

Lebanon's minorities have Syria in mind

By Michael Young

Lebanon's latest political psychodrama is about whether the deadline for candidacies to the forthcoming parliamentary elections should be extended or suspended. This has produced some strange bedfellows, namely the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb on the Christian side, and Hezbollah and Amal on the Muslim side.

At the heart of the problem is the 1960 election law, which the main Christian parties reject out of hand. If elections are held on the basis of the law, these parties have vowed not to participate. For them, as for Hezbollah and Amal, extending the deadline for candidacies under the 1960 law means legitimizing that law. So they prefer the proposal of the Parliament speaker, Nabih Berri, to suspend candidacies altogether, challenging the 1960 law and possibly precipitating a political vacuum if no agreement on an alternative is reached.

The behavior of the Lebanese Forces is, perhaps, most difficult to explain. The party has backed the Orthodox proposal, but in the face of withering criticism, Lebanese Forces officials sought to explain their position. In fact, they only confused matters more.

The gist of their argument went something like this. Under the 1960 law, the Lebanese Forces are at a disadvantage. The party cannot afford to win the same relatively small number of seats that it did in 2009, as this would lead to permanent marginalization. Most Christians support the Orthodox proposal. So, Samir Geagea had to endorse it, especially as Michel Aoun has done so. But in reality, Geagea is open to a law that would be agreed with March 14 and that satisfies his political objectives. "Geagea is playing chess while the others are playing checkers," a party official explained to me.

Soon thereafter, there were reports that if the Orthodox proposal came up for a vote in

Parliament, the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb would not vote in favor. How true this was is anyone's guess, but it begged the question: If backing the Orthodox proposal was merely a tactical ploy by Geagea, then why would he undermine it by opposing the proposal when his approval mattered the most?

In fact, what we saw was something rather different. When Berri called for a parliamentary session to take up the matter of an election law, he did two things. First, he asked March 14 to come up with an election proposal of its own to place against the Orthodox proposal; and he called for the full suspension of candidacies, rather than a delay in the deadline. To the first request, Berri received no response, as March 14 remains divided over a preferred proposal, and the Future Movement, wanting to avert a greater rift with Geagea, has formulated no election project of its own.

In turn, Berri's suggestion that candidacies be suspended under the 1960 law was welcomed by all the major Christian parties. Perhaps it was another chess move by the Lebanese Forces, but the message was unmistakable: The party would side with Hezbollah and Berri to torpedo the 1960 law, regardless of whether this might lead to a constitutional vacuum, and regardless of whether it helps ensure that March 14 will not win a majority in the next Parliament.

This dilutes the protests of the Lebanese Forces officials who have always insisted that their primary aim is to strengthen March 14. As for the Future Movement, whose interests are harmed by Christian approval of the Orthodox proposal, it has advanced a compromise: Candidacies would be suspended until May 19, allowing time for talks to reach agreement over a consensual election law. This was approved on Wednesday.

But for one senior politician, the tacit alliance between the Lebanese Forces, the Kataeb, Berri and Hezbollah may suggest something more than electoral maneuvering. Instead of thinking about March 14, Geagea and his deputy George Adwan are actually concerned about the aftermath of the conflict in Syria.

Because Christians fear Sunni affirmation following the fall of Bashar Assad's regime, quite possibly in an Islamist guise, Geagea, the Kataeb, and the Aounists are laying the basis of an alliance of minorities with the Shiite community. Their accord over the Orthodox proposal proves this, as does the Lebanese Forces' and the Kataeb's refusal to be mere accessories of the Future Movement, which the 1960 law guarantees.

Is this true? The long absence of Saad Hariri has created a void in the Sunni community, the consequences of which, Christians worry, will be greater Sunni radicalization. In response, the Christian parties had an opportunistic interest in making it appear to their co-religionists that they would defend them against a Sunni resurgence. But they also saw an advantage in preparing for the endgame in Syria, and the Orthodox proposal, whereby each minority can shape its own destiny free from other communities, allegedly was the way to do so.

Certainly, Geagea has lost the esteem he enjoyed among many Sunnis, preferring to rally Christian support through actions addressing communal anxieties. In tactical terms this has increased his electoral leverage over Hariri. However, the leverage means nothing if there are no elections because the Christian strategy has led to a void; and it means nothing if the Lebanese Forces decide, henceforth, to position themselves as the defenders of Christians against a Sunni renewal.

An alliance of minorities may be attractive to many Christians, but what it means is that the community could find itself once again standing against the overwhelming majority in the Arab world. This is what happened during the war years, and the result was a collapse in Christian fortunes and numbers. To adopt such a position when Sunnis may be about to triumph in Syria is not only stupid, it is suicidal. Geagea grasped this reality not so long ago, which makes his contortions on the election law all the more incomprehensible.

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