Analysing the Politics of Lebanese Society and the Importance of Dialogue

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"For you can only be free when even the desire of freedom becomes a harness to you, and when you cease to speak of freedom as a goal and a fulfilment." (Gibran 1923).

The following essay was prompted by recurrent querying into our motives as a group and the underlined path we wish to undertake in achieving our nationalistic aims.

On this occasion, we would first like to define ourselves as ordinary Lebanese individuals who feel strong longing towards their country, and feel, due to lack of public patriotism, a longing to contribute a change in the general attitude of the country as a whole.

So if we begin by outlining nationalism, the basic character of such ideology is three-fold: 1) to express un-paralleled love and devotion to one's country, 2) to focus on substantial internal affairs as opposed to international politics, and 3) to fight for national independence from any sort of foreign intervention.

A fourth indiscriminate characteristic is that of altruistic behaviour, which is of accentuating social drive, a generally weaker phenomenon than egotistical drive. In other words, the fourth character addresses the "society comes first to individual" conundrum. However in Lebanon, a more reasonable question is whether society would even come first to local community. For if society were to come first, would a sub-sectarian charity give to needy individuals of other religious breeding? This of course would only take place amongst a small minority due to lack of public faith in mutual national interest; whereas local community is a much more certain target to give members a great deal in return.

The second issue we would like to raise is of liberal attitude towards established dogmas that are generally governed by fear. If we run a simple test by mixing leader names together, it is guaranteed to give the majority of Lebanese people a mixed feeling. For instance the list could go: Bachir Gemayyil, Kamal Jumblatt, Samir Geagea, George Hawi, Camille Chamoun, Abdel Nasser, Ettienne Sakir, Elias Atallah. This sounds problematic, as preconceived ideas are determined more as much by inheritance rather than rational acquisition of knowledge and logical reasoning. For that reason we distinctly favour a reform approach that is based on open-mindedness and tolerance to others' opinions. For that same reason we also favour national collectivism as opposed to sub-national collectivism, inclusiveness as opposed to exclusiveness, change as opposed to tradition, and finally pacifism as opposed to armed deterrence. Hence we choose to take a progressive modernist approach to save Lebanon from its current tribulation, and a reformist approach to break through thoroughly engraved sub-sectarian fear barriers.

The third issue is that of dialogue and national reconciliation. A large part of the problem is we are failing to take responsibility, as people would rather blame the government for all their mischief. The tangible problem though in Lebanon is that of *de facto* segregation in society and lack of unitedness in the approach to manage society as a whole. Who is responsible for this segregation? Is it the current

claim, that the government is feeding the conflict, exclusively contributing to this segregation? Or is it a general trait that was fixedly founded within early establishment of Lebanese society? The cedar tree after all was not brought about as a symbol of current Lebanon but was adopted by Maronite Christians in the 18th century based on Psalms 92:12, *"the righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon"*; when of course the nature of Lebanon then was different to the nature of Lebanon now. The white and red colours do not symbolise the colours of snow and blood of martyrs, but were initially "associated, respectively, with the Kayssites and Yemenites, opposing clans that divided Lebanese society between 634 and 1711" (Smith 1992).

Hence, the current problem arises when people associate their belonging to what had been the nature of Lebanon in the past. As a result, it drives a direct segregation in public opinion. For instance, one could easily compare a region in Mount Lebanon, being more exempt of direct Ottoman practices, to a Southern region more influenced by Arab nationalism. The conclusion is to establish a new formula that would address a nation of genuine reconciliation. This would equally address the concerns of all Lebanese citizens despite religious and sectarian belonging. Therefore, the standard term "unity" does not stand for pretentious arguments of unity, but a genuine unity in decision-making and foreign policy. These would be decided based on the best interest of Lebanon as a whole.

The next phase and the fourth issue to address is how to go about achieving our aims in shaping Lebanese society more-or-less for the first time. Let us suppose political belonging is inherited at large from the surrounding community, a very likely assumption to be true. A real-life example would be a simple question: what do you think of Kamal Jumblatt, or what do you think of Camille Chamoun? Let us imagine there were two mainstream lines of thought in Lebanon, one who looks up to that individual as a past leader, while the other is not really fond of him. However within each line of thought, there is wide room for variation. An individual belonging to the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP) might not fancy Abdel Nasser because Arab nationalism defies the ideology of the Fertile Crescent. An individual of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) would similarly not fancy Samir Geagea, and a Lebanese Forces (LF) individual would likewise not fancy Michel Aoun. Therefore ideological labelling is a complex issue that is very difficult to decipher due to a large number of contradictions and anomalies. The important point, however, is we still observe common trends that are useful in breaking down ideological belonging to easier steps of understanding. This will be illustrated in the following example:

Imagine a character like height in a population, which is normally distributed. This is because a character like height would span the entire spectrum of height measurements given enough people in the population:
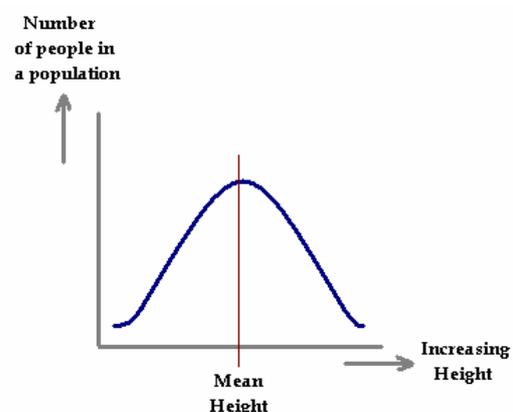
As shown in the above Figure, there would be enough people to span all values for height measurement in the population. The height trait is therefore said to be continuous. If we try to quantify a political trait however, it is complicated by confounding variables such as wealth, social status, religion, ethnicity, personal experience and most importantly the dynamism of political attitude of individuals. Let us consider the freedom of Samir Geagea as a political trait. Whether Samir Geagea has been subjected to a fair trial or not, the distribution of those with predetermined thoughts would still determine the outcome:
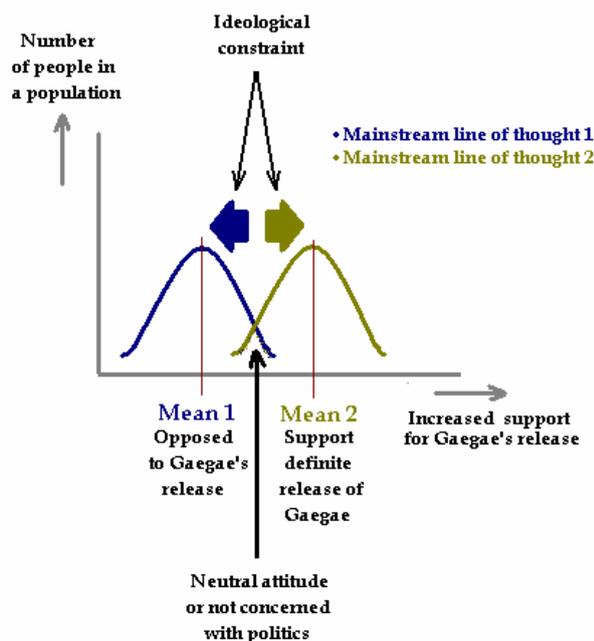
The average population of the former mainstream group would oppose Gaegae's release, while the latter group would support it. Ideological constraint is of course contributing to this phenomenon as opposed to logical reasoning. In contrast, if Gaegae was living in a liberal society, population spread would be normal and the mean

value would be based on logical evidence:
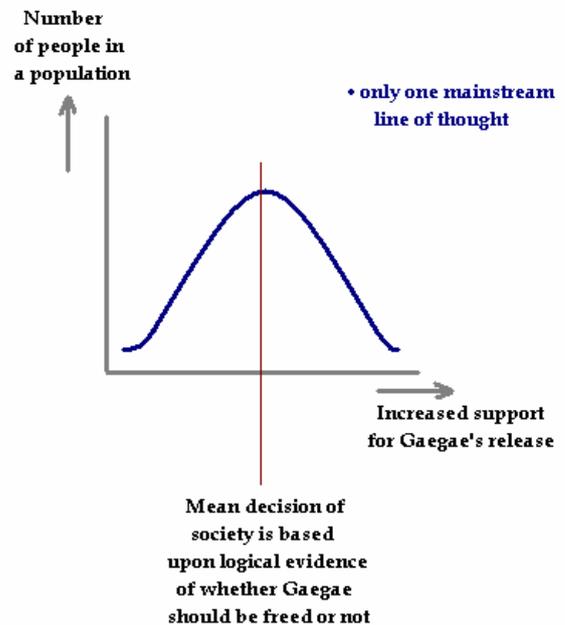
The final point to be raised is that of requirement for political activism especially at universities in Lebanon. When our hopeless behaviour will see light, our forgotten country will begin to thrive and we will live to the day of unity and reconciliation.

References:

Gibran, K.G. (1923). The Prophet.
Smith, W. (1992). Flags and Arms of the World.

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