

Executive

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The death of national policy making

Orthodox law likely to make holistic agenda setting for Lebanon near impossible

By Zak Brophy



Let's be honest about it: policy politics in Lebanon was already all but non-existent. Whether politicians had the desire or the wherewithal to deliver policies that addressed fundamental issues — such as the nation's corroded infrastructure and bloated public debt — was never of much importance. Loyalty to the major confessional leaders, their parties and their interests has always been the factor of consequence come polling day.

But when the joint parliamentary committees last week adopted the proposed Orthodox Law, they may have stolen the last breath from the lungs of national Lebanese policy-making. The law, if passed in parliament, will mean that voters can only vote for candidates from within their sect. To its proponents the Orthodox Law protects the ability of Lebanon's many smaller communities to choose their own representatives, rather than having the votes of the larger sects determine the outcome of the vote. For its detractors, however, this law further ingrains sectarianism into, even enforces it upon, the social and political fabric of the nation.

But stepping out from beyond the lenses of identity politics we should ask what could the law mean in the day-to-day life for all Lebanese. The reality is that most problems within the country and the solutions that they require are the same regardless of one's sect. Scant work opportunities, infrequent electricity and spiraling costs of living are afflictions similarly endured whether Muslim, Christian, Druze or Atheist.

A recent study by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies for the Arab Barometer Project found that the needs, concerns and preferences of most Lebanese citizens do not differ significantly by sect. Indeed, citizens were more likely to have shared views based on their economic or social standing rather than their sect. Perhaps the most telling finding was that 91 percent of interviewees disagreed with the statement that, "political leaders are concerned with the needs of ordinary citizens."

For more than half a year teachers and public sector workers, regardless of their sectarian affiliation, have been protesting for government to implement the wage scale increase it agreed to last fall but has yet to find a way to finance. The resolution to this bind is admittedly no easy fix, but the manner

in which it has been tossed like a hot potato between politicians is reflective of the malaise in addressing society's many pending issues.

Sit the same politicians down and task them with debating how they will manage the elections and there is no such inertia. There has been a frenetic flurry of sittings and press conferences as they jostle to maintain their respective power bases.

Lebanon's political establishment is already dominated by zero-sum calculations that stump meaningful and much needed reform. Locking the discourse into identity politics threatens to further distance the debate from issues that are of importance to all of Lebanon.

Many of the critical issues facing the country require not only mature, long-term planning, but also compromise from opposing parties. Constructive bargaining is already in short supply in Lebanese politics but the passing of the Orthodox Law threatens to further entrench leaders in obstructionist stances. With politicians confined to representing the interests of the "street" within their sect, rival players within the same sect will be able to label concessions in the national policy making process as a betrayal against the community, leading to a hardening of isolationist posturing.

Regional and local representation within parliament could well be another victim if this law is voted into action. While a Shia in the Bekaa and a Shia in Beirut will be voting for the same MPs, the issues facing the two voters can hardly be considered the same because they share the same confessional branding.

A silver lining?

The Orthodox Law could, however, present some unintended openings for prospective political players who wish to challenge the established status quo. While the proposed legislation would lock voters into casting their ballot within their own sect, it would also see Lebanon become a single electoral district under a proportional representation (PR) system.

The PR element of this system opens the door for smaller parties or fringe personalities to get voted into office. Were an alliance of aspiring political players to form across the sectarian divides united by a clearly defined vision for the country and presenting a basket of actual policies, they may be able to win a block of seats and shake some life into the moribund parliament. This, however, could yet prove an over-optimistic hope.

The inherent feelings of insecurity and mutual-distrust felt amongst Lebanon's sectarian groupings are derived from the nation's violent past, unstable present and uncertain future. In this context the drive for the Orthodox Law can be understood.

But the problems of the country cannot be solved from a sectarian perspective. It is only by building a shared body politic harnessing and addressing the whole country's shared interests that Lebanon can ensure tomorrow's security. That will involve putting the policy back into politics.