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Sect is not what divides Lebanese most

By Sami Atallah

Voting every four years for an electoral law only a few months before the election ensures that most parliamentarians maintain their seats in Parliament. They do so by selecting the constituents who will vote for them largely by carving out electoral districts to their advantage. This is called gerrymandering where politicians choose their voters rather than voters choose their representatives.

With the Greek Orthodox law, gerrymandering has taken a whole new meaning in Lebanon. If approved, politicians would be elected by members of their own sect. That is a Maronite parliamentarians will be elected by Maronite voters, Sunni parliamentarians will be elected by Sunni voters, and so forth with Lebanon as one district using the proportional system as a way to count the votes.

Many have already argued how this system is undemocratic, inequitable, and pushes the Christian community toward further irrelevance. Furthermore, political parties within each sect will compete against each other to defend and preserve the interests of the sect. This will not only consolidate the power of existing parties but it will enhance their sectarian discourse. The proportional representation system which in theory is meant to allow for smaller political groups, will do so now by paving the way for extremist sectarian parties.

It is not only parties' behavior that would change with the Orthodox law but the law would also shape the incentives of voters in perverse ways. Regardless of the multiple identities voters have such as their gender, age and the region from which they come and the income group to which they belong, the law would compel them to exercise their sectarian identity to access resources, jobs and services. Sectarianism becomes the only winning strategy in town.

If approved by Parliament, the Orthodox law will structure political and social interactions by making sectarian identity politically most salient. This is troubling since the needs, concerns and preferences of most Lebanese citizens are not determined by their sect.

For instance, a recent survey by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies for the Arab Barometer project shows that religion and sectarianism do not adequately explain the divisions within the country. In other words, the needs, attitudes and preferences of the Maronites do not vary from their Sunni and Shiites counterparts. For example, 50 percent of Muslims and 48 percent of Christians thought that the economic situation was the most important challenge facing the country. When asked about their future expectations, 89 percent of Muslims and 84 percent of Christians thought that the economic future looked dim.

The convergence of their opinion is not restricted to the economic realm. In fact, both groups are frustrated with how the government is performing. Furthermore, 79 percent of Muslims and 75 percent of Christians do not feel that as citizens they are treated equally. On religious issues, 93 percent of Muslims and 88 percent of Christians think that religious practices should be separated from politics. All this shows that the challenges and frustrations of the Lebanese cut across sectarian lines.

In fact, the division in the country lies elsewhere: It is not religious or sectarian differences that seem to be salient; income, education and gender equality are equally important, if not more so. For instance, 51 percent of the low-income group think that the economic situation is the most important challenge facing the country compared to only 39 percent of high-income group. When asked about their expectations, 74 percent of the rich compared to 88 percent of the poor think that economic future looks dim. Furthermore, only 68 percent of those with a higher education degree compared to 80 percent of those with low-level degrees feel that they were not treated equally.

This is not to suggest that there are no differences by religion or sect but the research highlights that the differences in the country are much more complex and can not be reduced to religion or sect.

So how does rallying for the Orthodox law improve the plight of the Christians whose politicians are most eager to see the law go through? The Christian political parties will now be able to nominate undeservedly all of their 64 parliamentarians (or now 67 members if parliament approves raising the total number of members to 134). This will not improve the political, economic or social situation of the community since the problems in the country cannot be addressed from a sectarian perspective. It will, however, give them a false sense of security at the price of taking the whole country to the brink of extremism rather than favoring coexistence.

Perhaps the statistic from the survey that best captures the feeling of the Lebanese is that 91 percent disagree with the statement, "political leaders are concerned with the needs of ordinary citizens." This is consistent across all sectarian and religious groups.

The joint parliamentary committee's vote of last Tuesday in favor of the Orthodox law goes against the trend that we are witnessing in the Arab world. Although the Lebanese political system proved to be malleable when adapting to the revolts in the region, it is proving to be bankrupt as religious and sectarian identities are being reconstructed to serve the interests of a very narrow circle of elites.

Moving forward, Parliament must adopt the National Commission Electoral Law, better known as the Boutros commission law, which combines both proportional representation and a majoritarian system. It introduces proportionality so as to encourage representation for small political groups and inject dynamism into the highly oligarchic system existing today. Furthermore, in light of the Orthodox law proposal, there is a serious need to reconsider establishing a senate as mandated by the Taif Agreement.

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