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**THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF POLITICAL
MOBILISATION AND PARTICIPATION IN LEBANON**

by Karam Karam

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The “Independence Uprising” demonstrations that followed the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on the 14th of February 2005, as well as the subsequent withdrawal of the Syrian army by the end of April 2005, reinforced the belief that the Lebanese political system is effectively undergoing transformation; all the favorable conditions required to engage the political system in a “democratic transition” process seem to have come together.

If the shadow of emerging disillusion began to emerge, it is clear that the Lebanese political scene in 2007 is obviously very different compared to the one of in the post-war period, when the Syrian Baathist regime assumed control over Lebanon with the consent of the international community in the context of the post cold-war era, with the liberation of Kuwait and the launch of the Peace Process in the region. It is equally important to note that the current situation is different from that of September 2004, when the Syrian President Bachar al-Assad unconstitutionally imposed the prolongation of Emile Lahoud’s presidential mandate.

The hypothetical indicators for “democratic transition” in Lebanon, may include for instance, the end of the civil war in 1990, the dynamics of “reconciliation” and “reconstruction” of the country and its public institutions (launched in 1992), as well as the organization of several elections (presidential, legislatives and municipal elections, after a long period of interruption or boycotting), and the withdrawal of foreign troops (The Israeli Army in 2000 from south Lebanon and the Syrian Army in 2005). These indicators however do not imply in any sense a reform of the Lebanese political system (nor its potential for democratization) and certainly do not solve the system’s endemic crises.

Within the framework of this paper, I shall concentrate on three mobilization cycles that I will differentiate according to their dominant hypothesis, the way in which they participate in the formation of political identities, and the way they intervene in the definition of groups-related social forms of dominations and “counter-actors”.

Moreover, instead of political, economic and social liberalization, in which some countries in the MENA region could be engaged, it seems that, in the scope of the last fifteen years, in particular since 1995, Lebanon was engaged in different cycles of mobilization or dynamic “protestation” that contributed to the restructuring of State power.

Without overstating the atypical aspect of the Lebanese political process compared to those existing in the MENA countries – particularly in terms of “State Resilience”, the monopoly of the means of coercion and/or the personification of the regime –, this paper will propose a new dimension for both understanding and analyzing “political

change without democratization”. This will be based on three main factors: (1) the analysis of regimes strategies (and the way in which they are redefined), (2) elite change and (3) their methods of participation and mobilization “from below”.

This paper will address these dynamics, at the same time avoiding Manichaeic (i.e. civil society vs. political society) or linear (i.e. oscillating among different strategies in the political arenas) overtures. It will also highlight the position of political actors and their objectives in order to draw attention to the difficulty of assigning them fixed positions (Who has power? Who and what is the “opposition”?).

The first cycle of mobilization can be described as civil mobilization. Between 1995 and 2001, several organizations, initiatives, or social movements emerging from below - or from the margins of society - shared common characteristics. In a society where political elites tend to neutralize any kind of opposition emanating from within the system, these channels tend to reinforce citizen action by giving participation in public life a politico-judiciary feeling and re-conciliating citizens to political action, which was previously compromised by the violence of the war and the behavior of the political elite after the war.

Three categories of actors can more or less clearly be identified during this period, and thus gives us the opportunity to reflect deeply on changes in the Lebanese political elite structure, as well as the way in which they are described: ruling elites, “opposition” elites and “civil actors”.

The semblance of cohesion and homogeneity amongst the ruling elite during this period prevailed primarily because of the hegemony of the dominant political actor Syria over the political system. Despite their differences, they managed to abide by the rules of the game which were imposed on the entire political elite, thus neutralizing political space in various ways, such as: recourse to repression or exclusion (for example, the imprisonment of Samir Geagea, the exile of Michel Aoun, the violent repression of Hizbollah demonstrations, etc.); restricting entry into the political system by controlling the electoral system and the electoral process which was revived during that period, or even the logic of cooptation and distribution which prevailed and spread in what was at the time a large reconstruction site.

During this period, notions of political opposition were complex and tightly linked to the rules and conditions of political participation. First of all, in a consociational system, the notion of power-sharing among the various representative factions makes the idea of opposition ambiguous. On the one hand, the opposition can express itself by exercising its right to veto, a right afforded to every group in Lebanon’s consensual political system. On the other hand, it can express itself through competition for representation of each group, or even within the government itself among the representatives of each group. Opposition against the government, however, was costly.

Secondly, that period was also typified by a group of outcast political leaders who became de facto opponents of the regime. For these outcast actors or groups, opposition arenas were numerous but not situated within the main representative institutions. If they were absent from government, or partially represented in parliament or not at all,

they challenged the government and the regime either on the local level or through boycotting elections (mainly in 1992 and 1996), or in ‘virtual’ arenas (from abroad, or through outspoken press statements, etc). However, their absence from governmental institutions did not have the same impact in terms of actual power, which depended on their relation with the dominant actor, the Syrian regime. This meant radical opposition for some and “alliances of convenience” for others (mainly Hezbollah).

In reaction to these restrictions on the political scene, civil actors began to organize themselves within associations in order to oppose government policies, and not the government itself. They called for civil rights, freedom of expression and participation, and the reform of certain laws and policies (such as the Electoral Law, Associations Law, Civil Status Law, dealing with the issue of missing people during the war, environmental policies, etc.).

The second cycle of mobilization emerged at the beginning of the current decade and was characterized by a patriotic and pro-sovereignty stance. One can roughly pinpoint 2000-2001 as the period where agitation for this cause began. It reached its climax with massive demonstrations during the spring of 2005. Above all, the 2000 parliamentary elections signified a break from the past when compared to previous elections, especially vis-à-vis the ruling elites. Competing alliances amongst the heavyweights of the political system (particularly amongst the three leaders of the so-called Troika – the Prime Minister, the President and the Speaker of Parliament) replaced the previous unified consensual lists imposed by the Syrian regime. The death of Hafez el-Assad, the withdrawal of the Israeli Army from South Lebanon in 2000, and subsequently the reshuffling of Near East policy on the part of international powers after the events of September 11th 2001, contributed to the transformation of internal dynamics in Lebanon and the balance of power amongst Lebanese elites. This cycle is termed ‘patriotic’ and was characterized by diverse movements whose common aim was the ‘liberation’ of public and national space from Syrian power and interference from the various Lebanese and Syrian security and intelligence apparatuses.

Frictions and divisions within the ruling elites intensified as was reflected in electoral competition, whereas considerable changes which were operating on the national, regional and international levels, blurred their previous standpoints. Certain leaders in the opposition or the loyalist camps changed their strategy to take advantage of emerging opportunities. Gradually, a large opposition movement emerged against the dominant actor Syria, which brought about a reshuffle in political alliances. In particular, the principal actors of earlier ‘civil’ movements merged some of their demands for the reform of the Lebanese political system with those of the new ‘patriotic’ movement. Consequently, the nature and the image of the opposition have changed. During this period, groups such as Qornet Shehwan, the Bristol Gathering rose to prominence and eventually culminated in the Independence Uprising, which spread to large segments of society.

In terms of mobilization, alongside the strategies of the elites, this period was also defined by the development of the arena of protest which reached a crescendo during the cycle of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations during the spring of 2005 (it should be noted that the starting point of these demonstrations was discernible since

2001). A misunderstanding arose between, on one hand, elites who adjusted their allegiances according to complex strategies in the name of national liberation and a Lebanese population, which openly demonstrated its politicization and its capacity to react and to mobilize around these challenges by going to the streets. In other words, the redrawing of the political space of the elites, and the rules and norms by which they abided did not necessarily coincide with the transformation of a society which was growing poorer, and whose demands went beyond conflicts of power.

The third cycle of mobilization began in the summer of 2005. It became a partisan (i.e. party-based) mobilization, in which different political factions clashed amidst some brushes with violence. This partisan mobilization resumed the earlier political boundaries. It confirmed, or reinforced, the political and sectarian cleavages in Lebanese society and political power. In contrast to the previous mobilizations, sections of certain confessions displaced a sort of acquiescence to their sectarian leaders. In fact, this cycle of mobilization is notable for inter-communal alliances (Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement against the government coalition). However, what emerged was a competition between the leaders or groups for representation of the political community. Patronal and clan mentality proved to be a determining factor. In other words, each political leader sought to rally community support in the name of partisan demands. Their aim was to strengthen their position and to maximize their gains on the political chessboard in a turbulent period for Lebanon, while waiting for the creation of a new order, more specifically, a new redistribution or restructuring of power by foreign actors.

This pattern saw the emergence of a more 'classic' form of opposition; i.e. an opposition characterized by the departure from the government of the Shiite representatives, which expressed itself through institutional and non-institutional arenas, and subsequently resorted to street demonstrations and sit-ins. The political scene also went down the path of violence.

In this tense atmosphere, civil society actors tried to distance themselves from these narrow-minded disputes and communal cleavages in order to propose trans-communal activities to unite around either a common project or certain principles of common living.

Thus, this paper aims to examine the restructuring of public space and of the Lebanese political scene during these three periods. More precisely, I intend to examine the interactions during each cycle of mobilization, the rationale of government elites and the opposition groups, while paying particular attention to the role of regional and international actors and their impact on internal dynamics. All this has several implications which I will try to develop within the framework of this paper.

The interactions between these actors in the different political arenas are complex and fragmented. Analyzing them allows us to understand the debates, dynamics and tensions, which characterize the Lebanese political scene. This perspective will permit me to suggest "plural political spaces. [where] politics play out through diverse scenes, where the arena for possible protest could no longer be reduced from now on to only state and para-state spheres" (Geisser, Karam et Vairel 2006, 194).

The relative singularity of Lebanon in the Arab region with its consociational political formula is interesting in terms of dealing with the question of the restructuring of power in Lebanon. To what extent is the singularity of the Lebanese process truly atypical?

The nature of the founding political pact, the National Pact of 1943, and the Taëf Accord of 1989, established a confessional political system, which divided power and high official offices of state among confessional elites. By default, no single group could assume hegemony over the others. Moreover, the idea of 'national' and 'individual' citizenship was sacrificed for the sake of maintaining peace among the confessional groups. In the notable "grey zone" (Carothers 2002, 10), the "feckless pluralism" syndromes of the Lebanese political system are stated and transformed into the three cycles of mobilization.

On one hand, because of the rules of the political game, political elites of the main political factions or parties were perceived by the majority of citizens to be corrupt, selfish and incompetent. For some, they had neglected their responsibilities to the public. However, this did not prevent some elites from showing a strong capacity for mass mobilization in their client and confessional bases. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that these patron-client relations vary from case to case where other types of ties between leaders and followers are defined (as with Hezbollah).

On the other hand, despite the pluralist consociational formula, the Lebanese political system is not protected from authoritarian logics specifically from dominant-power politics: Syrian power played a direct dominant role in political decision-making, from the end of the civil war in 1990 until 2005. Herein, the dominant actor was imposed outside the national political arena while partly determining the terms of conjunction between the elements of the civil society and the structures of the political one.

Finally, with regard to the three recent cycles of mobilization and recent developments on the Lebanese political scene another hypothesis is formulated: are we witnessing, after the withdrawal of the Syrian army, current confrontations between the actors who are competing to dominate the political system, which was structured specifically to prevent the hegemony of one group or person? Could this perhaps open the way for new domination outside the national arena?