

Democracy in Lebanon: Lessons from the Lebanese Cuisine

by Elie Al-Chaer*

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After the Metn elections, much debate is taking place these days about the viability of democracy in Lebanon, its values and its prospects, given the intense emotional charging that preceded the elections and the role money may have played in the process. These factors may have turned off many voters and disillusioned young generations in the promise of their democracy, even some seasoned Lebanese politicians like former Prime Minister Salim Al-Hoss who was quoted saying in a statement that the Metn by-election polls had proven again that "democracy in Lebanon is an illusion where money and emotions rule."

To begin, all elections, even in the finest of democracies, are held with an element of money and emotions. To what extent these 2 factors "rule" the process, corrupt the vote or dictate the outcome is controlled by the rule of law. Elections are but one step in the democratic process; the primary and essential step remains always the rule of law.

Defining democracy in the abstract is a daunting task and the subject of encyclopedic volumes of discussions and debates. For me, the easiest way to understand democracy is to look at it as a practical concept; think of it as a plate of the world famous Lebanese salad: Tabbouleh.

Tabbouleh is a Lebanese salad dish. Its primary ingredients are finely chopped parsley, cracked wheat (Burghul), diced tomato, chopped onions, lemon juice, olive oil, salt and various other seasonings. The main tools needed to prepare the dish are a sharp knife to chop, dice and slice and a large bowl to mix the whole.



Tabbouleh's taste varies by region, from country to country, town to town, and sometimes from one house to the next within the same town. Each region has its recipe for the mix, including its measures, special seasonings and preferred flavor. However, the one thing all regions agree on is that you cannot prepare Tabbouleh without its main ingredients (e.g. parsley) and a sharp knife. Once we agree on the concept of diversity of Tabbouleh preparation within its universality, it becomes easy to accept democracy as a main dish in our Lebanese political mezza.

A Recipe for Democracy "à la libanaise"

1) Five bunches of parsley:

The "parsley" (main ingredient) in any democracy is the rule of law. Without it, there is no democracy. That does not simply mean electoral law; it means:

- i) Fair and modern constitution that protects basic human rights for all citizens without discrimination
- ii) A modern penal code that protects the innocent and punishes the criminal swiftly and justly
- iii) A modern code to protect the civil rights of individuals against private or public intrusion
- iv) A fair tax code that redistributes wealth and protects the poor and vulnerable population
- v) A modern electoral law that guarantees one vote for one citizen

The essential tool (the sharp knife) for implementing the rule of law is an independent, transparent and qualified justice system with equal access to all and equal enforcement on all.

2) Two large tomatoes:

The second main ingredient for a successful democracy is the rule of reason. The viability of any representative democracy rests as much on the wisdom of its well-informed citizenry as on its laws. Two main safeguards are essential for the rule of reason; these are:

- i) insuring the public is always well-informed by protecting access and providing transparency
- ii) insuring the free-flow of knowledge by protecting the openness of the marketplace of ideas

3) Two cups of burghul:

These are auxiliary precautions necessary to protect against abuse of powers. As James Madison said in the Federalist Papers: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary ... A dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions." These would be:

- i) separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government
- ii) a system of checks and balances through which branches of government check each other, to ensure that the power of the government is both limited and controlled.

4) One large onion:

That would be the freedom protection against the unhealthy accumulation of too much power in the hands of one person; be it political power, military power or economic power.

5) Seasoning and the mix:

That is done to taste and will have to be adjusted until you reach the right measures. We are talking of course about the process of apportionment and also districting within the electoral law. You only get it right with experience – of course if you learn from experience.

6) Sample before you serve:

This is what happens in by-elections, general elections and referenda. Voters get to say what they think of the taste, the ingredients and the chef. And in the words of James Madison: “as long as the reason of man continues to be fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed.”

We Are Not Re-Inventing the Wheel

We may have invented Tabbouleh but we certainly did not invent Democracy nor we are about to re-invent it. So why not look at other systems and borrow from them what may work for us. Instead of always asking others for fish (to tell us what to do), let us for once learn how to fish ourselves or ask others simply to show us how they've done it.

Take the USA for instance, purportedly one of the most influential powers in Lebanese politics these days: In the fall of the year 2000, the citizens of the USA voted to elect a president. Candidate Albert A. Gore received 50,999,897 votes and candidate George W. Bush received 50,456,002 votes placing Bush 543,985 votes behind Al Gore in the popular vote. The constitution of the USA, however, clearly states that a president is elected by a majority of the electoral vote, regardless of the popular vote. Only three times before (1824, 1876, and 1888) in more than 250 years of the US constitutional history, the electoral vote did not reflect the popular vote. What was most impressive about the year 2000 presidential elections was not the outcome, but the legal process through which the candidates challenged each other in the courts of law for ~ 2 months until the Supreme Court (9 judges) ruled 5 to 4 in favor of Bush. With great dignity and majestic grace, Gore (winner of the popular vote by 543,985 votes; about 1/5 of the Lebanese population) conceded in a public address to the nation and one of the most moving speeches in political history. Here is an excerpt:

“Good evening.

Just moments ago, I spoke with George W. Bush and congratulated him on becoming the 43rd president of the United States...Now the U.S. Supreme Court has spoken. Let there be no doubt, while I strongly disagree with the court's decision, I accept it. I accept the finality of this outcome which will be ratified next Monday in the Electoral College. And tonight, for the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy, I offer my concession. I also accept my responsibility, which I will discharge unconditionally, to honor the new President-elect and do everything possible to help him bring Americans together in fulfillment of the great vision that our Declaration of Independence defines and that our Constitution affirms and defends.” “...I know that many of my supporters are disappointed. I am too. But our disappointment must be overcome by our love of country.”

He closed by saying: “It is time for me to go. Thank you and good night and God bless America.”

Al Gore could have easily bypassed the institutional and constitutional processes, claimed that he represented the majority of Americans (which he did), used this as a basis to continuously emphasize his political power, taken his supporters to the streets to protest the outcome and plunged his nation in civil unrest. But a dignified patriot knows better, and for love of country forsakes all.

Obviously this is not intended as a review of American history but as an example for us to learn how great leaders build great nations; by respecting the rule of law and by stepping aside “**gracefully**” at the right moment.

It is also intended to illustrate how the rule of law rather than popular elections is what preserves a democracy and brings forth internal peace for its people.

Of course, the electoral and legal systems in Lebanon are not to be compared with those of the USA; yet we have one advantage: being a smaller nation, we should be able to manage our affairs more easily. What do we lack? May be just the right leadership!

Admittedly, the system is not perfect. But fixing it begins by adopting a fair and balanced electoral law, in which every vote counts (one citizen, one vote), and districting and apportionment are not manipulated for electoral advantage. Without getting into the details of a model electoral law, any law should at least regulate the use of money in elections – i.e. require accountability and limit spending for all candidates in order to level the field of competition financially – and should be enforceable against all.

What Happened in Metn?

First and foremost, the Metn by-election should be interpreted for what it really was: a by-election to fill a parliamentary seat vacated by the assassination of MP Pierre Gemayel. As such there were winners and losers. The candidate that obviously won the election was Dr. Camille Khoury. The 2 other candidates lost.

Many may regard this as a narrow technical reading of the elections; for most, however, it is a simple reality. The margin of victory should only be relevant for the candidates themselves and their parties if they wish to broaden their base and run again in the future.



The mistake that many in Lebanon make today on both sides of the political spectrum (some with good intentions but others maliciously), is to blow the results of this by-election out of proportion and beyond their immediate implications.

Firstly, it was a by-election in a single district with ~48% voter participation, and it generated a clear winner.

Secondly, it was not a referendum on who better represents the Christians or the Maronites in Lebanon today, and therefore gets to name the next Maronite president - Michel Aoun or the Christians of the March 14 Coalition - for many reasons: technical (legal) and political.



Technical (legal) reasons:

- 1) The question of who better represents the Christians and their interests was not on the ballot
- 2) The opinion of the Christians in the Metn district does not necessarily reflect the opinion of all Christians in Lebanon
- 3) Not all the Christians of Metn participated, and
- 4) Non-Christians from Metn were also polled.

So technically, it was just a by-election to fill a seat in the Metn district and the winner was Dr. Camille Khoury.

Political reasons:

For more than two years now, the March 14 Coalition brandished itself as a national non-sectarian movement, representative of all Lebanese people, guided by the Taef accord and the famous oath of the late Gebran Tueni on March 14, 2005. As such, its candidates in any district should seek approval of all the district's voters regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation. In fact, one would expect their candidates to reach out nationally beyond their sectarian base and their campaigns to brag about the diversity of their electorate rather than reclus to the votes of a single sect looking for a measurable yet hollow majority.

Surprisingly, many in the March 14 Coalition (most vocal being Samir Geagea), are doing just the opposite. They persist in reporting the results along a sectarian distribution in an effort to claim superiority in representing the Christians and the Maronites. That in itself is a political failure of the March 14 Coalition, and on many levels:

- 1) It turns the coalition into a federation of sects, rather than a coalition of national leaders. As such, Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblat could no longer claim to represent the Christians and Shiites of Beirut and the Shouf let alone Baabda-Aley, North Lebanon and the Bekaa; gutting thereby their parliamentary majority of any political clout – “politically speaking”.
- 2) Applying the Geagea logic to the results in Beirut II will leave the Future movement with less than 20% of the Sunni voters; unless, of course, someone is able provide a fact-based reason for why more than 80% of the voters in a largely Sunni district (Beirut II) would boycott a by-election at times of high political tension.
- 3) The rhetoric used by some of the March 14 leaders is similar to the one used by Michel Aoun after the elections of 2005. Basically, presuming extra-institutional representative powers based on the popular votes of one sect in one district. Where do you "cash this check" in an institutional government?

No matter how one looks at it, the March 14 Coalition lost the by-election in Metn, technically and politically. The only political victory they may arguably claim goes to the cabinet of PM Siniora, and that by no means confer on the Christian leaders of the March 14 coalition the right to select the next president of the republic.

On the other hand, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and its allies, ran in 2005 on a sectarian platform, capitalizing on the anger of the Christian voter at the quadripartite alliance (Hariri, Jumblatt, Berri, Nasrallah), which totally marginalized the Christians. Christian leaders from Kornet Shahwan (now in the March 14 Coalition) who found it expedient at the time to participate with the Muslim alliance, to the dismay of Bkerki, paid the price heavily; the FPM won a majority of the Christian votes, albeit their representative power within Parliament was limited. What happened afterwards, the FPM used their victory and the mandate they acquired from the Christian communities of Lebanon to reach out nationally. They managed to broaden their political platform beyond its narrow sectarian appeal. Yes they may have sacrificed some of the Christian base but that's what popularity is for: you take it to a spin and find out how far it carries you. Nationally speaking, it was a political success. The quadripartite alliance disintegrated, and half of its members are allied with the FPM today.

In the 2007 Metn by-election, the FPM and its allies used the same old mantra again (defending the Christians) without retracting from their broader national appeal. They won again, this time with a cross-section of the national electorate; very astute by all accounts!...but not enough to give the FPM and its allies exclusive right to select the next president.

Therefore saying that the Metn by-election ended politically without a victor is not accurate. In a parliamentary democracy, you do not seek to vanquish your opponents; you simply seek to unseat them – unless of course you are following a totalitarian model of elections, very common in our region of the world, and unless you really prefer Tabbouleh “à la syrienne”.

Not so Perfect, but a democracy!

Despite all what was said and done, and despite the many flaws in the process, one cannot but thank the government of PM Siniora for remaining as neutral as humanly possible in a society like Lebanon, and insuring that the by-elections were conducted in a transparent manner and according to existing Lebanese law.

Perfecting the law and streamlining the process remain our sincere desire; as long as we work for it, we will be on the right track towards a better democracy.

* Elie D. Al-Chaer, PhD, JD. *Scientist and lawyer; director of the Center for Democracy of Lebanon.*