

The Secular Dimension of the “General’s Victory”

*by Rabih Lubnan**

The huge and sweeping victory for democracy in Lebanon that General Michel Aoun and his lists scored in Mount-Lebanon elections against the gigantic bulldozer of the Bristol-Amal-Hezbollah Alliance (BAHA; after Abu BAHA’, their campaign slogan, and not BAHIA) was the first realization of what the people demanded in a post-Syrian era: a representative democracy, a change of the political establishment and the hope for a secular government with equality for all.

For more than 33 years, since 1972, Lebanon has not held free elections; political leaders in Lebanon were sprung on the scene by the might of their sectarian militias or recycled time and again by virtue of their wealth, feudal roots or their willingness to accommodate the interests of foreign powers (Syrian, Israeli, American, Iranian, etc.), but almost never by the will of an electorate.

The Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the demand by the “French-American coalition on Lebanon” that “free elections” be held at this time, required that Lebanon’s political establishment acquires for the first time its representative credibility and legitimacy through *free* elections.

Many in the BAHA took *free* elections to mean the freedom to bulldoze popular will, by emotionally charged rhetoric void of a clear political plan in order to enable a handful of politicians wipe-out their opponents and consolidate their grip on their clan and country. This is what happened in Beirut; this is what happened in South Lebanon; and this is also what was expected to happen in Mount-Lebanon where the political establishment of BAHA tried to forego true elections by attempting to buy Aoun’s popularity with a few parliamentary seats, maintaining otherwise the depressing status-quo. When Aoun refused their deal, they maligned him and cast him out of their coalition, turning him into an underdog, and boy do people love the underdog!

By their own mischief, the BAHA grossly misread the people’s message of March 14, 2005 and overestimated their own popularity. The people who took to the streets on March 14 did it for many reasons, many for personal ones, but none of which was to give a blank political check to the Bristol group.

These reasons included:

- 1) To demand Syria’s full withdrawal from Lebanon
- 2) To express anger at and demand an international investigation in the assassination of Hariri and friends
- 3) To respond to Hezbollah’s pro-Syrian rally of March 8, 2005, and
- 4) Many of them to demand reform, democracy and a change of the state of national affairs.

The BAHA mistook (intentionally or naively) the people's outpouring of emotions to mean a blind political endorsement of their undeclared or non-existing agenda. And BAHA may have been right with 30% of the Beirutis [*who largely cast a vote of sympathy for the Hariris*], 43% of the Southerners [*many of which voted by religious mandate (Taklif Sharii)*], and a few percents in the Shouf [*who had no other choice*]. They drove the electoral bulldozer of their sham coalition through the voting districts of Beirut and the South with no program or agenda, just a negative campaign against the decaying "systems" of the current order (now largely dismantled), with emotionally charged slogans, with misleading referenda and empty rhetoric and perhaps with loud religious mandates from foreign Imams and silent whispers from newly assigned masters... and they thought they could trample popular will everywhere they wanted with no clear policy and no vision for the future.

How wrong they were when it came to Mount-Lebanon, to the people who historically stood proud against invaders, to the people who truly fought Syria's occupation with blood, sweat and tears. These proud people were not going to sideline the true "General of liberation" and simply delegate the victory to the "Vichy coalition" of yesterday, the neo-opposition and the pseudo-democrats... without a real fight. And by God, a real democratic fight they gave them!

Byblos-Jbeil, the Phoenician city that gave the world its first alphabet, the district that gave Lebanon Raymond Eddé, gave the Middle East its first lesson in democracy: 62% voter participation to say NO to the gigantic and grotesque bulldozer of BAHA, NO to referenda on the antiquated ruling establishment and NO to the status-quo; but YES for democracy, YES for reform, YES for new faces, YES for candidates with declared and clear programs and YES for a new chapter in the history of Lebanon, based on true democratic representation, a non-sectarian agenda and a civil society.

Will BAHA learn from that and change its ways? Perhaps not.

Perhaps BAHA sectarian leaders do not wish to learn, for fear that the popular and democratic uprising that swept the establishment in Jbeil, Keserwan and Metn spills over and sweeps BAHA's leaders in the rest of Lebanon.

BAHA's first reaction to the victory of democracy over the bulldozer came from its leader Walid Jumblat who, unable to graciously accept defeat, promptly shed the mask of "democrat" behind which he hid for sometime, to reveal the true ugly and monstrous face of the Mountain's butcher, the feudal dictator who can never tolerate democracy and will stop at nothing to maintain his leadership over his clan even if that meant a new war and the massacres of innocent Lebanese (*naturally, he specified his enemy as the democratic Christians*).

The true sectarian and hateful Walid Jumblat revealed himself once again yesterday. Never in the history of modern democracies has a leader described his loss in a popular vote as a call to a civil war. But those who knew the man behind the mask were not surprised. Jumblat was faking it all the time; he can never be a democrat. Tomorrow if called upon to explain his words or apologize, Jumblat may retract his Freudian slip even before the ink dries on it.

In reality, it may be better for his clan and for BAHA to retract Jumblat altogether from politics: his political discourse, his flip-flops on important national issues and his tone are outdated and no longer acceptable if the Lebanese people wish to build together a new and modern democracy.

By contrast, Aoun's appeal to the majority in Mount Lebanon, and perhaps in Lebanon at large, stems from his firm principles, non-sectarian tone and simple words; yes he was an extremist in attacking Syria when it occupied Lebanon, and yes he was an extremist in demanding that the sovereignty of Lebanon trumps all deals when Mr. Jumblat was fornicating with the occupation; but throughout that, Aoun always communicated with the Lebanese people as a true national leader, never presented himself as a Christian leader, let alone an extremist Christian one, and never threatened to attack any Lebanese based on sectarian policies. On the contrary he was fought against by a minority of Christian extremists, the allies of Mr. Jumblat, nowadays. For all he stands for, Aoun is seen by Jumblat as his nemesis; but it is Aoun not Jumblat that the Lebanese people want and need in their leaders, and it is Aoun not Jumblat (the uncontested deputy) the leader they democratically elected on June 12, 2005, against all odds.

The challenge for Aoun now is to remain "Aoun", and not become "Jumblat"; to remain principled and above the fray of sectarian politics, to translate his victory into an outreach campaign to the majority of Lebanese, disenchanted by the BAHA machine, to lift them up and push with them for secular reforms in government and society: today as a minority in the opposition; but tomorrow when the people across Lebanon have their fair chance to express themselves, from a position of majority in parliament and at all levels of government.

In a democracy, when the people vote we bow to the people's voice, we do not declare war on them. This is the democratic way, the new Lebanese way. The other way, Mr. Jumblat's way, is the old Syrian way.

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