Lebanon and the Citizenship State

What Vision?

By

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Introduction

The concept of citizenship is a contested one, more so for multicultural societies. Traditional academic discourse ties it to the notion of the nation-state where the rights and duties of citizens are enshrined in a social contract, openly and peacefully arrived at among the legitimate representatives of society. There exists a feeling of national belonging and attachment within well-defined and agreed upon territorial boundaries, with a respect for state political sovereignty and constituted legal authority. Citizens display civil loyalty and political allegiance irrespective of other attachments. The legal dimension of citizenship also involves the judicial status of the citizens who form a common political community with a collective identity. Citizens view the state as a legitimate and just legal independent entity where the twin rights to self-determination and non-intervention are respected by the international community. The aggregated political will of the nation is formulated along national interest, despite the existence of many cultural communities.

Alongside this discourse, other multi-dimensional approaches to the concept of citizenship address group exclusion for plural societies. The existence of multiple cultural communities displaying overlapping memberships complicates the emergence of the nation as a political community (i.e., a horizontal society where the principles of justice and fairness govern access to representation and state resources). In vertical societies, self-entitlement and the concentration of control and power in dominant groups creates a situation of hierarchy between and among cultural groups, complicated by demographic imbalances. In the process, the consolidation of citizenship is compromised; Its political and legal dimensions do not fully develop. Citizens struggle to transcend their cultural, geographical, religious and sectarian loyalties.

All modern societies are plural with some displaying extreme pluralism. Lebanon is one of them. It is identified in the literature as extremely plural, a very complex society existing in a region of complex politics. Equally, all societies are divided along many issues. Lebanon displays divisiveness across the spectrum of socio-economic, cultural and political issues. Within this context, this paper addresses the pathway to the citizenship state

I. The problem

Citizenship is key for nation building, more so for fragile states, where cultural considerations, demographic realities and economic inequalities intersect with the complex issue of political representation to threaten the social contract. In Lebanon, the democratic façade didn't create a citizenship state. Since the creation of Greater Lebanon in **1926** and its independence in **1943**, the vulnerable entente, the unstable regional milieu and outside interference/mediation have resulted in a deeply divided society with a compromised understanding of citizenship. The country is unable to address the pressing demands placed upon it and to insulate itself from regional turbulence. Without a considerable dose of external intervention, (itself detrimental to national interest and unity), the stability of the country is continuously tested. Some argue that "Recent Developments in Lebanon point towards a reconfessionalisation instead of a deconfessionalisation" (**Ingemansson, 2010, p.16**).

A. Structural Obstacles (the theory)

There are *structural obstacles* to a citizenship state within the consociational formula of governance. Consociationalism is unfavourable to nation-building, as it prescribes segmental autonomy (institutionalized in the Lebanese Constitution) and the undesirability of horizontal communication at the citizen level. Separatism means segments seek outside support to bolster their local presence. It creates an "us versus them situation", which leaders manipulate since consociationalism advocates vertical communication (elite/masses contact). As such, members of different groups rely on their respective representatives to preserve their citizenship rights. The basis of advancement of a group depends on its leader. The common denominator among the different groupings is the lowest possible: the survival of the system through the allocation of political and socio-economic resources.

B. Situational Obstacles (the practice)

Throughout 100+ years of accommodationist politics, the deviations from consociational politics, the inability or unwillingness of the state to fill the void, and the violations of accommodationist rules placed situational obstacles on the transition to a citizenship state in a small country with **18** confessional groupings. The model collapses when:

› ***The funds dry out.***
› ***State resources are mismanaged.***
› ***Public sector governance is ineffective.***
› ***Corruption is rampant; and***
› ***Corporatist practices exist.***

External involvement also means that the model nearly collapses when local commitment wanes. The permeability of Lebanese borders to ideological polarisation and regional instability coupled with socio-economic inequalities mean that stability (let alone a citizen state) is tricky.

II. The Diagnosis

The functioning of the confessional system in Lebanon is a tenuous accommodationist understanding among different groups of unequal size and power within a particular balance of power among them and external intervention (**Assaf, 2004, p.205**). Post-war governments exhibit weaknesses in implementing domestic policies, formulating effective foreign policy and dealing with the international community of state and non-state actors. Equally, a sudden change in the existing balance of forces (to prevent the politicisation and manipulation of ethnicity) entrenches the insecurity within society and increases instability. Such is the Lebanese conundrum, a trade-off of democracy and citizenship in return for a semblance of stability interrupted by cyclical crises and external interventions.

III. The Approach: Policy Ideas

Therefore, the transition to a more secular system of representation and governance should be gradual. The adoption and implementation of reforms that effectively safeguard the civil rights and obligations of citizens can engage all towards the citizenship state. **A rights-and-obligations-based approach** is critical, starting with political reforms.

A. Political Reforms: Re-instating Legitimacy where it Belongs

1. Deconfessionalising the System

Sectarianism and confessional systems of political representation are recognised in the literature on modernisation as signs of societal backwardness. For **Lebanon's** precarious context, it is possible to gradually de-confessionalise the system. All reforms leading to a citizenship state depend on political reform, itself a function of the willingness of the elite. The current system counterattacks effective manifestations of national power at the mass level (**as shown by the ineffective uprisings since 2015**). Hence, the impetus for bottom-up change needs top-bottom incentives. Socio-economic constraints and their translation into the current economic crisis constitute formidable obstacles to a sustainable national uprising, since they contribute to the politicisation of ethnicity/loyalty and the persistence of the patron-client network. Religion and confessional membership are the basis upon which individuals claim their share of material and economic benefits (**Assaf, 2004, p.217**), hence maintaining dependency of large segments on the patronage system. So where does one start?

Change in economic, political, social and religious structures must always be initiated by law, it being a binding enforcement mechanism. The willingness of the political elite to introduce constitutional amendments to deconfessionalise the system must come from legitimate representatives of Lebanese society, legitimacy being a crucial element to the process. Seeing as many elites lack in legitimacy, the legislative, (**which is the public democratic face of government and the embodiment of democratic rule**) must lead the change, preferably with the engagement of the executive and the judiciary. Respect for checks and balances, of which the principle of separation of powers is crucial for this process to succeed.

To transit to a citizenship state, some suggest rotating the troika positions amongst the three dominant groups in society to annihilate community fears. Others warn against any change at the executive level, suggesting **electing ratios of parliamentary seats on a national non-sectarian basis** (incrementally for each round) until insecurities are allayed and trust is built. I argue for experimenting with various formulas to see what works; A learning curve is better than the current status quo. Parliament is legally, constitutionally and morally accountable to its electoral base. Constitutional reforms are not sanctified, and the country can go back to a confessional system if deconfessionalisation harms communal interests. The decision is in the hands of the Lebanese people

and their legitimate representatives who must find ways to safeguard national interest while protecting minorities' representation.

2. Polling the electorate directly

In any indirect democracy, legitimacy is lacking, apart from elections time; Hence, governments regularly solicit the opinions of the electorate (not its representatives) through referendums, which are direct general votes on a single political question. It is imperative for the Lebanese government to directly solicit the opinions of its electorate through **referendums on single matters**, regarding identity, electoral law, constitution, regime type, role of the state in the economy, foreign relations, etc.

B. Societal/Cultural Change and Educational Reforms: Civic Citizenship

All societies move with changing times, even deeply divided ones. Change is the only constant as Heraclitus says. With the changes occurring constantly in the social, economic, and political orders, society restructures itself to ensure progress and continuity. Some argue that law can be employed as an instrument for encouraging or precipitating social and economic change (**Rosen, 1978, p.4**). The impetus for change towards a citizenship state emerges when the modernisation process leads to a **civic awakening** and forces a progressive depoliticisation of confessional identities. Civic citizenship deals with the way people live and interact within communities, cities and neighbourhoods. A **civic consciousness** has yet to mature. In the words of Judge Dr. Nawaf Salam (incumbent Prime Minister of Lebanon) the Lebanese citizen is an unfulfilled individual, torn between two opposing value-systems and whose civil status remains incomplete (**Salam, 2022, p.51**). The role of the Lebanese diaspora is crucial, it being engaged in this process in the host countries. The role of youth is also important as they are more likely to embrace change.

Introducing educational reforms and **a modern public education system** can effectively rally the populace around a citizenship state if school history books address the history of Lebanon after independence, including an account of the Lebanese civil war allowing aspiring youth citizens to draw meaningful lessons. This builds a common value system and cements the fragile social contract.

Transitional justice, including a truth and reconciliation commission, (centered on justice, reparation, memorialisation and guarantees of non-recurrence) is an imperative.

C. Socio-Economic Reforms: Citizen Inclusion and Equality

› Financial engagement and the provision of economic incentives are also critical to foster social inclusion and integration of vulnerable groups. These include minority groups, women, the disabled, former convicts, stateless children of Lebanese fathers and those affected by wars and displacement. Banning discriminatory practices and human rights violations can restore **citizen and group equality**.

> › Strengthening productive economic sectors increases employment opportunities. **The role of the state in the economy** must promote industrial and economic growth and development. Public-private partnerships are key.
> › The state needs to bridge **the center-periphery divide**. Regional disparities need to be addressed by prioritizing balanced economic development. I prescribe to the communitarian conceptualization of citizenship that is centred on public interest rather than the liberal conceptualization which emphasizes private and individual rights (**Assaf & Ofeish, 2015, p.2**). The Chehabist experiment is a reminder that bridging this gap is possible. Addressing the socio-economic causes of inequality and poverty can be achieved through partnering with humanitarian associations.

D. Administrative and Institutional Reforms: Civil Citizenship

Citizen interaction with state institutions (tax paying, voting, running for public office) is what civil citizenship is about. There is no alternative to the role of the state. Building **an institution-centered model** as opposed to the current actor-centered model will insulate the state machinery from the intervention of sectarian and manipulative leaders (mainly the executive who must allow state institutions to function effectively to restore the lost trust). **A state of law and rights** must:

> › Stop the practice of nepotism and corruption to improve its distorted image.
> › Command respect of and obedience to constituted official authority.
> › Enforce government policies equally on all citizens.
> › Introduce strategies to promote national identity, civic nationalism, civil values and political (as opposed to sectarian) loyalties; Civic nationalism is a form of nationalism that revolves around shared political aspirations and values, rather than cultural or ethnic ties (**Heywood, 2024, p.150**).
> › Promote pillars of national progress and common value-systems.
> › Define national interest and strengthen national unity.

IV. Conclusion: Key Stakeholder Engagement

A nation is not only a collection of cultural communities. Nations and individual have political rights. Introducing these reforms mitigates the vertical pressures that reinforce divisiveness and gives birth to a horizontal society where the rule of law prevails. At a time when one is cautiously optimistic about the country's future, all stakeholders can capitalise on this momentum. An all-hands-on-deck approach can progressively place Lebanon on the trajectory of the citizenship state.

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Authors' Short Bio

Noura Assaf (Ph.D., 2004, University of Warwick, UK) is an academic scholar and a specialist in the governance of deeply divided societies with a particular focus on conflict resolution and democratic theory.

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She has worked extensively with students on projects relating to civic engagement and community service at national CSOs concerned with corruption, accountability and e-government (of which Transparency International-Lebanon, LADE and TIPS) as well as public sector service such as MoFAE. She was also a Team Leader and Coach for the Third Inter-University Competition on Mediation, organised by USJ's Centre of Professional Mediation, the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) & the United National Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). She is an active promoter of a culture of peace through mediation and conflict transformation.

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