

THE POLITICAL CLIMATE IN LEBANON AND THE ARMENIAN LEBANESE COMMUNITY

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Lebanon at last formed its cabinet on November 10, 2009, following weeks of bickering and a five month political vacuum since parliamentary elections. The cabinet is formed of 15 ministers from Prime Minister Saad Hariri's US and Saudi-backed coalition, 10 from the opposition, backed by Syria and Iran, and five nominated by the country's president.

Lebanon had been without a government since the June 7 parliamentary elections which Hariri's coalition won. Hariri had failed during a previous attempt to form a unity government. The *As-Safir* daily, which is close to the opposition, stated that the Hariri government embraces all of Lebanon's sectarian complexities and rivalries. "It is a government of contradictions, which either contains a time bomb waiting to explode or will be able to rule until the end of its mandate," the newspaper said.

The March 14 movement won 71 seats of the 128-seat body, increasing its parliamentary hold by one. The Hezbollah-led opposition won 57 seats. Parliamentary seats in Lebanon are divided along sectarian lines.

As Hariri set out to create a national unity government, the opposition demanded veto power. The opposition wanted a cabinet that includes 30 ministers, in which it would have 11 ministers and that would allow them the "veto third" or the "blocking third," where they could block any major government decision they did not like. Important issues in Lebanon have to be decided in the Council of Ministers (cabinet) by a two-thirds majority.

But Hariri refused such a settlement. A formula was reached for having a 30-member cabinet divided thus: 15 ministers for March 14, 10 for the opposition, and 5 for the president. Under this formula, the parliamentary majority would not have enough votes to hinder decision taking or the opposition to bring down the government if it wanted. So, there is this situation where the president's appointees are the potential referees between the two sides.

The Armenian Lebanese Community

This system of political confessionalism reserves 6 parliamentary seats for Armenian candidates and 2 ministerial posts in the cabinet. Up till 2001, the 6 Armenian candidates used to run as one group and formed the "Armenian Block". Since then, however, this unity has been disrupted, and Armenian candidates are opting to run along with other Christian and Muslim powerful political figures. This has, consequently, created tensions and divisions among the different Armenian political parties and their supporters. The present Armenian ministers are: Apraham Dedeyan, Minister of Industry, nominated

by the Aoun coalition, and Jean Ogasapian, Minister of State, nominated by the ruling party.

The Armenian presence in Lebanon resulted from a series of immigration waves during the nineteenth century. However, the process of these waves reached its peak with the 1915 genocide. A new and larger wave of Armenian refugees arrived between 1937 and 1940 from Alexandretta, after the annexation of the latter by Turkey and the evacuation of Sanjak by the French forces. Armenian immigration continued in the 1940s from Palestine as a result of the Arab-Israeli war and the early 1960s from Syria owing to the Arab nationalist sentiments of its ruling circles which curtailed cultural and educational rights of the Armenians.

Armenians were granted Lebanese citizenship in 1924 by the French mandate authorities to boost Christian numbers. In 1926 there were some 75,000 Armenians, and this number played an important role in the "equitable distribution" of the political and administrative positions, as the Constitution specified a balance of political power among the major religious groups. Accordingly, the presidency was reserved for the Maronite Christians, the premiership for the Sunni Muslims, the speaker of the Chamber for the Shiite Muslims, and so on.

In the 1960s and 70s, the Armenians had achieved a significant degree of economic prosperity. Armenians virtually monopolized the Oriental rug trade, for example. Using their connections with markets in Constantinople, London, and Persia, these businessmen, many of whom were the sons of Old World rug merchants, established flourishing wholesale and retail outlets. This was accomplished through a combination of hard work, self-reliance, and entrepreneurial ingenuity – attributes that had served Armenians well in their long history of struggle against difficult odds.

However, economic well-being was not accompanied by a sense of contentment and happiness. Several factors were discernible after the mid-1960s as being responsible for feelings of discontent among Armenians in the diaspora: the gradual realization of the permanence of diasporic existence, the persistent concern with the threat of assimilation and loss of identity, the pervasive feeling of political impotence because of the lack of national independence, and the deep sense of loss and moral outrage against Turkey for its persistent denial of the Armenian Genocide.

They were the most important Armenian community outside of the Soviet Union and the United States, counting 175,000 in 1983 eight years after the cycle of violence had started in Lebanon. This was expressed in the description of the community as the "most Armenian" of all diaspora communities and as the "second Armenia". Unfortunately, there are no official statistics specifying the present number of Armenian or non-Armenian citizens in Lebanon, for the last census was conducted in 1932.

The Armenian community adopted a position of "positive neutrality" during the 16-year-long civil war in Lebanon, 1975-1991. Some militant Lebanese Christians resented the Armenians' reluctance to join the fight in what was in the early days of the conflict seen as a Muslim-Christian battle. The Armenian neutrality paid off. Throughout the war years, Bourj Hammoud, a predominantly Armenian neighborhood on the edge of east Beirut, even during the heaviest artillery shelling of east Beirut remained untouched; however, thousands along with many other Lebanese sought refuge in Canada, the United States, France, and other countries.

Existence in the New World

Survivors of the Genocide who reached Lebanon recount how they could not afford the time to study, as they worked to establish themselves in the new land. But they considered education for their children of paramount importance. "*Tebrots kena vor mart ellas*" (go to school to be successful/educated/cultured) was a popular injunction, and older children took jobs to make sure that their younger brothers and sisters would receive the prized high school diploma or college degree.

Phrases like, "The Armenian school is the home of the Armenian" and "Armenians' survival can be ensured only through the Armenian school", served as the underlying impetus for the proliferation of Armenian schools and churches. At present there are a total of twenty-eight Armenian schools in Lebanon, three seminaries, three technical centers, two special centers for the mentally and physically challenged, and one university.

Existence in this new world was supported by the three political parties that had reorganized themselves after surviving the Genocide and settling in Lebanon. Besides the humanitarian efforts of these parties, an important outcome was the formation of the press. The first long-lasting Armenian-language daily, *Aztag*, was established in 1927 by the Tashnak party. *Zartonk*, another daily, dates from 1934 as an organ of the Ramgavar Party. *Ararad*, another daily, was established in 1937 by the Henschag party.

The cultural, social, and educational associations rely upon the press to advertise their programs, while the newspapers fill up their pages with reports and photographs of those activities and sell subscriptions. Most importantly, the Armenian press contributes to the development of Armenian pride and sense of community by highlighting the accomplishments of Armenian individuals around the world and publishing news of ancient and new Armenian communities around the world, stressing the longevity and greatness of Armenian culture and reinforcing a sense of diaspora. Since the independence of Armenia, more pages are devoted to cover the political and cultural events in the motherland.

Van and Sevan, two Armenian radio stations in Lebanon, focus on news about the Armenian communities in Lebanon and the diaspora, and political, social, and cultural issues in Lebanon and Armenia. They also attach great

importance to a range of issues and social problems associated with divorce, parent-child conflict, domestic violence, drug addiction, and linguistic and cultural retention. They broadcast news in Arabic and Armenian and music in Arabic, Armenian, and Greek. The stations are affiliated with the Tashnak and Hariri-backed political parties. Also, the O (Orange) and Al-Mustakbal (Future) television stations owned by Aoun and Hariri respectively, broadcast daily half-an-hour news program in Armenian.

Conclusion

Armenians, besides the Jews, are the only people that have more members living in the diaspora than in their own country. For more than one hundred years now, more than half of the seven million Armenians in the world have been living in diasporic communities where they have been subjected to shifts and fluctuations of language ideologies, ranges of identities, sociopolitical and socioeconomic trends, and more recently to globalization, consumerism, explosion of media technologies, and the post-colonial and post-communist predicament of belongingness. Consequently, while acknowledging that globalization is progressively increasing, (with religious fanaticism and political unrest punctuating recent history, especially in the Middle East), broadening the range of available options, there is growing concern among Armenians about ethnic language maintenance, identity, and culture.

Hence, as it moves into its second century, the Armenian Lebanese community is caught in the dilemma common to diaspora communities. On the one hand, it is being pulled by forces and institutions inherited from the Old World, and its Armenian consciousness will continue to be heightened by the destabilization in Lebanon and the Middle East, the quest for political recognition of the genocide, and the fear of cultural extinction. On the other hand, the Armenian Lebanese community has integrated itself successfully into the economic, social, and political fabric of the host nation