

Lebanon – A Surviving Democracy

LECTURE BY TAMMAM SALAM, FORMER MP LEBANON

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to start by paying tribute to a monument of history, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who has left us on Friday June 16 after a lifetime of impressive achievements.

Chancellor Kohl, personified courage, vision and exceptional statesmanship; all qualities that allowed him to realize the unification of the German nation, to push forward the European construction, and to champion during his tenure from 1982 to 1998, the anchoring of Germany in a partnership with France that became the bulwark of the European Union.

He will be forever remembered as a political giant of a worldwide stature, who reached beyond geographic space and beyond the stretch of time.

It is a pleasure to be given the opportunity to speak from this eminent podium and in this venerable institution dedicated to the promotion of freedom, liberty, peace and justice, and to their twin concept, the consolidation of democracy in the world.

Such noble objectives, when pursued with the fair-minded spirit of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, are indeed a rare occurrence in a global environment vitiated by special interests and nefarious agendas.

There is no doubt in my mind, that the distinguished elite gathered here today, is well aware of the political conditions and the rapid changes which numerous nations in the world are witnessing. Many among these conditions and changes are taking

place as a result of populist movements, and sometimes, under the influence of pressures of a terrorist nature, or of terrorist movements committing the ugliest of crimes under the guise of religion.

Elections throughout 2016 and 2017 contributed to re-shuffle the political scenes, leading to some uncertainty at regional and national level, in the expectation of more clarity, in the orientations of major world and regional powers.

As in other countries, in Lebanon, we closely follow what is happening, waiting for our region's horizon to clear before we can expect a measure of stability. We know that major settlements for the region are still in the workshops of international politics and we sense the struggle over most of the regional issues.

The fight against terrorism is what unites nations today. However, the notions and the ways of opposing it and the determination of the types of terrorism, in the Middle East in particular, remain a subject of contention between international powers, as well as between significant regional players. To complicate matters further, these notions are subject to changes that we witness every day.

This general uncertainty, which is the constant concern of world leaders, as well as regional and local leaders, directly influences how they react to specific situations and often durably shape government policies.

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This raises a question on whether democracy succeeded or failed in its practical application, in those countries which have been practicing it for centuries and which are considered by political thinkers, as a benchmark for democratic best practice worldwide.

On March 14, 2017, the New York Times asked: Has democracy failed in the United States of America? The allusion was clearly to the presidential elections, in which the American electorate voted as citizens in particular states, and not as citizens in one country. Isn't it paradoxical, one may ask, that a candidate who obtains over 3 million votes more than his or her opponent, loses an election?

Democracy is a concept and a form of government in which all able citizens share equally, either directly or through their elected representatives, in the formulation of laws. Although some political thinkers want democracy to include the formulation of social, economic, and cultural policy, yet, the technical term -democracy - very often refers narrowly to the system of government in a particular state. Democracy, in a wider sense, is however, a social system which a specific society believes in, and applies in formulating a political and an ethical value system in the frame of which, the peaceful transfer of power is regularly exercised.

Free elections are not enough to make a democracy. Political and civil service institutions must also witness a democratic process of change. Such a change, especially in countries with a history of transfer of power by violent means, has led, in numerous countries to serious impediments in the implementation of the process.

Let us have a look at the world situation before moving to consider the situation in Lebanon: The results of the presidential elections in the USA, the British exit from the EU, the growing populist nationalist, religious and racist movements, are indications which analysts see as the end of democracy or, at best, its regression. Others see in these movements

reactions from citizens, men and women, against the political elites.

Yet, national elections which took place in 2016 and 2017, however dramatic and spectacular, make us feel optimistic about the future of democracy. The results of parliamentary elections in the Netherlands and presidential in France, and later, legislative elections in France, indicate that populism and extremist trends in Europe are waning.

When we take a look at democracy in theory and in practice, we often hear about direct democracy, parliamentary democracy, consensual democracy, and also confessional democracy. Looking back at the "white democracy" of South Africa, at American democracy up to the fifties of the twentieth century, and at the many male-dominated democracies, and, the pseudo "democracy" of oppressive totalitarian

regimes, we realize that some of these forms of democracies have disappeared with no chance of return; others hope to make a comeback.

In a parliamentary democracy, individuals vote to elect their representatives, who take decisions which are supposed to serve the best interests of their electorate. This norm has become prevalent in modern times, especially during the twentieth century as representative democratic government has spread widely.

But elections, as we mentioned earlier, are not enough to ensure democratic regimes or make a political system democratic; there are other elements which must exist, such as, an independent and strong parliament, efficient civic institutions, political parties, a free press and media, a fair and independent judicial system, and, last but not least, a political culture based on tolerance, respect for the opinions of others, a resolve to participate in the political process and, a belief in the values of democracy.

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Thus, democracy remains relative to different situations; a society, or government, is democratic depending on the prerequisites of democracy it decides to adopt. Therefore, there is no single, universally applicable model of democracy, as time and place play an important role. Economic considerations and the degree of participation in political life, influence democracy, because democracy is interactive, involving the participation of citizens in determining the future of their country. It is not a ready-made recipe, which can be applied in the same way in every country. It is a government by majority which safeguards the rights of the minorities in a pluralistic society.

Lebanon is a pluralistic society, culturally, religiously, and confessionally. Due to its history, and geographical location, it is a meeting ground for civilizations and various religious minorities. It is characterized by a complex community structure, that has made coexistence between the different religious groups a feature of its political life. This reality acted as a fertile ground for foreign interventions that have exploited situations of division and strife among its communities, and fueled the bloody sectarian conflicts that have marked its modern history.

Sectarianism played a major role in shaping the structure of the Lebanese society and in establishing its state and political system. In a contradictory way, this constituted, on the one hand, a kind of bonding cementing the various factions, but introduced, on the other hand, a measure of precariousness that led to frequent, sometimes violent periods of unrest at the political, social and security levels, separated by the all too brief moments of "détente" that it experienced. The political leaders who have been in power could not reach stable, long-lasting solutions to these crises, which have, every time, contributed to exacerbate sectarianism and confessionality.

This trend led to the decline of the national spirit and to a weakening of the state of institutions, as it replaced the feeling of nationalism, the sense of national interest and

the loyalty to the nation by an allegiance to the political and spiritual leaders. It has led to the crumbling of civic sense and to the emergence of strong individualism.

Another serious consequence, was the lack of visionary and long-term legislative action, which was replaced by reactive, opportunistic, short-term, improvised policies in the economic, educational, media and social fields, among others, all meant to defuse crises as they arise, and resulting from laborious partisan deals. All these facts marked Lebanon with a sectarian mentality, a confessional spirit of sorts, at the expense of the state authority and of true citizenship.

The Lebanese Constitution established firmly the principle of equality among all citizens, but, at the same time, it has established confessionality, hitherto a tradition, as a rule. Political and civil equality is incompatible with the confessional distribution of seats in parliament, or among presidential posts, or cabinet seats and government positions. Yet, we have lived with this reality for decades, convincing ourselves that it is but a transitional phase.

Such practices undermine the principle of equality. As I mentioned earlier, citizens in such a system develop an allegiance to their respective religious confessions rather than to the State.

Some analysts consider Lebanon a democratic oligarchy. This categorization is a simplification, because minority power is the power of various confessional and sectarian groups, with closely intertwined interests. Because of that, they have developed a remarkable propensity to find ad hoc compromises that mitigate conflicts. However, it is this very connivance that weakens the system and underpins the insidious division of the country.

The citizen, in such a setting, is eclipsed, and the national society is reduced to a minor role on the political stage; every confessional group considers itself a separate entity, bound to other confessional groups,

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only because of shared interests in the present or in the future.

There are those who consider Lebanon as a consensual democracy that seeks to provide equal and proportional treatment to all the religious communities that compose Lebanese society, while overlooking the principle of equality and democracy between individuals and citizens.

The problem is that the effectiveness and viability of consensual democracy, depends on its aptitude to establish stability and to sustainably reduce conflicts in countries with a wide extent of pluralism.

In Lebanon, this depends on the ability of political leaders to come to an agreement, and to maintain the truce among small minorities, whose militancy and influence grows as a result of foreign backing that ultimately fuels political tensions.

In Lebanon we should make a distinction between the "civic" and the "civil" forces of society. The civic society is national, whereas the civil society is confessional. The Lebanese is a member of his community, who owes allegiance to his civil and religious leaders, to his confession's judiciary framework and religious courts and to their charities and social entities. He is dithering between a membership imposed by his confessional affiliation and a citizenship of common belonging to the Lebanese nation. In other words, a citizen bound by the laws of the Lebanese Republic and its constitutional and legal institutions. Therein lays the apex of the paradox, which is consecrated by the Lebanese Constitution itself and by the law, which do not legally recognize the status of full citizenship to anyone who does not belong to a legally recognized sect.

In Lebanon the access to full citizenship, is via the confessions and the sects to which the individuals belong.

How do we come out of this dilemma? Principally, through an electoral law that transcends confessions, cultural differences and sectarian agendas.

The Lebanese Parliament has just promulgated a new electoral law after a debate that has lasted more than a decade. It modifies the existing law which dates back to the year 1960 based on majority vote.

The new law introduces a measure of proportionality which aims at correcting representation and allowing for minority and emerging political groups to be represented.

Many positive features were eliminated from the successive drafts but, be it as it may, the promulgation of the law is, in and by itself, an achievement for the democratic process, first because it was the outcome of independent, internal political concertation and agreement, and second, because it happened in a country with many difficulties, surrounded by a region in which little may be said about democratic achievements.

In addition, it has unquestionably relieved the political tension in the country and will, hopefully, pave the way for the long-awaited formation of the National Committee entrusted with studying the ways and means for the elimination of political confessionalism, chaired by the President of the Republic, as stated by the Constitution.

It is indispensable to keep resorting to such effective solutions to wiggle our way out of political stalemates and governmental logjams if we want democratic institutions to continue functioning.

In Lebanon, cabinet formations, legislative elections and presidential elections have been systematically delayed - up to two years for the most recent election of a President of the Republic. Thus, in the name of the "National Pact" or, in the name of "national interest", depending on the side you are talking to, a candidate was chosen, but only after numerous political compromises.

It is no exaggeration to affirm that such political arrangements that took place in Lebanon, have been generally qualified as the expression of a tacit agreement on the minimum level required to maintain Lebanon as a unified State, as one Nation, which my

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Government has strived to preserve, for our entire tenure between 2014 and 2016.

The first four months of our tenure were rich with moments of success. This is, in no small measure, due to the fact that a President of the Republic was still in place; a confirmation of the fact that it is only when all the parts of the Constitutional setup are in place, and when the functioning of institutions is unhindered, that you achieve stability. The departure of the President, and the inability to elect a new one at the end of his mandate, almost immediately generated extended debate over the process of decision-making at the Cabinet level in the absence of a President, and, consequently, crowded-out all other items of the national agenda, preventing us from discharging our duties to the people.

Navigating from one thorny issue to the next, we have at times, as if by magic, encountered moments of political bliss, when consensus allowed us to pass decrees and policies that addressed pressing people's needs.

Indeed, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, for the best of those years, I have tried to safeguard our fundamental political values, transcending the sectarian divide, and trying to obtain from the various forces that they rally around the common interest. Despite the difficulties we faced, including the stalling of the Cabinet work for recurring periods, I am still convinced that this is the only route to shield authority from crumbling, and institutions from gradually decaying, eroded by narrow partisanship driving us away from ideals.

Threats to democracy in Lebanon also come from external factors... The Syrian refugee crisis, for example, and what it carries in its fold of potentially destabilizing demographic imbalance, to severe pauperization, and a panoply of economic problems; not to mention the latent security threat that could be ignited by xenophobic sentiments, which until today, have been suppressed by the unparalleled sense of hospitality of the Lebanese people.

Another potential danger is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which, in my view, is at the origin of the spread of extremism and terrorism in the region and beyond. For it is the mistreatment inflicted to the Palestinians for almost 70 years, that gave rise to the sense of injustice that underlies hatred and the yearning for vengeance by resorting to indiscriminate violence.

Continuing to ignore this issue will cause more turmoil in the region and will constitute threats to moderates, moderation and democracy.

I would like to close by an optimistic note.

Although it is true to say that the sense of compromise of Lebanese political leaders has contributed to maintaining a certain form of democratic institutions.

However, what truly continues to cement the confessional mosaic is the remarkable resilience and the tolerance of the majority of the Lebanese people themselves. Miraculously, they continue to find in their battered souls, the force to safeguard life in common, by overcoming the deficiencies of the political system and by shoring up the precariousness of the democratic process in their country.