CHAPTER TEN

LEBANESE ARAB NATIONALISTS AND CONSOCIATIONAL DEMOCRACY DURING THE FRENCH MANDATE PERIOD

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Introduction

An active member of a Lebanese human rights organization recently suggested organizing a conference on consociational democracy in Lebanon. The organization rejected the proposed conference. Using the term “consociational democracy” interchangeably with confessionalism, sectarian divisions, and disintegration, the organization argued that it is a sham democracy that undermines individual liberty, constitutional governments, and the rule of law.

The counter-argument usually presented by the Lebanese consociationalists maintains that, in spite of the deficiencies of consociational democracy, it is more capable of defending the values of freedom, constitutionalism, and the rule of law in the Arab world than other existing political systems in the region. It is true that consociational democracy, as attested by Lebanon's history, failed to cement national cohesion in the country and provided, at certain stages of Lebanese history, fertile ground for civil wars, and hence for the occasional disruption of the development of the democratic system. However, consociationalists point out that this failure characterized the political development of other countries in the region with various systems, such as Iraq, Sudan, Algeria etc. In other words, from the consociationalist point of view, civil wars are not necessarily symptomatic of consociational democracy, but also of a variety of systems in the region.

Since I believe that there is some truth in this argument, it is deemed relevant to discuss consociational democracy in Lebanon in a book that focuses on liberal thought in the Eastern Mediterranean.

However, in preparing this chapter, I had to contend with two problems: First, the problem of having to describe the attitude of the Lebanese Arab nationalists throughout the French mandatory period—specifically the fact that for years the Arab nationalists of Lebanon
considered themselves “Syrian” rather than “Lebanese” nationals, aside from often being referred to simply as “Lebanese Muslims.” This meant that the Lebanese Arab nationalists were for the most part pursuing their aims jointly with other Arab nationalists, especially the Syrians among them, and that they were associated with the Muslim community. Hence the confusion between the Lebanese and non-Lebanese Arab nationalists, and between the Lebanese Muslims and Arab nationalists respectively.

In dealing with the first problem, I aim to identify the attitudes of the Lebanese Arab nationalists separately from the positions adopted by the Arab nationalists at the regional level, or jointly with the Syrian Arab nationalists, or by the Islamic community in Lebanon. Bearing in mind that these attitudes were discussed, defined, and made known to the public through a multitude of pan-Arab activities, forums, and initiatives, I should concede in advance that I will not be able to adhere very strictly to this task of “hair-splitting.”

The second problem pertains to having to identify the attitude toward consociational democracy during the period between the two world wars, though this concept was articulated, refined, and applied to Lebanon during the second half of the twentieth century.

For this reason, I will focus on those features of Lebanese politics during the assigned period that relate to consociational democracy. I am encouraged by the fact that this retroactive approach, as it were, has been tried before by several writers on democracy and consociationalism. Some have applied it to the Ottoman Empire itself, which was seen as a “consociational regime” in its own right.¹

To turn to the characteristics of consensus democracy, Arend Lijphart singled out four main ones: segmental autonomy; grand coalition; proportionality; and mutual veto. These usually characterize governments of an “elite cartel designed to turn democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy.”² The emergence of this system presupposes the existence of a polity that develops as a result of an agreement among its various segments. The process of attaining and maintaining this political entity with a system of consociational democracy is described as “negotiated democracy,” which entails compromise,