

Lebanon's Myth of Secularism

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“Why are you studying religion?” a Lebanese friend exclaimed when I told her about my research. “Religion is not important any more; politics in Lebanon is about national policy now.”

Since 2005's Cedar Revolution against Syrian hegemony, the myth that national interests have trumped religion in Lebanon has gained unprecedented force. Those events reshaped the country's political landscape, political parties aligning themselves either with the anti-Syrian “March 14” majority coalition or the pro-Syrian (read: anti-American) opposition camp. Both sides proclaim the success of a new secular civil society seeking national unity, and blame the country's problems – past and present – on foreign attempts to turn sect against sect. The claim on everybody's lips is that the Lebanese would all get along happily if only left to it.

This was the line I was given by Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces party, during an interview last summer. In reply to a question about the roles of religious authorities in Lebanon, he strongly denied that they have, or should have, any place in political leadership. He went on to talk at length about the flourishing of secular civil society. This despite having frequently associated himself with the influential Maronite Patriarch, Nasrallah Sfeir, and despite his party's strong low-level connections with the Maronite Church.

Geagea insisted that both he and his party had renounced their sectarian militia background in favour of secular politics. Nevertheless, his party's ethos – and consequent popularity – is built on a vocation of Christian defence, legitimated by a narrative of persecution and distrust. Talking about Hezbollah's attacks on pro-government factions in May, Geagea broke from his civil society rhetoric to assert proudly that his own party was spared not for political reasons but because of the Christians' reputation as fighters. A hint of the military charisma that won him the LF command in 1985 came through as he reminisced for a moment about the honour of having fought with and for his people.

An iconic red cross with a diagonal cut across the base can be spotted all over Christian Lebanon: in graffiti, on mantelpieces, or worn over the heart. This is the symbolic banner of the Lebanese Forces, with its roots in “Resistant Prayer Day”, observed in Maronite churches during the 1975-90 Civil War. According to the official LF website, it is blood-red as a “sign of martyrdom and glory... the bearing cross of the Lebanese Christians, the sign of their suffering throughout history.” The cross's dagger point represents “their determination to keep the cross planted in this region of the world.”

The myth of secularism and national interest is convenient for Lebanese politicians, smoothing over differences between allies within the current fragile coalitions, as well as

reassuring international observers and patrons. Yet while the rhetoric has become second nature to many like Samir Geagea, the basic political blocs that politicians compete to represent remain bounded by religion and mobilised by communal interest. So parties of all confessions both thrive on and perpetuate the sectarian concerns of their constituencies, as the Lebanese Forces does. It has often been remarked in the Lebanese press that while party leaders – Sunni, Shi'a, Druze or Christian – embrace and smile for the cameras, such cross-confessional conviviality has not been passed down to their supporters.

My Lebanese friend, who had criticised my study of religion, turned out to be a proud follower of Michel Aoun, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement leader. Aoun casts himself as a secular nationalist alternative to the Christian feudal and religious establishment. He rose to prominence through the ranks of the army, and has been one of the fiercest critics of Patriarch Sfeir's political stances. Following his majority share of the Christian vote in the last general election, Aoun controversially proclaimed himself "political patriarch" of Lebanon's Christians. Also since his electoral victory, Aoun surprised many by siding with the Hezbollah-led opposition.

This alliance has strained the loyalty of his voters, and as the Spring 2009 general election draws closer he is again playing to the sectarian realities behind his talk of Lebanese unity. Aoun scored points with his Hezbollah friends by visiting Syrian President Assad in December, but notably also made a show of touring Syrian Christian shrines. Regardless of his advertised secular values, it is only by asserting his religious credentials that he can reassure his Christian constituency about his dealings with Islamists.

The disparity between rhetoric and reality is not a new phenomenon in Lebanon, it has merely become more elaborate and universal since 2005. The Progressive Socialist Party is a classic case, being the political engine of the Jumblatt family of Druze feudal Skeikhs. Kamal Jumblatt, and his son Walid, used the party's ideologically secular name to cover their famously adaptable politics of sectarian self-interest. Whenever the dust settles, the Progressive Socialist Party is allied with the victor.

It has been widely acknowledged in recent years that Lebanese politics have been – particularly during the Civil War – misleadingly translated into the Western vocabulary of "right" and "left" in order to gain international sympathy and support. Such language helped sterilise the bloody realities of bitter sectarian strife for foreign financiers. It was a short step, for instance, from assigning left-wing ideology to a loose coalition of Muslim militants, to talking in clichés of a poor Muslim under-class rising up against a rich right-wing Christian élite.

The pervasiveness of the (secularist)myth today encourages a continued misdiagnosis of Lebanon's problems. If we are to avoid falling into this trap once again, we must recognise religion as a continuing influence on popular perceptions and therefore élite politics across the board. One such misrepresentation has found receptive ears in America, namely that the entire conflict can be reduced to a confrontation between

radical Islam and a pan-confessional coalition of secular moderates.

The most serious long-term barriers to democracy and stability are actually rooted far deeper than this, firmly entrenched in party patronage networks and social structures. The answer is not to bolster the cosmetic secularism that masks a generation of warlords, but to expose the myth. While talk of a secular system often suits Lebanese leaders, religion is still the bond that mobilises their support, and sectarian insecurity the spanner in the wheel of progress.

<http://www.religiousintelligence.co.uk/news/?NewsID=3718>