The
STRUGGLE
OVER
LEBANON
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The Early Years: Independence and the National Pact

Lebanon's charter for independence, known as the National Pact, is unwritten. Jointly produced in 1943 behind closed doors by President Bishara al-Khuri and his prime minister, Riyad al-Sulh, an Arab nationalist of impeccable credentials, it was designed to assure perpetuation of the Lebanese entity in its existing form. Its terms included:

1. An independent, sovereign, and neutral Lebanon in which Muslims renounced any idea of union with Syria, or any other Arab state, in return for Christian renunciation of separatism and special ties with France or any other foreign power.

2. Muslim acceptance of Lebanon's "Christian character" in return for Christian acceptance of its "Arab face." Although these ambiguous terms provoked endless argument, the meaning was plain. The Christian and Muslim bourgeoisie were in agreement on the advantage of Lebanon's political distancing from the rest of the Arab world and on its vocation as an intermediary between international capitalism and Arab markets. This compromise smoothed the way for the bourgeoisie, Christian and Muslim, to develop lucrative commercial and financial relations with the oil states.

3. Sectarian allotment of seats in parliament on the basis of a six-to-five Christian-Muslim ratio; "balanced" representation in the cabinet, with the offices of president, prime minister, and speaker of the house assigned respectively and in perpetuity to the Maronite, Sunni, and Shi'a communities. In the cabinet, this meant in practice reserving specific ministries to certain sects (e.g., foreign affairs and education to Maronites or Greek Catholics, defense to non-Christian sects, interior and agriculture usually to Sunnis), with other ministries being subject to bargaining. Since actual control of a department usually rests with its director-general—a permanent employee who operates
as head of the administration—the posts of directors-general, also distributed by sect, tended to become sectarian fiefdoms.

The National Pact was intended not only as a *modus vivendi* between the Maronite and Sunni communities, but also as a means to break a popular drive for secularization. A spontaneous national gathering in November 1943 to protest France’s attempt to abrogate its commitment to Lebanon’s independence displayed a national will overriding sectarian complexes. Although these reemerged when independence was achieved, the experience of the national awakening convinced many, especially the young of all sects, of the need to adopt a modern, secular political system on the Western model. A strong current demanding secularization developed, finding wide expression in the press and in parliament where a young Druze deputy, Kamal Jumblat, became a leader of the movement.

Even Prime Minister al-Sulh felt compelled to bow to this pressure. In ministerial declarations in 1943 and 1944 he called sectarianism “the strongest of the internal chains” preventing the country’s advance, “the first evil to be erased from the system,” and he solemnly pledged to seek its phased abolition.

He never did. The system exactly suited the needs and ambitions of the bourgeois, feudal, clerical, and bureaucratic ruling strata of the major communities. For it achieved a carefully calculated sharing of the spoils of office and power among the elites of the major sects, a share-out sufficient to unite the privileged of all major communities in the common cause of defending their privileges. In the words of the French political scientist Maurice Duverger, the sectarian system serves to “consolidate the domination of the privileged classes” since it “tends to unite the ruling classes and divide the downtrodden.” Most Lebanese knew nothing of the so-called National Pact of 1943 until 1946 or after. Nor were the leaders of other communities consulted about this crucial agreement concerning the country’s political structure.

In perpetuating Lebanon’s existence as a collection of seventeen closed sectarian units, the National Pact distorted the limited operation of the “democratic” institutions established in the French-drafted 1926 constitution, which was adopted on the achievement of independence. The stipulation of a six-to-five Christian-Muslim ratio in parliament, as well as the arrangements governing the allotment of all civil service posts on a sectarian basis, for example, violate Lebanon’s constitution, which restricts sectarianism to the executive branch and guarantees every Lebanese civil and further, the sectarian system ineffective—already considerable under “virtual omnipotence.” The president, cabinet (which cannot take decision or he can dissolve or sui exclusive right to initiate laws and a law not acted upon by parliament execute the budget and other projecion. He alone negotiates and ratifies inform parliament only if he decide the state permit. As a result his posit unparalleled.

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The Patron–Client System

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guarantees every Lebanese civil and political equality under the law.
Further, the sectarian system inflates the power of the chief exec-
utive—already considerable under the constitution—to a position of
“virtual omnipotence.” The president holds at his mercy both the
abinet (which cannot take decisions in his absence) and the parlia-
ment (which he can dissolve or suspend at will). He has the almost
exclusive right to initiate laws and can promulgate any “urgent” draft
law not acted upon by parliament within forty days. Thus he can
execute the budget and other projects without a parliamentary deci-
sion. He alone negotiates and ratifies treaties, about which he must
inform parliament only if he decides that the interest and security of
the state permit. As a result his position as a dispenser of patronage is
unparalleled.3

Yet Lebanon’s presidents have tended to be ineffective, if dic-
tatorial, since a bureaucracy to execute policy has never existed.4
Presidents usually govern by exploiting rivalries among the zuama
and distributing favors. And since ministers lack a common program
or party affiliation, they can do little more than carry out the presi-
dent’s will. The absence of authentic political parties has meant that
the function of parliament differs from that of parliaments in the West.
In Lebanon, parliament’s role has been to preclude any change in the
sectarian balance and so safeguard the interests of the ruling strata of
the major communities. In fifty years of parliamentary life only 359
deputies, representing 210 families (about 8 percent of the total) have
won parliamentary seats, and of these more than 300 have “inherited”
their seats from a relative.5 Parliamentary democracy, wrote the
Lebanese journalist Georges Naccache in 1952, “in the present
framework of our political society is the most oppressive form of
government; it only mortgages national sovereignty in instituting the
dictatorship of a club of notables.”6

The Patron-Client System

The deputy’s function remains that of providing services to his
cliente. The political structure—state–citizen or state–political-par-
ty–citizen—does not exist in Lebanon, where the structure is zaïm–
sectarian-community–extended family. Each zaïm has his own politi-
cal machine made up of qabadayat (plural of qabaday) and their