

The question of secularisation in Lebanon

A conversation with Fawwaz Traboulsi



Fawwaz Traboulsi holds degrees from the American University of Beirut and the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. He is Professor at the Lebanese American University. Founder of Bidayat, an intellectual

review, he has also authored a number of books, including *A History of Modern Lebanon* (Pluto Press, 2007).

Constitutional schizophrenia

Lebanon suffers from constitutional schizophrenia. The political regime, with quotas for the electoral system and government appointments, contradicts the rights of political and legal equality enshrined in the Constitution. Yet Articles 9 and 10 of the same Constitution stress respect for all religions and the rights of religious communities. Both are a direct legacy of the Constitution of 1926, which required the state to respect all confessions and safeguard religious interests as long as they did not undermine public order. So while the Constitution makes the abolition of the confessional system a “basic national goal”, other parts of it tend to protect that same system.

Isolation of secular activists

Facing such a complex institutional situation, the question is whether, and how, existing resources within Lebanese society could bring an end to the political system based on confessional representation, and how these could contribute significantly to the secularisation of personal status and education.

The programme of the Lebanese National Movement (a coalition of political ‘progressive’ parties and movements founded in the first days of the civil war) is a useful historical reference. It gave a central place to the secular state, advocating an electoral system where the entire Lebanese territory would be considered a single electoral constituency, based on a list system and on proportional representation. It recognised two main identities of the Lebanese: as ‘individual citizens’ and as ‘members of a community’. It also tried to establish a voluntary non-religious civil code (it is worth noting that a similar decree in 1936 never saw the light of day). However, the project failed and the forces behind it were destroyed.

Since then, there has been no mass mobilisation in favour of secularising the electoral system. Admittedly, in 2005 there was a residual movement embodied in the

‘Beirut Spring’ (alternatively the ‘Cedar Revolution’ or ‘Independence Intifada’) but this crumbled quite rapidly due to its heterogeneous character. Indeed, the movement was composed of militants from the Left and members of a somewhat apolitical new generation – overly romanticised and anti-religious – who naively believed they could bring down the confessional system, but were incapable of working out how to achieve this.

Religious consensus and the status quo

There is a consensus among religious authorities in favour of the status quo. They assert a demagoguery of sorts: for example, Christian authorities expect violent reactions from their Sunni counterparts against any proposed changes in personal status, only to support their position in the end.

However in a context where confessionalism is inherently embedded, the problem runs deeper than this. Confessionalism also keeps the Lebanese divided in a way that is convenient for other interests. The leaders of religious groups are business people, militia fighters and former warlords. The general public belief is that politicians make the decisions in Lebanon. In reality, however, decision-makers are actually accountable to a class of traders, merchants and bankers who have officially nothing to do with politics.

Secularisation and national identity

The confessional system must be understood as a modern creation, not as a legacy of a remote past, that is linked to many external interests. The existence of a Lebanese national identity cannot be questioned, even if it is one that often asserts itself negatively – ‘against’ another, eg the Palestinians or the Syrians. Nowadays, no one defends the idea of uniting Lebanon with Syria. But how should we understand nationalism and patriotism in a country where the majority of the population works overseas and those living in the country are dependent on them for subsistence?

Implicit in the reference to a common identity should be the domestic market as an economic foundation for Lebanon’s independence. The Lebanese state became globalised in the 1950s, and this globalisation was amplified by Lebanon’s particular historical tendency to look for support elsewhere, instead of its own resources. The recurring civil wars that characterise Lebanon’s history have only reinforced the propensity to resort to external forces. And breaking this is no easy task.

Based on an interview conducted for Accord in March 2012 by Vincent Geisser