

L'Orient le Jour

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What's Next?

By Carlos Eddé Tuesday 15 June 2011

After 40 years of repression, corruption and total contempt for human rights, to think that the Syrian leaders would be able to change or make their people buy their reform promises, is a fairy tale. How can these dictators imagine that in the 21st century it is still possible to keep people in ignorance and under their control in the long-term? How can they ignore the power of the media that virtually anyone can access via Internet, mobile phones and TV? Let us have no illusions; the question is no longer *will the Syrian regime remain?* But *how much longer will it last?*

So the key point now is 'What's next'? The answer matters, first and foremost for the Syrians themselves of course, but also for the neighboring countries, particularly Lebanon, whose policies have been forged in Damascus in recent decades. The Syrian popular revolt has plunged Lebanon into political stagnation. Everyone is waiting to see who will win the fight. The fact that the March 8th alliance has taken months to form a government, making all sorts of concessions despite a parliamentary majority gained by threat, is quite meaningful. Where is the arrogance of the Baathist regime collaborators? Where are the threats of "breaking arms" or of a "new May 7th"? Just look at the change in tone of the pro-Syrian Lebanese factions (the correct term should have been pro-Assad Lebanese, but no one dared to use it). Suddenly, "they" become less rude and strangely consensual.

A silence has descended upon the majority of the Lebanese political class concerning the massacre of demonstrators in Syria. The explanations are many but none are particularly honorable. There is in Lebanon a certain atavism which consists of waiting for the outcome of the arm wrestling. Let us remember one of the grand Lebanese political maxims: *"The hand you cannot fight, kiss it, and just pray for someone to break it."*

Under the pretext of non-interference in the affairs of others, the March 8th Lebanese politicians argue to their entourage: *"However bad the Syrian regime might be, it is always better than a Sunni majority coming to power"*. The danger of the doctrine of alliance of the minorities - so dear to the partisans of March 8th - lies in trying to contain the majority with minorities, mobilizing the people of these communities with an extremist discourse

based on fear and hatred. By so doing, this policy brings about a fanatic leadership, triggering extreme reactions among opponents. This logic is now reaching its limits in Syria. The more the regime attempts to stay in power through repression, the greater the danger for all inhabitants of the region as it will discredit moderate leaders both in the majority and within the minorities for a long time.

Nations, like individuals, only learn from their own experience and mistakes. A person too controlled by dominant parents during childhood, adolescence or even adulthood will find it difficult to confront problems and face responsibilities in dire circumstances. Similarly, people who remain for too long under strict authority will commit mistakes and unnecessary excesses when liberated from their yoke. Democracy is – despite all its risks and shortcomings - the best political system, for while it does not prevent mistakes along the way, it allows for their correction, and favors, in the long run, the development of a mature and stable society.

To say, as do supporters of March 8th, that a regime such as the Syrian one should remain in power in Syria in order to control the people and prevent them from following their own path is immoral and shameful vis-à-vis the Syrian people. But it is also quite inefficient and impractical. What is going to happen will eventually happen sooner or later, and the repression will only make things to come much worse. This madness could lead to irreparable damage for all of us. It is therefore essential to maintain a political discourse based on justice, fairness and human values, regardless of the petty political calculations.

What's next? There is an issue all Lebanese who call for lasting political reform and rule of law will be faced with: what is the future of those who came to power thanks to the support of the Syrian regime? What will happen to those who have abused power and grown rich at the expense of all Lebanese?

It is quite possible that they will succeed in staying in power through changing their discourse and adopting new justifications. In general, they want us to believe that "they have sacrificed themselves to shield us from the worst," or: "Now that the Syrians are no longer physically here, what is the harm in working together to implement their policy in Lebanon?" And it was always in the name of the higher interest of the nation that they were pressed to collaborate. When one is accustomed to being a collaborationist, one naturally knows how to turn one's coat.

Alas, this negotiated transition could occur with the formal or silent consent of the majority of the Lebanese people - for several reasons. The most sensitive is sociological as the majority of Lebanese have a mentality of '*zelm*' and not a culture of citizens. Their allegiance is to a community, a person or a family (even under the

disguise of political parties), not to an ideal or a political system. This loyalty is based on a system of *clientelism* or patronage that will allow politicians to claim an amount of ‘*zelm*’ to negotiate at the time of their transition.

Further, for most Lebanese, the political game is much more about saving their champion and/or making their adversary lose, than about finding lasting solutions to socio-economic problems. Thus, if the leader wins, the ‘*zelm*’ are happy! And if their ‘*Zaim*’ gets rich, better him than the others! One follows the leader, that’s it.

Moreover, even among political opponents, there is some kind of understanding. It will be much easier for those who will have the upper hand in the aftermath of the regime change in Damascus, to deal with the now weak but known opponents (and their price is often displayed), than to accept a new wave of reformist politicians.

Our history is rich with examples of turnabout and cooptation. One of the least known, but most amusing, took place in my family’s home: in 1943, after the Lebanese parliamentary elections, the composition Chamber of Deputies secured the victory of Emile Eddé in the coming elections for President of the Republic. The house was always full of politicians, businessmen and notables. One day, when the house was packed, information came discreetly that Great Britain; represented by General Spears, would refuse to recognize the election of Emile Eddé. The rumor spread so rapidly that in less than fifteen minutes, the house was empty. It became a race of would arrive the soonest at the house of the future President Beshara el-Khoury, who lived 400 meters away. The same words spoken an hour earlier to pay tribute to Emile Eddé were now being used for Bechara el-Khoury. The more flattering they had been towards Emile Eddé before, the more hostile they became to him later. But the most amusing part is that some left so quickly that they left behind them their coats and hats and did not have the courage to come back out of fear of being seen entering the house of Emile Eddé, who had the elegance of discreetly sending them back to their owners.

In Lebanese politics, political recycling is a tradition and does not really surprise. Unfortunately naughty politicians will always find a way of doing business together.

* Amid the Bloc National.