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POLITICS IN LEBANON

Can democracy live in a lopsided structure?

By Rebecca Givner-Forbes

IN MAY, the Lebanese government tried to rein in Hizbollah.

They began investigating the extra-legal communication network Hizbollah is constructing for espionage and militia operations within Lebanon. They also fired an airport official suspected of facilitating spying for Hizbollah which responded violently, flooding gunmen into the streets of West Beirut, blocking the highways and airport, and, generally, disrupting life throughout the capital.

The Lebanese military, fraught with internal cleavages, is weaker than the militia, so it was powerless to help. The government was forced to back down to get Hizbollah off the streets. They called off the investigation and rehired the airport official.

Hizbollah thus proved that it could call the shots in Beirut, and prospects looked bleak for democracy in Lebanon.

Press coverage of the confrontation painted a simplistic picture of a nascent democracy under siege by an anti-democratic militia, but the underlying dynamics of the conflict are far more complicated than that.

Lebanon's current government may be liberal, Western-friendly, and support vital democratic values such as constitutionalism, freedom of expression and free-and-fair elections. But it is not really a representative government. Also, it is not a democratic one in the conventional sense, and this is what Hizbollah's supporters oppose.

The Lebanese Constitution provides for less direct representation for the Shi'ite community than for the Christian and Sunni communities. It mandates a Christian president and a Sunni prime minister. The weaker position of Speaker of Parliament is reserved for a Shi'ite Muslim.

Christians, while believed to be numerically the smallest of the three groups, are allotted 50 per cent of parliamentary seats. This set-up is rooted in a 1943 agreement which established sectarian representation based on the 1932 census.

The tradition of ruling through religious leaders had been around since the days of the Ottoman Empire, and the 1943 agreement was essentially a modernised version of this sectarian system.

At that time, Lebanon was intended to be a haven for Christians in the Middle East, and Shi'ites were the least populous of the three major groups. But today the dynamics are starkly different. Christians have been leaving Lebanon steadily for decades now. Their birthrate has declined to around two children per household.

Meanwhile, many Shi'ites have eight or nine children per household. Estimates on the number of Sunnis vary, but they are believed to be fewer than the Shi'ites.

A census has not been taken in Lebanon in 75 years because of fears that it could reveal a Christian minority

and a Shi'ite majority. This would provide the basis for an argument against the current government's claim that it is democratic, and would give clout to Shi'ite calls for dominance.

Enter Hizbollah. The Shi'ite population believes their apparent numbers merit more political clout, especially if Lebanon is now supposed to be a democracy. Hizbollah is an organisation that has the capacity and arms to pursue that power. This is the foundation of their partnership.

To be clear, Hizbollah is no champion of democracy. It rules its territories in southern Lebanon and the suburbs of Beirut with a vise-like grip. Many predict that, if the group were to attain political power, it would erode democratic institutions and values supported by the current government.

However, the disparity between the size of the Shi'ite community in Lebanon and the proportion of political power allotted to it allows Hizbollah to position itself as a champion of Shi'ite empowerment.

The situation is uncomfortable for Western supporters of democracy in Lebanon. If Lebanon's current system were to be scrapped in favour of a purer form of representative democracy, sheer numbers could dictate a Shi'ite-dominated government. Such a government would be closer to Iran than to Western countries or even other Arab nations.

This begs the question of whether Lebanon can be a 'real' democracy while maintaining an unrepresentative government structure. The educated elite is composed primarily of Christians and Sunni Muslims. Most liberal reformers responsible for Lebanon's freedom from Syrian occupation and its progress towards modernity come from these groups.

By contrast, some perceive that the most visible contributions from the poorer and less educated Shi'ite community include an out-of-control militia and an astronomical birth rate. They argue that these are not achievements which merit increased political power.

This problem is not restricted to Lebanon. Majority rule does not always go hand in hand with the institutions and values associated with democracy. Democracy advocates are being forced to ponder which is more important: democratic values and freedoms, or majority rule.

Bahrain, a small island state located in the Persian Gulf, is not dissimilar to Lebanon. It is a Sunni-ruled country with a considerable Shi'ite majority. In spite of the non-representative nature of its monarchical government, Bahrain embodies more of the values associated with liberal democracy than do most of the nominal democracies in the region.

Like the Lebanese government, Bahrain's ruling elites have supported the liberal freedoms characteristic of Western societies to a greater extent than can be expected in the event of majority rule.

Unlike the powerful Bahraini monarchy, the Lebanese government cannot keep the Shi'ite population from going after more power. But granting concessions as an immediate consequence of Hizbollah violence is a mistake, and so is overhauling the government to implement majority rule.

What Lebanon needs instead is a political process that gives Shi'ites increased political power and marginalises Hizbollah without disrupting the Lebanese government's march towards progress.

The writer is a senior analyst in charge of Middle East analysis at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at NTU.