

The Short-lived Promise of Chehabism

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ENGL 203: Academic English

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Friday, April 25, 2025

Growing up, politics seemed like a distant and complicated subject that didn't affect my day to day life. But as I've gotten older, especially after witnessing November 17th revolution in Lebanon, I've started to realize how much the past still affects our present. The more I learned about past leaders, the more I began to understand how every decision made years ago is still affecting us today.

In 1975, Lebanon fell into a 15 year civil war that tore the country apart, the political system was already weak, especially with the deep sectarian divisions that made it even harder to hold things together. Eventually, both the government and the people broke down, and as a result, armed groups and militias took over Lebanon. Fast forward to today, Lebanon is still struggling with the same problems that started the civil war, the protests held in October 2019 brought people back into the streets, asking for an end to corruption, sectarianism, and the political system that benefits only a few. Even though people were desperate for a change, Lebanon is still divided and unable to move forward.

To understand how Lebanon ended up in this situation, we need to look at a key moment in the past like the presidency of Fouad Chehab, who tried to fix the country during a similar period of crisis. During his time in office, Chehab tried to fix Lebanon's instability by controlling the government, modernizing the military, and pushing for changes to make the country more stable. He came into power after the 1958 crisis, when the country was on the edge, many believed he's the one to fix it, his calm and balanced actions back then made people see him as a fair and capable leader, and once in office, he quickly started reforms that focused on rural development, public institutions, and making government services fairer.

For many, his presidency offered hope, a chance to fix a country standing on the edge. Some people still see him as one of Lebanon's only truly honest leaders, someone who tried to build and create a government that served its people. They believe his efforts helped create a basis for a stronger and more effective government, while others think his approach was too cautious and controlling. They think that by not fixing problems like sectarian power or including more people in the government, he just delayed the issues that masked greater problems. Over time, the same political figures he tried to avoid began to regain their power, and his reforms faced stronger opposition, for them, Chehab's efforts failed to fix the root causes of Lebanon's instability. In the unstable history of Lebanon, his name stands out for trying to stabilize the country, but did his reforms and decisions truly stabilize Lebanon, or were they just a short-term mask hiding deeper issues that eventually lead to the Lebanese Civil War?

One of the most important things Chehab did as president was work to improve the government system. He knew that Lebanon's public administration was weak and full of corruption, and he wanted to change that. In *Lebanon under Fuad Chehab 1958-1964*, Salibi notes that a Civil Service Council was established under the Office of the Prime Minister to manage the recruitment and training of public employees. Additionally, a new Central Inspection Board was created to monitor the proper functioning of the administration (Salibi, 1966, p. 222). These two new offices helped reduce political favoritism and made it harder for random people to get government jobs just because they had connections. Chehab believed that public officials should be chosen based on skill, not loyalty to politicians. In the same book, Salibi explains that the new civil service laws

aimed to make appointments more merit based while keeping the sectarian balance intact. These laws established minimum educational qualifications for eligibility to work in public service. As a result, this approach helped bring in trained experienced workers and slowed down the cycle of corruption that had been going on for years. Salibi (1966) states, "The new civil service laws made all appointments depend on competitive examinations, provided the sectarian balance was kept, and fixed minimum educational qualifications for eligibility for public service" (p. 222). Salibi's analysis helped me better understand how serious Chehab was about fixing Lebanon. He tried to make things fairer and more organized, even though the political system around him made it very difficult. For me, these changes weren't just small fixes, they were one of the few real efforts to move the country forward. Reading Salibi's article helped me see why Chehab's ideas were important, but also why they couldn't last after he stepped down.

I wanted a more updated and critical view, so I turned to Traboulsi's article "Shihabism and the Difficult Autonomy of the State". His writings gave me a clearer picture of the challenges Chehab faced and why his reforms couldn't survive in Lebanon's system, he expanded the government workforce by thousands, which was part of his broader plan, to fix Lebanon's public administration, which had long been corrupt. By hiring a larger number of employees through a more organized and merit-based system, he aimed to reduce political influence in government jobs and improve the overall functionality of the state. "The state administration doubled in size through the employment of some 10,000 new functionaries, vetted by a Civil Service Council and a Central Inspection Council, which limited the role of MPs in job patronage, reduced administrative corruption and favoured recruitment on the basis of merit and specialisation" (Traboulsi, 2012, p. 141). While this didn't completely fix the system, it did make a real difference in the country. Chehab didn't try to remove sectarianism from

politics completely, but he worked to make it more fair. “Chihab contented himself with those measures without questioning political sectarianism as such. His constitutionalist approach was limited to establishing sectarian equilibrium rather than abolishing sectarianism” (Traboulsi, 2012, p. 141). He knew it wasn’t possible to erase the deep divisions in the country, but he tried to balance them and make the system fair and accessible for everyone, his decisions caused tension, making it seem like his leadership was doing more harm than good. At first, it seemed like his efforts weren’t really helping, but as I looked more closely at how he restructured the government, I realized his plans weren’t about immediate change. He was thinking long-term, trying to build a state that could last, he didn’t fight the system by changing it, but tried to fix it from the inside. That made me see that real change doesn’t always come through loud revolutions, sometimes it’s slow, careful, and behind the scenes and maybe that’s why people often ignored it.

However, while Chehab’s intentions and reforms were real, they faced the harsh realities of Lebanon’s divided society. Fouad Chehab rose to power during one of Lebanon’s most critical moments. In 1958, the country was deeply divided between pro-Western factions, led by President Camille Chamoun and supported mainly by the Christian elites, and Arab nationalist forces, inspired by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, which had strong support from Lebanon’s Muslims. Chehab wasn’t just looking for quick political wins. As commander of the Lebanese Army, he took a neutral stance and refused to use force against the protesters. To better understand how Chehab rose to power, I read *Chehabism Revisited: The Consequences of Reform in Lebanon*, a scholarly article written by Tarek Abou Jaoude. I chose this source because it gives detailed political analysis based on historical records and academic research. It showed how Chehab stayed neutral during the civil conflict, which earned him respect and made him a unique leader,

“Chehab had demonstrated his ability to control the army having just come off a civil conflict where he made the explicit and resolute decision of keeping the armed forces uninvolved. This policy was seen by both sides as having contained the conflict and stopped an all-out civil war (even at the expense of his relationship with the president).” (Abou Jaoude, 2021, p. 811). This article gave me a strong understanding of how Chehab responded to all events, it clearly explained how he managed to gain trust without taking sides, which directly helped answer any questions about his leadership style. Chehab’s ability to remain neutral during crisis taught me that true leadership often comes from patience, not action. His calm approach in such country showed me that being fair can be more powerful than taking sides.

After his early efforts to bring stability, one of the first signs of trouble came from Chehab’s attempt to strengthen ties with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In 1959, Chehab met with Nasser at the Syrian Lebanese border, hoping to ease tensions and protect Lebanon’s independence by gaining a public promise from Nasser to stay out of Lebanese affairs. While many Muslims saw this as a positive step, it worried Christians and political groups like the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, who feared it was bringing Lebanon closer to pan-Arabism. As *Chehabism Revisited* notes, despite its generally favorable portrayal of Chehab and focuses on his intentions to reform and unite the country, it has also been argued that the agreement included, an acknowledgement by Chehab of Nasser’s supremacy in the region (Abou Jaoude, 2021, p. 811). By trying to balance Lebanon’s divisions through foreign policy, Chehab unintentionally deepened sectarian fears in people. The SSNP, already angry about being left out of government roles, took Chehab’s meeting with Nasser as a proof that he was putting Lebanon’s independence at risk. Things got worse in 1961 when members of the SSNP tried and failed to carry out a revolution,

which revealed serious problems inside the army, the same army Chehab had trusted and used as a symbol of unity in the country (Abou Jaoude, 2021, p. 823). Reading about this part of his presidency made me realize how hard it was for Chehab to work in such a divided country, he was genuinely trying to calm tensions and protect Lebanon, but even his most careful moves could backfire. His meeting with Nasser seemed like a smart way to keep Lebanon neutral, but it ended up creating even more fear and problems. At this point, I started to feel like Chehabism, was trying going somewhere despite all the new cases and problems it opened. There was a vision behind it, something bigger than just reacting to crises. This pushed me to dig deeper into who was backing him, what kind of political relationships he was searching for, and how he reacted towards them.

When Chehab became president, he inherited a country with many problems and divisions, each with its own goals. Jumblatt, who had once supported Chehab, started to become frustrated with his leadership. To understand the growing tension between him and Kamal Jumblatt, I turned to *Kamal Jumblatt, the Uncrowned Druze Prince of the Left*, an article that focuses on Jumblatt's political journey and personal ambitions during this critical period in Lebanese history. It helped highlight how his change of opinion towards Chehab was caused by both ideological and strategic differences, "Jumblatt's armed revolt in 1958 was not only directed against Chamoun's domestic and foreign policies; rather, it was an angry Druze reaction to Chamoun's open defiance of the 'seigneur de Mukhtara'" (al-Khazen, 1988, p. 181). While Chehab tried to stay neutral in politics, his position on Arab nationalism didn't sit well with Jumblatt, who strongly supported pan-Arabism. As mentioned in the article, "Chehab's working relationship with Nasser deprived Jumblatt as well as other Muslim leaders of pan-Arab political platforms usually used for internal political purposes" (al-Khazen, 1988, p. 181). This frustration was only worse after

Chehab's reforms, which, while aiming for stability, also reduced Jumblatt's ability and power to help his own community.

As a Druze, I can't help but think about how these divisions in Lebanon relate to my own identity. Growing up with my Druze background, I've always seen how political choices are affected by sectarianism. Jumblatt's response to Chehab's actions shows the challenge of small communities trying to keep their power in such a country. Chehab, even though he meant fixing, didn't seem to understand how deep his reforms went, focusing more on stabilizing Lebanon as a whole, which makes me wonder: Can Lebanon ever truly be stable if it ignores the needs of its diverse groups? This question helps me reflect on my place in Lebanon's politics and how each generation fights for power that later reflect on the country's future.

Also, Jumblatt who had initially supported Chehab, began to feel ignored (al-Khazen, 1988). As the text says, "Chehab's working relationship with Nasser deprived Jumblatt as well as other Muslim leaders of pan-Arab political platforms usually used for internal political purposes" (p. 181). As Chehab worked to keep Lebanon out of pan-Arab issues, Jumblatt felt his influence dying. The truce he declared with Chehab showed a growing divide, as Jumblatt began to criticize Chehab's policies, which became even clearer after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war (al-Khazen, 1988, p. 181). This was when Jumblatt shifted his focus to regional issues, especially the Palestinians, moving away from Chehab's more neutral stance.

In short, while Chehab focused on making changes within Lebanon to improve stability, he unintentionally pushed away important political figures like Jumblatt, who cared more about Arab unity. This tension was one of Chehab's main mistakes. He couldn't balance the push for Arab unity while keeping Lebanon's independence and internal peace

(al-Khazen, 1988, p. 181). This shows how hard it is to balance diverse groups and maintain peace while respecting their different interests.

To learn what happened to Chehabism after Chehab left the office, I looked at the Fouad Chehab Foundation, which shares official information about his career and ideas. It helped me see how his vision continued for a short time through people like Elias Sarkis and René Moawad, but without Chehab's leadership, the movement slowly faded. Chehabism wasn't a political party, it was more of a style of leadership that people asked for during national crises, but without Chehab, the movement failed to maintain power. On August 4, 1970, President Fouad Chehab issued a statement explaining his decision not to seek re-election, despite strong support from the parliamentary majority (Fouad Chehab Foundation, 2009). He expressed that Lebanon was not yet ready for the changes he looked for and that he would never force reforms through non-democratic means. "He explained that his experience in office convinced him that the people of his country were not ready to put aside feudal traditional politics and support him in building a modern state. He chose instead to endorse the candidacy of his protégé, Elias Sarkis" (Fouad Chehab Foundation, 2009). But Lebanon's political and social crisis left him so weak in applying solutions. His term was focused on managing the crisis, trying to minimize the damages, and protect the little that could be preserved of the State's presence (Traboulsi, 2012, p. 145). Sarkis was not able to lead Lebanon toward stability in the way Chehab had which led to his loss "Sarkis lost to the feudal leader Suleiman Frangiyeh by a single vote. This marked the end of the Chehabist era and reforms" (Fouad Chehab Foundation, 2009). Similarly, in 1989, after the Taef Agreement, the search for a leader capable of uniting Lebanon led to the election of René Moawad, who was described as a "devoted and committed Chehabist

politician" (Fouad Chehab Foundation, 2009). Tragically, Moawad was assassinated before he could take office or start his reforms for the country.

In the late 1990s, Lebanon's political scene was once again depending on military figures to bring back some sense of order, just like it did during Chehab's time. Generals Emile Lahoud and Michel Suleiman were both appointed president during critical times in the country's history, showing how military leaders were often viewed as neutral and unique figures. But even with that image, both failed to reform a better fair country. Lebanon's sectarian divisions, political tensions, and outside influence made it nearly impossible for them to repeat the kind of reforms Chehab once pushed for. The cycle of turning to military figures for leadership in Lebanon showed me a lot about the challenges our country faces in finding stability. Even today, in 2025, Lebanon has once again looked to a military figure like General Joseph Aoun. It's clear that the country's struggles with division and instability are not new, but they've been repeating for decades. Leaders come with hopes of bringing change, but the same obstacles keep standing in the way.

Chehabism didn't really survive after his presidency, mainly because it was so tied to him personally. Once he stepped away, no one was able, or maybe even willing, to take it further. It was more about Chehab himself than a lasting vision people could carry on. Without a proper structure, it faded.

Fouad Chehab's presidency is often remembered as a time where Lebanese people had faith and hope. His efforts to remove corruption, balance divisions and fix the government seemed to promise a better future for the country, but the deeper issues Lebanon faced, were never fully addressed. While Chehab managed to do some great fixes and reforms during his time in office, they didn't last long after he left.

His leadership was marked by good intentions, but the reality was that Lebanon's political system was too deeply fallen in divisions and corruptions. Even though Chehab's reforms brought some improvements, they were not enough to overcome the problems. His vision of a unified Lebanon was not fully noticed, and after he left the office, the country fell back into the same patterns of corruption.

The failure of Chehabism to survive after his presidency really showed me how much Lebanon's politics depend on individuals rather than real ideologies and plans. It made me realize how hard it is to build something real in a country where divisions are so deeply rooted. Chehab had great ideas, but without a strong structure, they couldn't survive beyond his time. His leadership left a mark on Lebanon's history, but it was still not enough to move the country beyond its problems.

In the end, while Chehab's presidency brought hope to the Lebanese, his plans couldn't outlive the country's problems. The divisions and political struggles stayed, and without the right leadership after he left, Lebanon returned to the old patterns. Chehabism wasn't achieved, leaving the country in a crucial state. His efforts showed Lebanon's broken political system. This leads to the question, Was it too hard for any leader, even one as determined as Chehab, to overcome Lebanon's sectarianism? Could some stronger approach to fix have created better lasting change? Or was Lebanon always going to struggle with the divisions and conflicts, where every attempt of fix is undone by the ideologies that have shaped its past?

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