

## Lebanon's Christians are going too far

By Michael Young

What on earth has gotten into Lebanon's Christian leaders? Last week a gathering of Maronite politicians, under the auspices of the wannabe politician, Patriarch Beshara Rai, endorsed the proposal of the Greek Orthodox gathering, whereby each sect would vote for its own parliamentarians. The plan, intended to deny Muslim voters the latitude to choose Christian candidates, is bound to isolate Lebanese Christians further, while hardening sectarianism nationally.

The proposal has yet to be clarified and is unlikely to be adopted as law. The idea is this: Lebanon votes as a single district, with each sect electing only its own candidates. Votes are tallied for the different lists, and the proportion of votes each list receives determines its number of parliamentarians. There is a problem, however, for those communities with few or no representatives. Several smaller Christian sects, for instance, compete over a single Beirut seat reserved for minorities. Most of their voters will not participate in an election that allows them but one candidate – effectively meaning disenfranchisement.

Acceptance of the proposal by individuals as different, and as antagonistic, as Samir Geagea, Michel Aoun and Sleiman Franjeh suggests ulterior motives. There is little doubt that each of these men is calculating not that an election law will be approved on the grounds suggested by the Greek Orthodox gathering, but that it is tactically necessary for them to portray themselves as defenders of Christian rights by going along with a law based on sect.

However, this kind of short-term calculation is risky, as it represents an open expression of hostility toward the Muslim communities. Worse, why is Rai playing along, when his role should be to offer a longer-term vision of Maronite welfare? The patriarch has been an ecclesiastical calamity in his first months in office, a man who has invariably preferred playing the populist card

to speaking truth to a community reaching new depths in its self-segregation.

Some have also suggested that Maronite leaders see the Greek Orthodox proposition as leverage to renegotiate Christian privileges in Lebanon. It's true that Sunni and Shiite representatives need to elucidate the kind of Lebanon they desire, and the importance of Christians in it. Many Sunnis feel a new impetus because of the breakdown of Alawite rule in Syria, and the Islamists among them cannot help but welcome the successes of Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia. Saad Hariri may embody a political alternative more tolerable to Christians, but the former prime minister is not in the country. The vacuum he has left is being filled by others, like Sheikh Ahmad Assir in Sidon, who have exacerbated sectarian polarization.

As for Shiites, there is little to reassure Christians there as well. The community is led by a secretive military-religious organization that has always made plain its impatience with Lebanon's social contract. Hezbollah may be working through the institutions of the state, but primarily because this has become an optimal way of controlling the state's commanding heights. Many Christians, and that includes not a few followers of Michel Aoun, are uneasy with this situation, which has only heightened their doubts about communal coexistence

Christians themselves also need to engage in a more enlightened consideration of their future. The Greek Orthodox plan is a formula for communal irrelevance. If sects vote solely for their representatives – or even if, ultimately, Christians vote only for Christians, a potential fallback position in the plan – this would remove Christians from the fabric of Lebanese society. The country is already being shaped by the agendas of its two largest communities, the Sunnis and Shiites; for Christians to move toward a form of political autarchy would mean voluntarily ceding a say in what lies ahead for Lebanon.

Worse, this would signal a return to the illusions of the war years, when Christians imagined that the geographical area in which they form a numerical majority could survive on its own, autonomously from the Lebanese beyond its confines.

An election law based on the Greek Orthodox proposal would also be profoundly undemocratic. It would reinforce the leaderships already in place within the Christian and Muslim communities, despite the proportionality condition. It would also weigh votes unevenly, and unfairly, with voters in some communities electing a very different number of parliamentarians than those in others.

Perhaps most disturbing, the Christian consensus has gelled around utterly ignoring the Taif

Accord. It's almost as if the founding document of the Second Republic did not exist. While Taif has been disregarded time and again, especially with respect to election laws, what we have in the Christian stance is an effort to empty it of its spirit. Taif unambiguously calls for an end to political sectarianism, which means terminating the 50-50 quote of Christians to Muslims in Parliament. The Christian leaders not only failed to acknowledge this reality, they are now actively sharpening sectarian reflexes.

What happens to an election law based on sectarian voting if Sunnis and Shiites agree that they want to implement Taif? What happens if the Muslims point out that demographics no longer justify a 50-50 parliamentary ratio of Christians to Muslims? Will Christians decide that they want to form a breakaway Parliament, or a canton? Instead of having prepared for these eventualities, they would have spent years psychologically cutting themselves off from their Muslim brethren, ensuring that Taif becomes a source of conflict rather than unity.

The odds are that in the next election Lebanon will vote on the basis of a law similar to that of 2009. The most powerful factions – the Aounists, Hezbollah, the Future Movement, and the Jumblattis – all have a vested interest in voting at the level of the qada, or small constituency, without proportionality. The Christian demands may be a maneuver, but maneuvers can have existential implications. The Christians may be close to maneuvering themselves out of political existence, like so many other minorities in the Middle East.

***Michael Young** is opinion editor of THE DAILY STAR and author of “The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon’s Life Struggle” (Simon & Schuster). He tweets @BeirutCalling.*

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