

Rebuilding Lebanon: Challenging the Consociational System

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The idea of an ideal nation has entertained citizens for centuries, and the fact that such a notion is far-fetched does not seem to hinder people from clinging to it like moths to flame. Personally, I cannot get enough of Utopian-based books and movies though they all seem to meet the same fate where the utopian nation falls into the destruction brought upon it by the faulty nature of human beings. I've come to realize that such speculations on building a perfect state don't just serve the entertainment of one's imagination, for they have political implications as well when studied further. Unfortunately, the Lebanon I grew up in is a state haunted by its political and economic instability. However, I've come to notice that people born into what is known as Lebanon's Golden Age speak of an era of prominent prosperity featured during the time of President Fouad Chehab's tenure. Alas, the aspiring utopia that Chehab was envisioning did not last long, but looking into his nation-building scheme and analyzing its effectiveness would help us uncover the best nation-building strategies that should be adopted in Lebanon to reap the best results. When it comes to restoring a politically fragile state such as Lebanon, some individuals, including Chehab, believe that rebuilding the nation through introducing idealistic visions and tactics, is the best strategy to adopt. Others claim that embracing those notions can do more harm than good since such ideal visions clash with the precarious foundational system that Lebanon has rooted in place; a system that relies heavily on power-sharing between different religious entities. Thus, the following dilemma persists: Were Chehab's ideal nation-building visions for Lebanon effective blueprints to be relied on, or were they a threat to the grounds upon which Lebanon's foundational system is built?

To tackle this dilemma, I first needed to start with reading a source that will provide a clearer understanding of Fouad Chehab himself and the idealistic visions he harbored. The Fouad

Chehab Foundation is an authorized institution founded to honor President Chehab, and its aim is to reinforce the principles that the President pursued and valued. “Chehab’s way of bringing change was evolutionary, not revolutionary” (“The Mandate’s Development and Reform Achievements”, n.d., par.1). Most will overlook the power that Fouad Chehab gained just by adopting this simple principle. The former President realized that trying to build an ideal nation from scratch is quite different than remolding an already existing fragile nation, so he started working on various economic and social projects that helped in bringing prosperity to the state and in gaining people’s trust throughout the process. Challenges showed up in 1964 when he refused to prolong his ruling era after it had ended. The Foundation’s website notes that running for a second mandate would have allowed him to continue pursuing the projects he had started and the visions he had planned for rebuilding Lebanon as a nation. Still, Chehab refused preferring to stand by his principles and the Constitution. His refusal to prolong his mandate depicted him as a genuine leader who viewed presidency as an honorable duty without caring for personal gain and power. However, one cannot help but wonder if it was truly the right thing to do, especially considering the fact that Lebanon was going through a critical point of development during Chehab’s mandate. Letting go of the state’s reins at such a delicate turn point in Lebanon’s progress, had evidently led to the nation’s gradual regression and ultimate fall both politically and economically. The website suggests that the issue with Chehab’s prosperous streak of evolution coming to an end so soon is not due to Chehab’s inefficiency, but it is rather due to the incompetence the Lebanese people and government showed when it came to supporting and receiving Chehab’s productive visions for a better state. In fact, Fouad refused the renewal of his mandate *again* in 1970, his reason being the following: “The analysis that I made have confirmed my conviction that the country is not yet ready to accept these fundamental

solutions” (“Fouad Chehab’s Proclamation”, 1970, as cited in “Challenges of Chehabism”, n.d., par.3). I must say that at first glance, this simple act of stating the obvious appears surprising in its sincerity and validity. Why would a country refuse to accept the solutions that President Chehab offered it when it comes to nation building? What reason could it have for refusing to receive the very medicine for its ailment? Unfortunately, the article did not focus on entertaining those questions, choosing instead to highlight the country’s seemingly unjustified incompetence, and failing to consider the possibility that Chehab’s idealistic strategies and visions may have been in themselves inefficient. It did not consider that maybe Chehab was offering Lebanon the wrong medicine. Chehab’s condition for ruling was that “all citizens participate with conviction in the national reform task” (“Challenges of Chehabism”, n.d, par. 5). Although this condition represents the ideal way of ruling, I am not convinced that it was the motive that Lebanon needed at the time. Fouad Chehab seems to claim that “his, was a way of governing that aimed to serve best the Lebanese entity by constantly taking into consideration its various components’ needs and particularities” (“What is Chehabism”, n.d., par.1) and yet when he deemed Lebanon unsuitable for his idealistic nation building plans he resigned, without trying to adapt his plans to suit Lebanon’s system. The issue remains unclear: Was Chehab asking for too much by imposing his idealistic plans and limitations, or are my people truly to blame for their incompetence?

To explore this question, I must tackle the issue from the country’s perspective so that I can acknowledge the reason why it was difficult for Lebanon to welcome Chehab’s western-based idealized nation building projects into its realm. As I was searching for a scholarly source that tackles this specific point, I came across a published thesis written by Catherine Faerlie Wilson and titled “The Independent State and the State of Independence: Chehabism’s Challenge

to Lebanese Democratic Stability”. It is a thesis published by King’s College London that aims to critique Fouad Chehab’s political approach to nation-building in Lebanon and that argues that challenging Lebanon’s foundational system is not favorable. It is important to note that the type of democracy that is embraced in Lebanon is not the same as the typical democracy which is usually associated with a country being ruled by its people. Lebanon is a state governed by *consociational* democracy. “Consociational democracy is effectively a democracy of groups rather than individual citizens.” (Wilson, 2017, p.45) According to Wilson, such a democracy is adopted in Lebanon due to it being the most suitable when it comes to dealing with the deep religious division existing in the state. The author acknowledges that it might not be an ideal system to adopt, but in Lebanon, it plays a vital key in ensuring that power-sharing is distributed effectively between the different religious segments. It is worth noting that Wilson is representing consociational democracy as the only choice of ruling deeply divided countries deeming it the most effective without considering other viable choices that exist which might lure readers into agreeing with her. Wilson then moves on to describe President Chehab’s attempts at introducing national unity and homogeneity into Lebanon; a political project that was later referred to as Chehabism. “Lebanon is for everyone and everyone for Lebanon” remarks Chehab during an Independence Day speech (Fouad Chehab, 1958, as cited by Wilson, 2017), and Wilson concludes that it is just another way of him stating that “a new Lebanese identity must replace religion as the Lebanese people’s primary allegiance” (Wilson, 2017, p.82). Wilson might be reading more into Chehab’s words more than what was meant, but she does raise an important concern when it comes to uncovering the underlying aim of Chehabism and its effectiveness. In fact, thorough reflection made me aware of the reason why people were hesitant when it came to supporting Chehabism and Chehab’s national reform project. Lebanese citizens

consider religion to be a core aspect of their identity, and Chehabism's attempt at challenging religions' role in politics threatened that core; it was a change people were not ready for.

“Chehabists attempted to quietly reform their way out of consociationalism through social justice, modernization, and national unity, but in so doing they compromised the system's ability to function” (Wilson, 2017, p. 252). Here, Wilson had pinpointed the main problem with Chehabism which has to do with the fact that it clashes with the Lebanese consociational system. She claims that introducing Chehabism into Lebanon would only ever work by first uprooting the consociational democracy that the state is built on. Is it possible and desirable to uproot Lebanon's consociational system to make way for other nation building projects such as the idealistic one that Chehab planned to pursue?

Entertaining the desirability of uprooting an entire political system sounds entirely familiar to me, and that is probably due to the fact that such an idea constitutes the main plot of many of my beloved utopian and dystopian books. One of the things I love about reading fiction is that protagonists dare to challenge the corrupted world they live in even if it means rebuilding from scratch. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about reality because people are used to viewing the system governing the state they are born into as one set in stone. The Lebanese consociational power-sharing system has been the same for more than eight decades, and I think it would be interesting to explore whether dismantling such a system would provide the chance needed to start a new successful nation building project. “Trapped by Consociationalism: The Case of Lebanon” written by Samir Makdisi and Marcus Marktanner and published by the American University of Beirut discusses the problems with consociationalism in Lebanon. The article acknowledges that maintaining the sectarian balance associated with the consociational

democracy in Lebanon has its merits when it comes to ensuring that no singular religious entity forces its ideology on society. This is true in essence, but in actuality, the brutal civil wars that Lebanon endured tells a completely different story highlighting this sectarian system's inefficiency. The authors shed light on how such a system highly fragile prevents it from accepting national reform attempts such as the one Fouad Chehab was aspiring to lead. The main overlooked factor that prevented Chehab from carrying on with his national project was the intense "opposition by entrenched politico-sectarian special interests that feared redistributive reforms" (Makdisi & Marktanner, 2009, p.3). Makdisi and Marktanner did not expand on that statement. It is easy to blame the corrupted politico-sectarian government for strong opposition against change, but it is improbable that the political elites would have been able to oppose national reform if it weren't for the people supporting them, knowingly or unknowingly. The self-interested elite, each leading their respective religious entity have always gotten their power from their people; the same people who complain today about being robbed of their money and rights. The consociational system is deemed ineffective and corrupted so what's next? "The initiation of a transitional phase of reforms that would eventually lead to a fully-fledged secular democracy is necessary" (Makdisi and Marktanner, 2009, p.14). This is the solution the authors are suggesting for gradually reforming Lebanon, and it does require further examination. A "fully-fledged secular democracy" means a state governed by a *real* democracy devoid of any religious interference. This is the ideal solution and Chehab would agree; in fact, this is in itself the national reform project that Chehab was working on. He attempted to reform Lebanon to gradually transition into a secular democracy, but that did not work very well seeing as the country did not support this transition. This article helped me confirm that the Lebanese consociational system is the major factor contributing to corruption and preventing effective

change from taking place. If the consociational democracy is to be properly challenged, there must be something better to replace it with; an alternative that suits the needs of both the people and the country.

Thus, the following question arises: Is there an alternative to Lebanon's consociational democracy that would yield better results and would suit Lebanon's core system? Up till now, I have learned that challenging Lebanon's foundational system does not necessarily threaten Lebanon's existence. In fact, when done in the right manner, challenging the consociational system is rather favorable. Fouad Chehab's western-based visions for nation building clashed with Lebanon's foundational system only because he did not adapt his project to suit people's need for religious representation. It is necessary that I uncover the correct manner for challenging the consociational system, and the following source proved to be valuable in providing the answer. In the article "Failing Consociationalism in Lebanon and Integrative Options" which was published by the International Journal of Peace Studies, Imad Salamey analyzes Lebanon's current consociational system's inefficiencies and provides possible alternatives and solutions. The major issue with Lebanon's current consociational system which Salamey highlights is due to the demographic imbalance between the different religious sectors in Lebanon (Salamey, 2009, p.87). For instance, the fact that Muslim's growing population rivals that of Christians, results in a serious sector imbalance which thus leads to major political conflict due to disproportionate power-sharing. Integrative consociation is the one solution that Salamey devoted his attention to, and it is a strategy that encourages "power sharing arrangements through combining democratic proportional rule with that of sectarian consociationalism" (Salamey, 2009, p.95). That does seem like a plausible solution to our

dilemma because it preserves Lebanon's foundational system which embraces diversity through its different religious entities. At the same time, it allows for a national unified presence which is one of the principles Chehab believed in most when it comes to nation building. In theory, adopting this integrative option means that people's main focus would no longer be fighting to obtain the biggest share of political power for their respective religious sectors. Instead, since every sector gets a fair share of power, people's focus would gradually shift towards maintaining stability in Lebanon, and reforming it into a place where all the sectors can coexist in peace. However, in a country like Lebanon peace requires justice and the eradication of corruption. The eradication of corruption requires power to return to its people and not to self-interested elites. Power would only return to people if the said people were worthy of yielding the power...

Real or not real, democracy is still the official system that governs Lebanon which means that the political power does ultimately belong to the people. Chehab realized that the people were not ready yet for the necessary change, which is why he did not attempt to pursue his anti-sectarianism nation building project further. Is the same to be said about Lebanese people today? "The Lebanese Rise Up Against a Failed System" is an article written by Marwan M. Kraidy, and published in 2019, and it aims to showcase the generational shift that is occurring which can be most prominently seen through the October 17 Lebanese revolution. "The octopus of political sectarianism that chokes Lebanon has a weaker hold on members of this generation." (Kraidy, 2019, p. 363). The most remarkable about this revolution which was mostly led by youths is that it did not target a specific political party, instead it targeted the entire corrupt and manipulative consociational system with the bold phrase "All of them means all of them". Kraidy emphasized the importance of such a revolution regardless of the outcomes, remarking that the feat it carried

out is most crucial: “Lebanese leaders are now more afraid of the people than the people are afraid of them. This allows a new generation to feel a better future within its grasp” (Kraidy, 2019, p.363) Unfortunately, Kraidy’s assumptions did not turn out to be fully true. Indeed, the revolution was most crucial since it represented the countries’ readiness towards uprooting the sectarian corrupted system, and slowly taking root among its people. However, the revolution having had no leader to effectively give it purpose was based on pure simmering anger which gradually died out less than a year later without the grand resounding effect that Kraidy described. Lebanon had leader Fouad Chehab back in 1958 but the people were not ready to take action when it came to nation building. In 2019 when the people were blossoming into readiness, there was no leader. The situation is quite ironic and can be summarized with the phrase “right person wrong time”.

In conclusion, I find myself contemplating whether there is a true possibility for the analysis that I made to be used in a way that actually yields tangible impact when it comes to nation building in Lebanon. In the worlds folded between paper and ink, whenever protagonists challenge their corrupted nation, they always act and not just plan, and I cannot help but be inspired by their ability to take action. As I researched, I found a limitless supply of plans, analyses, and strategies to apply to build a nation, yet not one of them suggested taking action. Although it did not reap ideal results, The 17 October revolution is proof that when action takes hold of people’s hearts religious divisions do not matter. President Fouad Chehab’s nation-building project was on the right track when it came to challenging the corrupt consociational system. However, Lebanon does not need to be westernized in order to be reformed. His schemes would have been much more effective if they were adapted to people’s needs at the time in a way

that acknowledged religion to be at the core of Lebanon's foundation. Fouad Chehab had the right mindset as a leader, which paired with taking action is the right formula for change to take place. Fast-forwarding to 2025, President Joseph Aoun has taken hold of the state's reins and it seems to be going well! People are comparing him to Fouad Chehab, seeing as Lebanon is passing through a crisis quite similar to that in 1958. Exploring this fact further would ultimately tie the past that I discussed to the present and might yield an even clearer understanding of how to apply what is learned in a way that yields action.

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