Lebanon: a "cedar revolution"?

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It has been compared it to last year?s "Orange Revolution" in the Ukraine. That may be about right. Neither side in the crisis that has erupted since the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, widely attributed to Syria?s security forces, has anything to offer the Lebanese masses.

The opposition, with its calls for the withdrawal of all Syrian forces and a transitional government pending May?s elections, are defending not Lebanese independence and democracy, but sectarian privilege. The make-up of their leadership reflects this. Their most prominent leader is Amin Gemayel of the Phalange party, who assumed the Lebanese presidency in 1982 on the back of an Israeli occupation, following his brother Bashir?s assassination. While today he denounces the "Syrian occupation" of Lebanon, he had no problem in cooperating with Israel, going so far as to sign a peace agreement in 1983 with Menachem Begin?s government, before being forced to abrogate it by a Muslim-led insurgency.

Alongside him stands Walid Jumblatt, leader of the traditional sectarian party of the Druze community. While he has called for a gradual Syrian withdrawal ever since Israel?s humiliating retreat from Lebanon in the spring of 2000, the his joining of forces with his bitter enemy for much of the 1970s and 1980s reflects the declining importance of the Druze in Lebanon?s sectarian jigsaw. Like the Maronites, the Druze too feel the demographic threat from the Shia Muslims, who today are Lebanon?s single largest confessional grouping.

The inclusion in their ranks of Hariri?s mainly Sunni Muslim supporters in no way makes the opposition a non-confessional movement, any more than the presence of a Christian Maronite, President Emile Lahoud, in the "pro-Syrian" government makes it representative of Lebanon?s Christians.

The "Gucci revolution"

What sort of forces do they represent? Hariri?s funeral attracted around 10,000 people, while the demonstration on 28 February that provoked prime minister Omar Karami?s resignation has been estimated at 70,000. Subsequently, the "anti-Syrian" demonstrations dwindled to a few thousand or a few hundred. In contrast, the march called by Hizballah in support of Syria on 8 March attracted upwards of 500,000.

In its early phase, the opposition marches were not so much a case of "people power" as of a "Gucci revolution", although the 14 March demonstration of an estimated 800,000 attracted more plebeian elements among the Sunni Muslims, alarmed at what they saw as a manifestation of Shia strength the previous week. It nevertheless remains a Christian-led movement of the more privileged elements of the population. There is more than an element of class hatred in the disdain in which they hold Syria and its supporters.

The idea that these forces represent "Lebanese democracy" is a joke. If they were really concerned for Lebanese democracy, then they would demand the abolition of Lebanon?s confessional system. They do
not, because that would only further undermine the disproportionate influence that their sectarian constituencies still enjoy in the post-civil war Lebanon of the 1989 Taif agreement.

The ?pro-Syrian? government and its allies

What, then of the ?pro-Syrians”? President Lahoud and his Sunni Muslim prime minister, Omar Karami, represent little more than the interests of the confessional elites that ruled Lebanon in an unstable coalition from its independence from France to the start of civil war in 1975. They have seen off challenges from more extreme rivals on their own sides of the sectarian divide only by agreeing to resolve their differences under Syrian tutelage.

The corruption with which they oversaw Lebanon?s ?reconstruction? in the 1990s is well known, although Hariri was then with them and his hands were also less than clean. More important has been their disregard for democratic norms, ranging from the redrawing of parliamentary boundaries to reduce the representation of ?anti-Syrian? candidates, to the physical intimidation of political opponents and business rivals. The final straw was their move to amend Lebanon?s constitution to allow Lahoud to serve another term as president, forcing Hariri to resign as prime minister in October 2004, and forcing Jumblatt to step openly into the ?anti-Syrian? camp.

Sheikh Nasrallah of Hizballah may command mass support among the Shia Muslims, and a degree of respect far beyond for his movement?s role in fighting the Israeli occupation, but he cannot unite significant sections of the masses beyond the confines of his own constituency.

The role of imperialism

As in the Ukraine, the demonstrators received considerable moral, if not material, backing from imperialism. The US withdrew its ambassador from Damascus in protest the day after Hariri?s assassination on 14 February, without any evidence of Syria?s involvement. Jacques Chirac combined his very public condolences to Hariri?s widow with a call on Syria to observe September 2004?s United Nations Resolution 1559, which called for the withdrawal of all Syrian forces from Lebanon, and for Hizballah?s disarmament. Even the UK?s foreign secretary Jack Straw got in on the act, expressing regret at Karami?s reappointment.

The background to all this is Syria?s growing isolation following the US occupation of Iraq and the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian ?peace process? following the election of Mahmoud Abbas as Palestinian leader; the fact that Lebanon and Syria remain the only Arab states technically at war with Israel; and the openly-stated threats of some in the US administration against Syria and Iran. This international pressure, combined with the unspoken but obvious military pressure from the US and/or Israel, emboldened the ?anti-Syrian? demonstrators to up the ante.

The hypocrisy of the imperialists and their allies in this crisis has been sickening. Israel has flouted UN resolutions for decades without earning for itself this kind of pressure or isolation. Putin?s record in occupying Chechnya should be enough to nullify anything he might have to say about democracy or human rights. And for the US and UK to demand the withdrawal of Syrian troops as a precondition for free and fair elections, when they have only just stage-managed elections under curfew in an occupied Iraq just takes the biscuit.

Syria?s role in Lebanon

No socialist should attempt to prettify Syria?s role in Lebanon, or to dress it up in the ?anti-imperialist? colouration that the regime itself adopts. It has been characterised chiefly by the pursuit of the regime?s
narrow political and strategic interests, its fear of revolution, and by its own deals with imperialism. That Syrian forces have remained in Lebanon until now, when under the Taif agreement they were scheduled to withdraw in 1992, is the result of a quid pro quo with the United States, following Syria?s support for the coalition that ejected Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991.

The Taif agreement

Syria today maintains that its role in Lebanon is to oversee the implementation of the Taif agreement that ended the civil war, and to protect Lebanon from Israel and its agents. But what in the agreement is worth defending? It enshrines the institutionalised sectarianism that formed the basis of the confessional 1943 National Pact, whose instability paved the way for the eruption of civil war in 1975. It merely defers a future sectarian conflict when this agreement, in its turn, no longer reflects Lebanon?s demographic balance. In particular it confines the Shia Muslims to a role much smaller than that warranted either by their size, by their role in the Lebanese resistance to the Israeli occupation, or by their military significance given that Hizballah remains the only militia not disarmed under the Taif agreement.

At best, the it redistributes the division of power between the various confessional groupings, giving the Christian five parliamentary seats to every five held by Muslims, in place of the previous ratio of six Christians to five Muslims. The president remains a Christian Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim. Lebanon?s political parties remain the representatives of one or another single sectarian constituency.

As to the claim that Syria?s presence is essential for Lebanon?s defence against Israel, the Baathist regime has rarely ever played this role when it had the opportunity, and in any case has outsourced it to the guerrillas of Hizballah. That Syria can afford to withdraw its already much-reduced military presence from Lebanon without undermining its own security concerns on this score is a function of the undoubted heroism of the Lebanese resistance, and speaks volumes about the usefulness and reliability of the Baathist regime as an ally against imperialism and Zionism.

Socialists, the Syrian-Lebanese question and the current crisis

Syria?s key strategic concern in Lebanon is to prevent the emergence of a Lebanese government that might make a separate peace agreement with Israel. As anti-imperialists and anti-Zionists, we can certainly share this concern. It is probably what prompted the half a million who demonstrated in support of Syria on 8 March, while the desire for ?normalisation? of relations with Israel is amongst the unspoken objectives of some of the opposition.

But we cannot suppose for a moment that the maintenance of a united front against imperialism and Zionism is best served by a strategic alliance with the Baathist regime in Damascus, by support for its undemocratic governmental allies in Beirut, or even by the continuation of Syria?s military presence against the clear opposition of a large part of Lebanon?s population. In fact, the Syrian regime?s role is a double-edged sword. If and when the Syrian bourgeoisie reach their own accommodation with the Zionist state, they will wish to take Lebanon with them. And those who have placed misguided confidence in Syria?s self-appointed position as the guardian of Arab nationalism in Lebanon, as in June 1976, will find themselves unprepared for betrayal.

In this respect, we can share some of the attitude of the Hizballah-led demonstrators, who backed the Syrian withdrawal while calling for the maintenance of Syria and Lebanon?s ?fraternal ties". These ties will outlast Syria?s military presence, because, contrary to the claims of the imperialists, they are not solely or even primarily the result of Syrian coercion. They are the result, partly of Lebanon?s confessional
divisions, and partly also of the spontaneous aspirations to solidarity against imperialism and Zionism of key sections of the Syrian and Lebanese masses. The former we should wish to overcome, while the latter we should wish to develop to its logical conclusion: a common revolutionary struggle against all of the agents of capitalism and imperialism in the region, up to and including the Baathist regime in Damascus.

Our slogans in the current situation are:

No to imperialist intervention in Lebanon Against the imperialist and Zionist offensive on Syria and Iran No to the disarmament of Hizballah in the interests of imperialism Against a separate peace with the Zionist state No to sectarian partition - yes to democratic rights for all of Lebanon?s minorities For a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of one person one vote For full political, social and economic rights for Lebanon?s Palestinian refugees No confidence in the Damascus regime - yes to common struggle against imperialism No support for Lahoud and Karami - for the political independence of the masses For a party of the Lebanese working class, allied to the global anti-capitalist movement For the national self-determination of all oppressed peoples For a socialist federation of the Middle East