

LCPS

المركز اللبناني للدراسات
The Lebanese Center
for Policy Studies



Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung

Arab Uprisings and Challenges of Change

August 2011
Roundtable reports series

The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that aims to produce independent, high quality research relevant to policymaking and to promote active reform through advocacy and raising public awareness.

The roundtable report series is a synthesis of the discussion and debate that LCPS organizes with key scholars, experts, journalists, and decision makers on pertinent and timely issues affecting Lebanon and the region. The purpose of the meeting is to provide a forum for an open and constructive exchange amongst the panelists in order to gain a better understanding of unfolding events and issues and to also initiate policy ideas and recommendation. To encourage open and frank debate, Chatham House Rule applies.

The report does not necessarily represent the views of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies or those of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

The report was revised and edited by Sami Atallah based on a draft by Joumana Farhat and comments by Rania Abi-Habib, Rania Jureidini, and James Reddick.

LCPS

The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies

POB 55-215, Vanlian Center, Eighth Floor - Mkalles Lebanon
T +961 1 48 64 29 /30/31 - F +961 1 49 03 75
info@lcps-lebanon.org - www.lcps-lebanon.org

Copyright© 2011. The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies

Executive Summary

- The lack of internal consensus on reforming the political system, as well as the regional and international support for the sectarian system, which is perceived as legitimate among the Lebanese, explain why the Arab uprising did not spill over into Lebanon.
- The political sectarian system must be reformed through an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process that enacts change within the existing institutional framework, as well as those prescribed in the Taef agreement.
- The Lebanese system cannot serve as a positive model for emerging Arab regimes, with the exception of countries bound to find a power-sharing solution in order to preserve sectarian and/or tribal interests.
- The newly formed government will face major challenges, including the uprising in Syria, the release of indictments in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and the socio-economic demands of citizens.
- Conditions in Syria will have an effect on Lebanon, though its severity depends on how Syria emerges from the uprising.

Introduction

Since the Tunisian revolution was sparked on October 17, 2010, unprecedented popular protests have taken the Arab region by storm and succeeded in toppling former Presidents Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. As both countries now seek to reorganize and reshape their political systems, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria are still in the grip of a conflict between regimes and popular groups. Several questions ought to be raised about Lebanon's position vis-à-vis these changes and their potential extension to Lebanon. With protests next door in Syria, which more than any other outside player has wielded great influence in Lebanon's political affairs, one needs to assess the repercussions of regional events on Lebanon's stability. Furthermore, the regional transformations towards democratic regimes raise serious questions as to how Lebanon could reform its own political sectarian system.

Amidst this background, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) organized a roundtable meeting to discuss and debate the impact of the Arab uprising on Lebanon's political system. The debate focused on the following three questions:

- What are the potential repercussions of the Arab uprisings on the newly formed government and its political agenda?
- What are the expected challenges and dangers threatening the political stability of Lebanon and the internal power balance?
- What are the potential opportunities provided by regional changes to introduce political reforms?

The roundtable is supported by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung - Amman office in Jordan, represented by Dr. Martin Beck, and moderated by LCPS' executive director,

Mr. Sami Atallah. Four distinguished panelists were convened: Dr. Talal Atrissi, Professor of Sociology at the Lebanese University, Mr. Nizar Saghie, attorney and independent researcher, Dr. Bassel Saloukh, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Lebanese American University, and Mr. Michael Young, political analyst and opinion editor at the Daily Star newspaper.

The following report summarizes the June 24, 2011 discussion on the effects of the Arab uprising on Lebanon's political stability.

Amid Arab Uprisings

As Arab uprisings gained momentum, a few protests of limited scope were organized in Lebanon. Unlike those which took place over the last five years, which were galvanized around the March 8 and March 14 camps, these protests steered away from political polarization and made specific social or economic demands.

First there was the prison "uprising" in April. This was triggered by inmates who sought the improvement of prison conditions and demanded a general amnesty. This event contributed to a launching of prison reform, including an increase in the prison sector budget from the state as well as promises of further reform. These assurances precipitated by the prison uprising exceed what has been achieved on this matter in the last 20 years. Second, in response to the state's decision to demolish illegal constructions on public properties after years of unpunished violations, citizens revolted against what they deemed to be an "uprising against the law" rather an "uprising for the rule of law". Those

opposing the state's decision believe that the law which the state is upholding is not being enforced on the rich and the elites. Third, demonstrations were also organized by women's rights groups in front of Dar el-Fatwa demanding an increase in age requirements for retaining custody of children. These demonstrations were the first to be organized by a group belonging to one sect demanding personal rights from their own community rather from the state.

Though these protests appeared within the context of revolts elsewhere in the region, their capacity to introduce change should not be overstated. In reality, they were only organized to call for specific rights rather than to attempt to enact widespread change to entire laws or to rebuild the political system.

However, the largest demonstrations recently were those against the sectarian system, during which the revolutionary slogan "the people want to topple the regime", heard throughout the Arab uprising, reached Lebanon. The protests against the sectarian system did not follow the same pattern as demonstrations in other Arab countries. While protests began on a limited scale in Tunisia and Egypt and progressively expanded until presenting a threat to respective regimes, protests in Lebanon started out small and grew in size, only to fizzle out soon after. Although the organizers had a common objective, they soon came into disagreement over the means and scope of their campaign.

Since the protests in Lebanon did not coalesce into a force that threatened the existing regime as in the case of other Arab countries, one can say the Lebanon has not been directly affected by the Arab uprising. Why did the protests against sectarianism fail to

threaten the regime? Why was the system in Lebanon able to absorb the protests? Lebanon lacks three major components that lend themselves to change or deep systemic reform. First, there is a lack of strong internal consensus for reforming the political system. Not all communities in Lebanon are convinced of the need to change the political institutions that govern the country. This lack of unanimity fuels the fears of certain groups concerned about their own fate and about the domination of one community at their expense. At the same time, there is no other force in Lebanon stronger than religious communities to impose their will to change the system or to lobby for its change.

Second, regional and international support for a political overhaul is also lacking, making meaningful change in Lebanon difficult. Throughout the country's history, regional and international parties have played a crucial role in dictating the rules of the game and refereeing disputes otherwise impossible to resolve internally, the fruits of which include the Taef agreement and the Doha accord.

Third, the sectarian nature of the political system in Lebanon also helps to shield it from unified popular dissent. Though the need for reform is unquestionable, the system enjoys as much legitimacy as is bestowed on its sectarian leaders, who have the capacity to mobilize citizens against opponents of the sectarian system.

In consequence, the structure of Lebanese politics generates two dynamics. First, the state apparatus as a whole is weakened, as religious communities exceed it in strength. As the state is marginalized, power is spread throughout communities and their leaders. Contrary to other Arab countries,

For Lebanon's political system to be reformed, it requires outside interventions, as the Taef agreement and the Doha accord show

no single leader has the capacity to seize power, making it more difficult to topple the Lebanese regime. Based on the above, the success of the sectarian system in absorbing reform dynamics should not come as a surprise, even more so as the proponents of change -the leaders of the anti-sectarian movement- have presented no framework for enacting change itself and remain divided between supporters of reform through “evolution” and through “revolution”. The revolutionary process, witnessed by Arab countries, is not viable in Lebanon since it may destabilize the country.

An evolutionary process would require the system to be changed within its institutions, which are themselves sectarian in composition. Similar to the process leading up to the Taef agreement, reform from within is lengthy and not linear. This path requires maximizing the primary characteristics of the Lebanese sectarian system, namely its diversity, while minimizing its limitations. Measures, some of which were already introduced by the Taef agreement, can be taken towards this end, such as the establishment of a committee for the purpose of abolishing sectarianism, as well as the creation of a Senate. Other measures can be adopted, such as introducing rotation among the sects for major civil service positions, adopting a proportional electoral law, decreasing the minimum voting age, reforming the judiciary and lobbying for the adoption of a civil marriage law. This approach requires the emergence of a public support for an alternative to sectarianism. A new public discourse is needed for real change to occur, as politicians are not expected to introduce change unless they are pressured from their own constituency.

Though the need for reform is unquestionable, the system enjoys as much legitimacy as is bestowed on its sectarian leaders

Drawing Benefits from Arab Uprisings

Despite its flaws, the Lebanese system has been considered preferable to its counterparts in the Arab world. As yet, no alternative models have come out of the Arab uprising, with the outcome of the Egyptian revolution still in question and the nature of the next political structure unknown. The situation in Yemen and Syria is still very much unclear. In order for Lebanon to benefit from regional developments, the next steps in the political process of the Arab countries in revolt will need to take shape. One arena in which Lebanon can benefit from experiences elsewhere is its judiciary, namely by learning from similar reforms in Tunisia and Egypt.

After attaining their freedom earlier this year, judges in Tunisia are now forming groups to debate their responsibilities within society, fully aware that their post-revolution role should focus on accountability and guaranteeing the rights of citizens. This experience provides valuable lessons for Lebanon since the marginalization of the judiciary as well as citizens’ rights, are now one of Lebanon’s major problems

and are preventing any political, economic or social change. This marginalization also impedes the transformation of the centralized but polarized sectarian system into one based on respect for the individual. Lebanon is likely to benefit from the Arab uprisings if the countries in turmoil

successfully adopt basic laws guaranteeing the rights of citizens, which can then spur mirror reforms in Lebanon.

The possibility of exporting Lebanon's political system to countries in turmoil depends on their own internal developments. If the reforms that were triggered by the uprising manage to guarantee basic rights for all citizens, the Lebanese sectarian model becomes no longer useful. However, if countries, especially those with a mosaic-like society, fail to guarantee such rights and sectarian polarization takes precedence, then the Lebanese political system becomes a governing model, despite its imperfection.

In a nutshell, Lebanon's political system is not in a position to make constructive contributions to the Arab revolutions. It can offer the Arab region a solution for power sharing that is sectarian and tribal, a possibility in Libya and Syria in particular.

Post-Uprising Challenges for the Lebanese Government

The region's uprisings have had varying repercussions on Lebanon. Protest movements in Yemen, Libya and Tunisia have had few direct effects. The protests in Bahrain only stirred the sympathy of the Shiite Lebanese with their counterpart demonstrators in Bahrain. The fall of the Egyptian regime, however, left a deep impact on Lebanon. Led by Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian regime was described as one of the pillars of "the axis of moderation" in the Arab region, along with Saudi Arabia. With Lebanese political parties divided between the "axis of moderation" and the "axis of resistance", the proponents of the former lost an ally with the fall of Mubarak, a boon to their political rivals.

Furthermore, the protests in Syria have had a direct impact on political life in Lebanon. For one, the formation

of the new government, which overlapped with events in Syria, was both arduous and contentious. This was not only because of the disagreements between the political parties over the portfolios and shares of the cabinet, but was also reflective of regional tension, particularly the turmoil in Syria. Note that regional and international factors play a crucial role in nominating both the President and Prime Minister.

The events in Syria might have led some parties to delay the formation of the new government, with the hope that a weaker Syrian regime would change the balance of power in Lebanon at the expense of Syria's allies. In response to this tactic, the political allies of Syria in Lebanon pushed forward with the formation of the government before things worsened, even at the expense of sacrificing a Shiite seat in the Council of Ministers.¹

How well the government will be able to perform is a topic of some debate. One point of view contends that the newly formed government will not be able to achieve much on the domestic front. For one, the politicized nature of the formation of the government might keep it as a hostage to the situation in Syria. Hence, the government must try to establish an internal preemptive safety net that shields it from regional events. Otherwise, Lebanon's stability could be compromised. With this rationale, March 14's refusal to join the government when it was invited to do so comes at the expense of Lebanon's political stability since the representation of all major political parties is necessary at such a critical time. Moreover, the indictments for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon will paralyze the government and will prevent it from meeting the socio-economic needs of the population.

¹Note that a 30 member cabinet is composed of 6 Shiites, 6 Sunnis, and 6 Maronites. The remaining 12 seats are distributed among the other sects.

Another point of view suggests the opposite: Because the government is made up largely of one camp, it has the opportunity to address socio-economic needs, particularly in some ministries like Labor, and even launch political reforms with regard to the electoral law and the judiciary. This perspective does not deny the challenges that lie ahead, as the government, even if unified in theory, remains vulnerable to internal dissent. Furthermore, the economy is expected to be the main bone of contention for the new government - especially the banking system. The case of Lebanese Canadian Bank has raised concerns that it signals a broader campaign from outside targeting the entire banking sector.

In either case, the government will have to prove that it is economically responsible and fiscally disciplined, especially in light of the current poor performance of other Arab economies.

Scenarios of Change in Syria and their Political Repercussions on Lebanon

The current situation in Syria is at best precarious. There are several scenarios of how the events could unfold. Depending on which direction the uprising takes, Lebanon could be affected dramatically. The five scenarios are as follows:

Scenario 1: The Syrian regime survives the crisis and adopts a power-sharing formula

The Syrian regime successfully steers clear of the crisis, absorbs the protest movements and regains control. Yet Syria does not go back to what it was. Finding a solution for power sharing, based on sectarian and ethnic divisions, will be necessary to preserve the

unity of the country. The Alawites will obtain some guarantees, while the Sunni majority shares power with the Alawite president through an elected Parliament. In this case, the effects on Lebanon will remain unchanged, with the same Syrian leadership in power.

Scenario 2: The Syrian regime is toppled, with Syria remaining unified

The regime falls while Syria remains united. But the powers to take over after the collapse remain unknown. Will the Muslim Brotherhood govern alone or within a coalition? If this were to happen, the repercussions on Lebanon are unclear. Will the new forces adopt a different approach towards Lebanon? Or will these powers enter a new phase of regional Sunni awakening, as the Brotherhood makes its entrance into politics in Egypt and other countries, making Lebanon a new source of conflict within which Syria supports specific forces in Lebanon.

Scenario 3: Syria falls into a long period of chaos and conflict

Syria enters a cold civil war, with varying intensity. The regime weakens and does not fall. Protestors are unable to take control, leaving the country in chaos and bloodshed. This scenario has serious repercussions on Lebanon. This sectarian-ethnic killing in Syria will likely spread to Lebanon, as Lebanese and Syrian societies are in many ways a mirror of each other.

Scenario 4: Syria breaks up into several states

The uprising in Syria might break the country into two states: The Tartus and the Alawite mountains would form one state, while the rest of the country makes up the other. Such a scenario would have a dangerous effect on sectarian relations in Lebanon. Many communities in Lebanon could start adopting the same

line of thinking, calling for a geographic separation. In addition to geographic proximity, the structure of Lebanese society is highly similar to that of the Syrian society in its sectarian makeup (Sunni, Shiite, Druze, Alawites, Kurds and Christians), though the formula to preserve sectarian diversity in both countries is different.

This scenario remains thorny at the moment, as it would require strong external backing and has a high political cost. Its repercussions will not be restricted to Syria or Lebanon, as it will whet the appetite of all minorities in the region and open the doors for new bloody conflicts over borders between countries.

Scenario 5: Syria engages in a war against Israel as a way to flee the crisis

A war between Israel and Syria or Israel and Hezbollah is waged. Some believe that Israel and Syria share a common goal in entering a direct war or involving Hezbollah in a war against Israel. As both the Israeli and Syrian governments face challenges, this scenario is as likely as ever. In September, Israel will have to face the Palestinian Authority's bid to the United Nations for recognition of a Palestinian State within the 1967 borders.

Expectations suggest that Israel might seek to divert attention to another front, with Lebanon being its primary victim. Yet it is unlikely for Syria to try to seek an exit from its domestic crisis by launching a war with Israel, fought by Syria itself or by Hezbollah, especially given that the situation in Syria has not yet reached the point of no return. The Syrian regime still has a base of support and is relatively firmly grounded. Therefore, Syria will not embark on an adventure whose outcome is highly uncertain and

which might engulf the entire region; it still has other cards to play in the region.

The protests in Syria also raise questions about the position of Hezbollah, which is very uneasy about the current situation. But Hezbollah does not want chaos, civil war, or the rise of an unknown regime to take over, which might jeopardize the party's political and military apparatus. Another challenge will be in how Lebanese powers opposing the Syrian regime

will deal with its fall or change. Though these forces wish to benefit from any change, caution remains necessary, as any step might breach the tenuous peace between Sunni and Shiite.

The worst scenario for Lebanon: Syria falls into a long period of conflict or it breaks up into two states

The Iranian Role and Saudi Interest in Syria

Saudi Arabia and Iran have divergent standpoints vis-à-vis developments in Syria. When Mubarak fell and the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen came under threat, Saudi Arabia was deeply worried and destabilized, having lost one ally and being on the verge of losing another. As protests spread to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia made a conclusive decision to intervene directly to protect the ruling family and prevent any revolution in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia also cannot afford any change in Bahrain that might inspire its own Shiite community to demand rights similar to those conceded in Bahrain should true reform have been carried out. Having lost its Egyptian ally, Saudi Arabia has viewed the protests in Syria as the opportunity to restore regional balance.

On the other hand, Iran was initially content to see Mubarak fall, Yemen in turmoil, and Bahrain flaring up in front of the Saudis. These events would have tipped the regional balance of power towards Iran at the expense of Saudi Arabia. However, when the uprising in Syria picked up steam it became nervous at the prospect of seeing Assad removed from power. After all Syria provides the Iranian regime the space to extend its political and military power into the Levant. The direct implication of this development on Lebanon depends on how Hezbollah perceives and reacts to these unfolding events.

Conclusions

Six months after the first Arab uprising in Tunisia, several conclusions can be drawn regarding Lebanon's position:

Lebanon will find it difficult to shield itself from the repercussions of Arab protests, especially with an uprising next door in Syria. Nonetheless, similar uprisings are unlikely to occur in Lebanon, despite the drawbacks of the sectarian system. In this regard, the limited protests in Lebanon over the past few months have proven unable to form a real threat to the structure of the system and to potentially topple it. Thus, the best solution to reform the Lebanese system is to adopt an evolutionary rather than revolutionary process, i.e. to create change through the institutions already in place. Such a choice requires time and efforts, as reforms will need to be agreed upon by the Lebanese.

As countries witnessing uprisings await a new political model to mold itself, Lebanon has only been able to draw limited benefits from the Arab uprising thus far, namely through legal reforms. At the same time, countries in revolt have little to benefit from the sectarian Lebanese system.

Economic and social issues remain the priority for the current government, in addition to the need for Lebanon to immunize itself from regional changes, especially the potential repercussions of Syrian events on Lebanon's stability. As the Lebanese system is deeply connected to the Syrian situation, the current government of Lebanon cannot be expected to achieve radical reforms under the current circumstances.

Panelists

Sami Atallah

Sami Atallah is the director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS). Prior to joining LCPS, he served as a consultant for the World Bank, the European Union and the UNDP in Syria and Saudi Arabia as well as with The Dubai Economic Council. He also served as an advisor for the Lebanese Ministries of Finance, Industry, and Interior and Municipalities, as well as in the Prime Minister's Office. His policy research work spans the fields of fiscal decentralization and municipal finance, corruption and governance, institutions and development, industrial policy, and competitiveness of firms. Atallah is pursuing a PhD in Politics at New York University. He holds two masters degrees, one in International and Development Economics from Yale University and the other in Quantitative Methods from Columbia University.

Talal Atrissi

Talal Atrissi is a Professor of Sociology at the Lebanese University. He was the former director of the Institute of Social Sciences at the Lebanese University and the former director of the Center for Strategic Studies. He is a researcher and writer on the Middle East and has written articles and books and participated in local, regional and international seminars on Middle Eastern political, cultural and strategic issues, and in particular on the Iranian and the Islamic movements issues. He holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Sorbonne - Paris.

Martin Beck

Martin Beck who is currently on leave of absence from GIGA Institute of Middle East Studies in Hamburg, Germany, has been the Resident Representative of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Amman, Jordan, since 2010. He served as Visiting Professor at Denver University, USA; Birzeit University, Palestine; the University of the Federal Armed Forces in Hamburg, Germany; and the University of Bremen, Germany. He has published extensively both in German and English on Middle Eastern affairs. He obtained his Ph.D. as well as his "Habilitation" in political science from Tübingen University, Germany.

Nizar Saghieh

Nizar Saghieh is a practicing lawyer and independent researcher. He has authored several books on judiciary reform, the electoral system reform in Lebanon and the Lebanese war. He recently launched Legal Agenda - Al Mufakkira Al Qanuniyya - a non-governmental, non-profit organization based in Beirut that monitors judiciary, law and public policy in Lebanon and the Arab region. Saghieh is a frequent contributor to newspapers and magazines in Lebanon.

Bassel Salloukh

Bassel F. Salloukh is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Lebanese American University in Beirut. He has authored and co-authored many publications on political reform in the Arab world, the domestic and foreign politics of Lebanon and Syria, and Middle East international relations. He is Senior Non-Resident Research Fellow at the Interuniversity Consortium for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies (ICAMES) in Montréal, Canada. He has served as consultant to the UN-ESCWA (Beirut), Medecins Sans Frontieres' Beirut office, and a number of private organizations, and is also expert commentator for a number of media outlets in North America, Europe, and the Middle East. He received his Ph.D. and M.A. in Political Science from McGill University (Dean's Honour List) and his Honours B.A. in Political Science from McMaster University (Summa Cum Laude).

Michael Young

Michael Young is the opinion editor of the Daily Star newspaper in Beirut as well as a contributing editor for Reason Magazine. He contributes regularly to publications in Lebanon, the United States and Europe, and has published in The New York Times, The New York Times Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, Slate, Tech Central Station, the International Herald Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, Index on Censorship, L'Orient-Express and others. He has appeared on a variety of radio and television stations in recent years including CNN, the BBC, and NPR. He received an M.A. in international relations, specializing in the Middle East, from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington.