

Federalism, Lebanon's ignored option

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Taif is 20 this year, and many of the questions posed by the accord have yet to be answered in Lebanon. Political reform and further amendment of the Constitution have been at the heart of the political debate relating to the future of Lebanon since the end of the Civil War in 1990. Among several things, Taif mandates a process of “political deconfessionalization,” and has remained the primary framework for reform in Lebanon. The agreement put forward three important ideas, some implemented, some not: the transfer of executive power from the president to the Cabinet; the eventual abrogation of confessional politics; and administrative decentralization. Despite the incorporation of many of its clauses into the Constitution, Taif remains full of lacunas and ambiguities. Hence the importance of finding more pragmatic alternatives to cope with Lebanon’s problems, in many respects those of a Balkanized state.

Confessional federalism may be the only realistic solution to Lebanese woes. This implies the institutionalization of federalism at a regional and confessional level; in other words, constitutional recognition of the de facto socio-political and religious reality present throughout the country.

Federalism implies creating regional parliaments and governments, decentralizing politics, and reducing central state authority in some fields. This would allow inhabitants of a region to participate in politics while generally avoiding deadlock with the central authority. Moreover, it would prevent dominant parties, or in some cases confessional groups, from attempting to hijack the country by threatening to push Lebanon into a nation-wide political impasse in defense of their narrow interests.

Federalism enhances representation on a local and national level. At a local level, it allows the federated state to focus on problems relating solely to its region, freeing it from the requirement of reaching an often elusive national consensus as a preliminary step for decision-making. At a national level, federalism gives federated states a voice and authority over institutions of the central state. This would allow voters in Akkar, for instance, to have two voices: one in their region, another in Beirut, doubling their representation, making their voice count on regional matters while strengthening their Lebanese identity through the authority exercised over national policy.

Under such a system, elections in the federated state would be carried out according to proportional representation so all communities have a voice in regional matters, guaranteeing their rights and protection.

Lebanon's sectarian reality is stark. It is difficult today to find a mixed neighborhood or village in the country. Despite the sectarian fighting last year in Beirut and the mountains, Lebanese can be proud of having averted a repeat of the Civil War. But, for a younger generation, growing up in relative peace has come at the detriment of a "Lebanese" identity, in an atmosphere of exacerbated communitarianism. Perhaps more than their parents, youths are first and foremost Maronites, Shiites, Sunnis, or Druze. Because of their parents, they live in self-imposed regional exiles, even psychological ones. Unlike their parents, they did not witness bloody conflict, therefore do not understand the nature of "Lebanese identity," a notion that relies heavily on the country's fragile stability. In other words, Lebanese identity cannot exist without being embodied in long-lasting, institutionalized stability.

Should one talk about national identity if it does not really exist? Wasting time on the illusion of a unified Lebanese identity only postpones a more stable order. A unitary, more secular state, as proposed by Taif, may not be the right solution for such a diverse and segmented society as ours. Secularism does not necessarily alleviate the tensions between different communities; it only amplifies them as political parties continue to act in a confessional manner, allowing those sects with the most numbers to dictate the politics of the country. If Lebanese society responded to the criteria of a mixed integrated community, Taif could have been an option. But the reality on the ground is far different. The Lebanese are a divided people.

Nor is administrative decentralization, as vaguely described by Taif, suitable for Lebanon's reality. The paragraph that elaborates this concept begins by saying that "the state of Lebanon shall be a single and united state with a strong central authority." Most Lebanese live under the impression that administrative decentralization is synonymous with enhanced local representation through the devolution of central authority to regional administrations. This is not the case; it is merely an interpretation of what the Lebanese wish were the case. Decentralization in Taif remains nebulous, expressing little in terms of practical content.

Perhaps Taif's most important clause is the one that shifted executive power from the presidency to the Council of Ministers as a collective body, in which all communities are represented, and Christian and Muslim representation, as in Parliament, respects a 50-50 ratio. This structure has effectively established a framework for a concordant federal executive that could resemble the Federal Council of Switzerland, a country not unlike Lebanon in its social and communal complexity. In such a system, executive decisions could be made by common consent; and the leader figure could change once every year, let's say, giving the chance for all communities to direct politics.

This project may appear difficult on a technical and psychological level. Technically, elections in the regions and on the national level are difficult to organize. Federalism, if poorly applied, can also lead to aspirations for regional autonomy, or worse, secession. Psychologically the word federalism is a non-starter for many Lebanese, who have little knowledge about what it really signifies and its widespread application in the world, in places as diverse as the United States and Germany or Malaysia and Switzerland.

Despite the difficulties of carrying out this project, federalism, if applied well, may allow Lebanon to find much-needed stability. Unless the Lebanese people are willing to accept that their current unity is a fantasy, political crises and strife will continue to characterize the country's status quo.

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