Can Federalism Work in Lebanon?

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Brief Analysis

For those promoting federalism in Lebanon, a historical analysis of the country's geographic and ethnosectarian divisions demonstrates the necessity of inclusive discussion and collective engagement.

As Lebanon's economic and socio-political conditions have spiraled downward since the rise and fractionalization of the 2019 popular protests—known as the October 17 Revolution—various proposals have emerged as to how to remedy the bankrupt and virtually failed state. All agree that the current outlook is grim; today, the Lebanese currency has lost almost all its value and the presidential seat is contested and remains vacant. Political elites are at loggerheads and blamed for robbing the state, society is polarized across intra- and inter-confessional lines, and poverty has reached a popular level not seen since the Great Famine of World War I.

Among the proposed suggestions is the federal option, put as an alternative to the country's confessional system. Such ideas are not new; in fact, the federal option had been championed and the subject (https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1266103/federalism-in-lebanon-a-cure-all-or-a-sham.html) of debate among mainly Christian politicians and parties prior to and during Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990). President Camille Chamoun (1952-1958) offered a detailed plan for a federal Lebanon; the Lebanese Front, representing mainly Maronite aspirations, likewise presented a federal project during the Lebanon National Dialogue in Lausanne in 1984; and president-elect Bashir Gemayel, assassinated in 1982, toyed with the idea of federalism.

However, Lebanon's civil war ended when the antagonistic parties signed the Document of National Reconciliation of 1989, also known as the Taif Agreement, which introduced administrative decentralization instead of federalism. And while the agreement ended the civil war, it subsequently ushered in an era of Lebanese politics marked by the Syrian occupation of Beirut until 2005 and the rise of the Islamist Shia party Hezbollah, effectively building a state within a state and commanding a militia more or less better equipped than the Lebanese Armed Forces. Meanwhile,

Lebanon's political elites entered into a Faustian pact with Hezbollah under which they legitimized the 'Party of God' in exchange for turning a blind eye to their theft of the state. It is this bargain that has brought Lebanon to its almost total collapse as a state and a nation.

Now federalism has once again been proposed by mainly Christian voices to address this dynamic. **Federalism (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/federalism/)** is the theory or advocacy of federal principles for dividing powers between member units and common institutions. Unlike in a unitary state, sovereignty in federal political orders is non-centralized, often constitutionally, between at least two levels such that each level has final say over certain predetermined aspects of governance, with citizen rights and responsibilities assured by all parties. Typically, the center maintains powers regarding defense and foreign policy, but member units may also have international roles.

No doubt, the current proponents of federalism are guided by lofty ideals. Based on the **website (https://federallebanon.org)** of Federal Lebanon, proponents of federalism underscore what they term "Sovereignty First," or sovereignty and neutrality as a national foundational priority to rid Lebanon, among other things, of political violence, sectarian polarization, corruption, foreign intervention, and illegal weapons. Writing in Lebanon Files, Salim al-Bitar Ghanem argued that national unity and coexistence will not be an obstacle to a new system that prevents hegemony and secures social justice, balanced development, and economic stability. As per the Federal Republic of Lebanon **website (https://fedleb.org)** , proponents of federalism propose an ethno-geographic constitution, with a preamble fully excerpted from the opening preamble of the Swiss constitution.

The proposed constitution identifies four distinct ethno-cultural [religious] groups—Christians, Druze, Sunnis, and Shia—who will be able to administer and handle their own affairs within their own cantons under laws decided by each group. Following the adoption of these rules by the parliament of each canton, a federal Parliament will enshrine these laws into a basic law for the Federal Republic of Lebanon. In other words, the basic law will apply to the entire Lebanese population organized under the four ethno-religious groups whereby each group would govern its geographical unit.

On the surface, this sort of federalism appears to be a viable solution to the chronic problems of Lebanon's confessional system and the country's economic and socio-political crises. On closer examination, however, absent a confessional consensus among the country's religious communities on federalism, it would become a recipe for civil strife, further debilitating the overall condition of the Christian community in Lebanon.

Proponents of federalism reinforce their arguments by drawing on examples of the viability of federalism, pointing mainly to the political systems of the United States, Switzerland, and the UAE. This intellectual exercise is theoretically feasible but its practicality is questionable, especially as these federalist systems are—as is the case of any political system—inextricably tied to their own historical contexts. In this respect, the history of Lebanon should likewise inform the would-be framers of a new governmental social contract with the population.

It is true that Lebanon's religious communities have been traditionally centralized in specific areas of Lebanon, with Maronite Catholics constituting the majority of Mount Lebanon, Druze comprising the majority of southern Mount Lebanon, and the Shia Fatimid Caliphate's influence in the turn of the last millennium and subsequent Mameluk rule helping to spread Shia and Sunni Islam respectively, with geographic centers for each.

Into the Ottoman period, Mount Lebanon nevertheless remained a citadel of co-existence and a refuge for the persecuted. The paramount Emirs of Mount Lebanon, Fakhr al-Din II (1572-1635)—ethnically Druze but raised by a Maronite family—and the Maronite Bashir Shihab II (1767-1850), whose reign formed the basis of modern Lebanon, governed their subjects fair and firmly, and in a manner removed from sectarianism. During this period, Christians began to migrate to southern Mount Lebanon, creating mixed areas in what had been traditionally Druze-controlled districts. Druze rivalry and internecine fighting among prominent families concurrently whittled away at Druze

power.

The beginning of Lebanon's current sectarian system emerged with Muhammad Ali's 1831 invasion of Lebanon and Syria, though his rule would be supplanted nine years later by Ottoman and British forces. Under pressure from the Egyptian ruler, Emir Bashir led a Maronite force and supported his son Ibrahim Pasha in conquering these Ottoman provinces and in suppressing Druze rebellions. This decision marked the first time a Lebanese sect rallied around a foreign force to subdue another sect.

Upon the withdrawal of Muhammad Ali's forces, clashes erupted between the Druze and Maronites, sparking tensions which the returning Ottomans attempted to diffuse by creating the *Qaim Maqamiyah.* This new governing system divided Mount Lebanon into two districts, the northern district governed by a Christian Qaim Maqam and a southern district under a Druze Qaim Maqam. Both Qaim Maqams answered to the Wali (governor) of Sidon.

Nevertheless, this arrangement only deepened sectarian tensions, especially in mixed districts. Clashes erupted in the 1840s and then again in 1860 in mixed Christian-Druze areas, ultimately spilling over to Damascus and ending only after European powers pressured the Ottomans, who had supported Druze and turned a blind eye to massacres of Christians, to end the fighting and redesign the system of governance.

Subsequently a catholic Mustasarif (governor-general) was assigned to rule over Mount Lebanon, assisted by an elected council of twelve from the various religious communities and implementing equal rights and the end of feudalism. Subsequent French administrators would model the country's confessional system on this structure, and the creation of independent Lebanon in 1943 neither fostered a strong national identity nor a strong state, a condition that invited foreign intervention.

Significantly, the issue of feudalism was never addressed, and transitioned instead into political sectarianism. These longstanding ties have more or less preserved the socio-political and sectarian problems that plagued Lebanon under Ottoman rule, while political elites increased their power at the expense of the state, promoting their own interests over that of their community before the welfare of the state and the nation as a whole. Therefore, Lebanon has rested on a delicate and tenuous confessional balance, repeatedly disrupted in 1958, 1975-1990, and 2008. The Taif ultimately deepened sectarianism by stripping powers from the president to redistribute equal powers to the Maronite President, Sunni Prime Minister, and Shia speaker of the House, and dividing political representation in the country equally among Christians and Muslims on a six-to-six ratio.

Proponents of federalism must reckon with these past failures in Lebanon's governance. Since federalism will be based on sectarian districts similar to the Ottoman *Qaim Maqamiyah* and *Mutasarifiya* systems, proponents of federalism must take into consideration the potential problems that have arisen in the past over a) mixed areas, b) power sharing and communal imbalance, 3) foreign meddling in communal affairs, and 4) sectarian control of weapons—in this case, Hezbollah.

Whereas proponents of federalism argue that cleavage along economic, cultural, and religious lines makes federalism a suitable political order for the ethnic-religious groups within their own sectarian canton, Lebanon lacks geographical sectarian homogeneity suitable for sectarian cantonization. Mixed areas scatter Lebanon's landscape, and they have proven especially susceptible to conflict.

Federalists argue that mixed areas are not an impediment to federalism since the proposed sectarian cantons are fairly homogeneous and sub-cantons can be established to safeguard minorities. However, this line of thought is problematic; Lebanon had only one official census in 1932 and mixed areas have expanded since the end of the civil war. Sectarian parties also have weapons which could be used to preclude a majority sect imposing its will over a minority sect in a sectarian district.

In most cases, sharing power in a federalist system entails that the federal/central government controls the

portfolios of defense and foreign policy. This is one of the most intransigent and difficult problems facing Lebanon's society and political parties. No consensus has yet emerged among political parties over Lebanon's foreign policy orientation and defense strategy. Proponents of federalism presuppose that federalism would resolve this problem without addressing the problem beforehand. Hezbollah and its practical and/or ideological allies among intra- and inter-sectarian groups may well contest, whether by force or political maneuvering, the political vision of the proponents of federalism.

Moreover, minorities have historically been cautious in taking sides along sectarian lines. For example, during the strife in the 1840s and 1860, the Greek Orthodox community was not willing to support the Maronite community against the Druze community. And during Lebanon's civil war, the Armenian Christian political leadership embraced what it termed a policy of positive neutrality.

No less significant, Lebanon is currently saddled with a communal imbalance, making it hard to reach a consensus over power sharing, including on taxes and distribution of government revenues. Proponents of federalism rightly argue that Christian districts contribute a large portion to the government's budget yet receive fewer services than any other community. This imbalance is exacerbated by foreign meddling in the country's domestic affairs and by the reliance of sectarian political parties on foreign intervention on behalf of their sects.

Broadly speaking, Lebanon's communal imbalance underlies a divided Christian community, a leaderless Sunni community, a Druze community guided by survival politics, and an assertive Shia community armed with Hezbollah's weapons. In this respect, it is questionable whether federalism will promote a communal balance conducive to power sharing.

Another present issue is the approach some proponents of federalism are taking towards these communities , pursuing a path contradicting the very essence of their federal project. On February 18, the Twitter account for Federal Lebanon **posted (https://twitter.com/FederalLebanon_/status/1626864738930917377)** : "It is time to regard the areas under Hezbollah's control as gangrenous extremities." A few days earlier on February 14, Associate Professor Hisham Abi Nassif, a strong proponent of federalism, emphasized in an interview with Dr. Charbel Maroun of Voice of Lebanon that Hezbollah's project is not only about controlling the state; it is a long term ethnic cleansing project meant to expel Sunnis, Christians, and Druze and make their presence in Lebanon a symbolic one. He added that the only way to face this project is to effect a geographical separation with Hezbollah.

Proponents of federalism have also made the mistake of equating Hezbollah with the overall Shia community, negating the very nationalistic legacies of Shia luminaries and activists from Imam Musa al-Sadr to Lukman Slim. Such attitudes go against the grain of the project of federalism and will surely lead to civil strife and partition.

Bearing in mind that political sectarianism constitutes the root of Lebanon's dysfunctional system, federalism may indeed be an option for Lebanon. But for this federal option to become viable, its proponents need to open up to and engage all civil and political groups across the political and sectarian spectrum. They could, for example, revive the initial non-sectarian popular spirit of the October 17 Revolution and try to nurture and cultivate a socio-political philosophy commensurate with Lebanon's history and society—an enormous and time consuming effort. Such an approach is also essential for facing Hezbollah as a concerted communal front to peacefully take the Islamist party to task as a Lebanese entity.

Ultimately, federalism cannot be implemented through Christian—mainly Maronite—voices alone. For any measure of success, structural issues currently serving as roadblocks would have to be addressed, and maximally inclusive efforts need to be made. Absent a collective communal effort supporting federalism, one cannot expect power sharing or distinct sectarian cantons to remain at peace with each other. Federalism as currently proposed is a recipe for renewed civil strife, as the history of Lebanon has repeatedly shown us. ❖

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