground between both communities? It seems almost impossible to promote a common social order in Lebanon separate from religion.

Second, some present ‘secular’ countries, such as the USA, France, and Turkey, are reconsidering their official position vis-à-vis religion—each for different reasons; secularism does not have the same shape in the aforementioned countries. In 2008, and during his visit to France, Pope Benedict XVI called for ‘new reflection’ on the meaning of secularism. A year earlier, President Sarkozy had called for ‘positive secularism’ which would allow space for religion in public life (RFI 2008). Moreover, aren’t the Muslims and other religious minorities struggling for their political rights in the USA and France? Isn’t it true that in Turkey, where secularism is in question (Halliday, 2000, pp. 177-188), there is a limited form of democracy and the armed forces are seen as ‘guardians of secular way of life’ by setting limits to the power of a parliamentary majority (Mango 2007)? Thus, if those role model ‘secular’ countries have not succeeded completely in maintaining secularism, how could this happen in Lebanon? Shall it be imposed by the military? Who can dereligionalize the Lebanese social reality, i.e., to completely exclude religion from social affairs in a complex multi-confessional country and how? Are they the same politicians and clerics along with their followers who have led Lebanon to this awkward status quo?

Third, some countries such as Lebanon (a multi-confessional non-theocratic country) and Iraq (a Baathist secular regime under Saddam) have undergone bloody regime change under the auspices of the USA in collaboration with many regional non-democratic regimes. Lebanon and Iraq have become more sectarian and confessional than ever. Can the Lebanese succeed in implementing their plans without the support of the regional and international stakeholders?

Fourth, some countries such as Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina, with the support of many Western Countries, were apparently established on religious and/or ethnic factors, after dividing Yugoslavia. This ultimate division happened for many political, social, religious, ethnic and economic reasons, supposedly to grant basic human rights to ethnic and religious communities. Federalism, even Confederalism, could have been a rational solution to Ex-Yugoslavia; the end of the Soviet Union had
brought crisis to Yugoslav federalism (Elazar 1991). Can one suppose that federalism would be a solution to Lebanon’s sectarian problems when key political and religious stakeholders, internal and external, are against it?

- Fifth, although both Christians and Muslims claim their respect to human rights, the majority of devoted Muslims and Christians does not have a common reading of the main principles of human rights. A quick synoptic analysis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (UDHR 1948)¹ and the ‘Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights’ (UIDHR 1981)² & the ‘Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam’ (CDHRI 1990)³ of the Organization of Islamic Conference will show that both legitimacy and rationale of the UDHR on the one hand and the UIDHR as well as CDHR on the other are not the same and are problematic in so far as they apply to freedom of religion (and why not freedom from religion) and equality between men and women. UDHR is set by men and composed to serve the individual. UIDHR & CDHRI are based on the Shari’a (which Muslims believe that it is from Allah, the ‘sole guide of mankind’) and the Sunna (the sayings and acts of P. Muhammad); their rights “are introduced as divine responsibilities and religious duties” (Ezzati, 2002, p. 196). Thus, UIDHR and CDHRI are supreme to any UN document and are much more authentic than any human-given declaration; they are tools to spread Islam and show its cultural superiority. Consequently, one can only change his/her religion to Islam and not from Islam; this becomes a problematic human rights issue.

- Sixth, the game of power amongst politicians, clericals, and anti-clericals in many societies is not over. This struggle is apparent in many countries where relations between bishops and politicians are problematic; this complicated relationship is common in the Maronite church and rare in the others. In principle, the clergy should understand their position in the political life and behave accordingly. In a leaflet entitled How should Christians be involved in Politics? Mgr. Raffaello Martinelli⁴ summarized the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church about the

Church involvement in politics, saying: “The Church is not involved in, or linked to, and neither does it identify itself or mingle with, any political system or party. It respects and promotes the sound and just secularity of the State. The Church does not propose concrete decisions to be taken, programmes to be implemented, political campaigns to be undertaken and persons to be voted.” Similar teachings in the Orthodox Church were lately voiced by Archbishop of Greece Jerome II in his meeting with 500 priests of the Archdiocese of Athens, in 2008, stating “we are not political but ecclesiastical men... This means that the Church has a duty to give its word, not to challenge the institutions or to engage in political and partisan controversy, but to express its agony of when its feels that the principles and values are being weakened and compromised” (Antoniadou 2008). Can one entrust the clergy with the task of not becoming paternalistic and not interfering in politics?

3. THE ROADMAP TOWARDS SECULARISM

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) in The Prince (1513) wrote, “It must be borne in mind that there is nothing more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry through than initiating changes in a state’s constitution. The innovator makes enemies of all those who prospered under the old order, and only lukewarm support in forthcoming from those who would prosper under the new” (1995, p. 19).

It is not guaranteed that if political sectarianism were changed, the country would be better off, heading towards secularism, because not every change process leads to expected results (Recklies 2001). Moreover, Metropolitan George Khodr considered that “no one in Lebanon does seem willing to bypass the personal status law” (2009). Gregoire Haddad explains the various benefits of implementing the different dimensions of comprehensive secularism, e.g., political secularism, cultural secularism, military secularism, judicial secularism, social secularism, individual secularism, administrative secularism, etc (2005, pp. 45-55) although he admits that gradual achievement of comprehensive secularism is probable and that no one has a clear strategy about how to implement it despite the various political, social and religious opposing forces to change (pp. 70-79). Thus, the vital questions remain the following: how can advocates of secularism technically generate change and successfully move the current sectarian state to the vision of the future, i.e., to the desired secular state?

Change can occur on three levels: individual, social, and institutional. Thus, if the citizens, the communities, and the various social institutions, public and
private, resist change, secularism will never be achieved. Since it is not possible
to have a national unanimous consensus about abolishing sectarianism and
adopting secularism, democratic standards and majority decision making
techniques should be followed in this regard. Would the Lebanese agree on
numeric democracy? Since the National Reconciliation Accord (known as the
Taif Accord) calls for parity between Christians and Muslims and consociational
democracy, it follows that all changes should be accepted by all political parties
and religious communities before change can be implemented. The Taif Accord
was supposed to be implemented under the direct patronage of the USA, KSA,
and Syria. These countries could have put pressure on the government of
Lebanon to start the change process and to implement the different political
reforms. Moreover, the international community was not really interested in
those reforms; otherwise, they could have put pressure through the different aid
programs to start the change process. Consequently, one may say that while the
various external agents of change have been indifferent towards achieving that
goal, internal forces, such as secular political parties, NGOs, and advocates of
secularism are always weak against the powerful confessional political parties
which are supporting and maintaining the sectarian status quo.

There are many contributing factors to the failure of change efforts¹.

- First of all, Lebanon does not have a change culture regardless of the
  myths about the greatness and smartness and flexibility of the Lebanese
  people. Thus, if advocates of secularism will not create a climate and
  urgency for change, and opponents of secularism are not convinced of
  the importance of change, change will simply not happen.

- Sometimes the agents of change, more precisely, advocates of
  secularism, leaders and followers, lack the know-how, motivation,
  planning and managerial skills, financial and human capitals,
  competence and ability to translate thoughts into action, etc. in the
  direction of effecting change. Advocates of secularism in Lebanon
  cannot narrow the gap with their opponents.

Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail.” In Harvard Business Review on Change (pp. 1-
London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing; Ackerman Anderson, Linda S. and Dean Anderson
Advocates of secularism should walk the talk. Actually, if followers do not trust their leaders, or if they are uncertain about their abilities and capabilities, they will not commit themselves till the end.

Unless the intended agents of change correctly understand what the real problems of their country are and why sectarianism should be abolished and replaced specifically with secularism as the ultimate solution and the cost that this will entail, nothing is likely to change.

If the Christian minority fear the Muslim majority and feel that their rights will be lately compromised, they will definitely stand firm on the Taif Accord which grants them parity although one may acknowledge, implicitly if not explicitly, that Christians are over-represented in the name of the National Pact formula.

If agents of change remain concerned with their own private interests and satisfied with the current situation and content in their feeling of security and stability in the way things are, then why change!

On the other hand, there are several approaches to deal with resistance to change although none of them is without problems:

One of the best methods to overcome resistance to change is education and communication, although it is not always true that if one knows what is right and sees what the logic behind change is, he/she will do it.

It is advisable to make people participate and be involved in the change effort because support should come from all stakeholders, by motivating and offering them some incentives.

The issuing of appropriate laws and legislations may force citizens to accept change. However, this creates its own problems since secular and sectarian parties do not agree on what things require change and what things do not.

CONCLUSION

Lebanon has always been a place where sectarianism (or confessionalism) constituted one of the main factors that enormously affect the Lebanese reality. As for the religious obstacles that impede the advance of secularism in a multi-confessional Lebanon, some are of theological nature, especially for those Muslims who cannot but live under the Shari’a, and behavioral, especially for those Christian bishops who tangle with politics from their position as religious officials and not as simple citizens whose rights are guaranteed. As a matter of
fact, secularism, as practiced in some ‘modern’ Western democracies, promotes Religion-State separation (i.e., separation of religion and politics and protection of religion from governmental interference), defends human rights (mainly, gender equality, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech), endorses scientific rationalism and naturalistic thinking, and supports individualism over collectivism within the framework of official multiculturalist policies and the constitutionally rule of law. On the other hand, secularism in the Middle East and the Arab world is resisted on the ground that religion-state interdependence is the cornerstone of many cultural identities and political regimes. For instance, part of the problem in Lebanon lies in solving critical dilemmas, such as the absence of secularism from some Muslim and Christian societies regardless of the individual attempts of some secularists, such as Muhammad Hassan Al Amin and Gregoire Haddad; and the unfeasible complete separation between society and religion since there is no way to dereligionize the societies of complex multi-confessional countries. The implementation of secularism in Lebanon would not reduce religious, social, and political tensions between the different communities and parties! To conclude, change process has always been a difficult task which cannot be done without proper preparations. Will the Lebanese be ever ready to implement secularism in their country?

LIST OF REFERENCES


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