

Exclusive WSN- interview with Samy Gemayel
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The Lebanese are left to choose their own path and destiny" Manuela Paraipan
01 Apr 2008

http://www.analyst-network.com/article.php?art_id=1915

WSN: We met in 2005 to discuss Lebanon's political situation. What has changed and what has stayed the same since that time?

Samy Gemayel: Let's make a brief panorama of the current situation. I will start with the things that changed. No Syrian occupation. This is a major change.

The Lebanese are left alone to try to build their country even if a part of the population is still under Syrian influence or attached to Syrian interests and views. This is based on their free will. Nobody is pointing a gun at the Shiite population to defend Syria. They could be taking the same stance as "March 14", but they are not doing it ("March 14" is the alliance between the Sunni Future Movement led by Saad Hariri, the Christian Lebanese Forces Party led by Samir Geagea, the Druze Progressive Socialist Party of Wallid Jumblatt, the Christian Kataeb Party- Lebanese Phalanges – led by Amine Gemayel. "March 14" has been labeled as a pro-West group, close to USA, Saudi Arabia and few European countries). For different reasons and maybe we'll talk about it later, why Hezbollah has this attitude and why the population follows Hezbollah.

The Lebanese are left to choose their own path and destiny. In previous years, it was the Syrians and not the Lebanese that chose the political course for us. We feel that we have much more freedom today, to say whatever we want, to have the political language that we want. There is no oppression of any kind today. The politically correct language is the only restraint. Maybe if you talk outside the box, you cannot be part of the alliances or you cannot be in the front line with all the great leaders we have today, but no one is putting you in jail for your views.

WSN: You have freedom at the people level. Do you have freedom - politically speaking - at the highest level? Like the freedom to elect the president?

SG: We have freedom. However, nowadays we have a conflict between factions and parties.

The Lebanese population is divided on the crucial issues. And the Lebanese constitution, which is a consensual one based on consensual democracy, is made so that decisions cannot be taken without consent. This is why we have this situation today, not because someone is preventing us from taking decisions. Because our political system is based on consent. If you do not have it, you cannot go further. This is the problem.

WSN: You have two blocks: "March 14" and "March 8" ("March 8" is the alliance between the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) of General Michel Aoun, the Shia Amal Party of Speaker Nabih Berri and the Shia Hezbollah of Sheik Hassan Nasrallah. ("March 8" has been labeled as pro-Iran and pro-Syria) What are the most important matters the blocks cannot agree upon?

SG: In all the countries in the world, the majority rules and the minority is in the opposition. When a majority wins, it forms a government and the government is free to make all the decisions it wants, as long as it has the blessing of the parliament. In a normal country, things work like that. In Lebanon, the

government cannot be formed unless all the Lebanese religious communities or community parties are represented. There is no opposition.

What I am saying is that we cannot today elect a president or do any institutional process if one of the communities wants to veto the institutions, to block the institutions. Every community today has the power to do so. This is consensual democracy. There are strict rules for the presidential elections. Two thirds of the members of parliament must be present in order to validate presidential elections. In other words, if more than a third of the deputies don't want the elections to be held, then the elections cannot be held. We cannot make any decisions without the approval of the principle communities, the Druze, Christians, Shiia and the Sunnis.

WSN: What other issues are there in addition to the presidential elections?

SG: The international tribunal was and still is one very important matter that divides the two camps. Even if the tribunal was voted and is now in the hands of the UN, there are still ways of interfering in the process of the international tribunal. It is a half-international, half-Lebanese tribunal. You have Lebanese judges; therefore in a way the process can be slowed down or maybe stopped by any change in the country. Perhaps the minister of justice can ask the judges to retire and as such the tribunal can be blocked.

The question of Hezbollah's weapons is another matter opposing the two camps. And the relations with Syria. "March 14" has a view on these issues that "March 8" does not share. "March 14" accuses Syria of perpetrating all the assassinations in Lebanon in the past years. The opposition says that the Israelis did it.

In all countries, there is a diversity of views. You resort to the people, to the parliamentary elections and people decide what they want. They take side with one party or the other and then the winning party has the right to implement its policies. In Lebanon this is not the case. In order to rule, you need the blessing of the opposition. This is blocking the institutions. The consensual democracy and the political regime are the core problems. The current crisis is proof of what I said to you in 2005.

WSN: How do you see the role of Christians in this conflict?

SG: Christians should have their own realistic and objective views. You have to say on the one hand that Hezbollah should be disarmed, that the Syrian regime should be brought to justice for all the acts it perpetrated in the last 30 years, for bombing the country, for assassinating personalities for the past 30 years. On the other hand, Christians should be asking for the international tribunal and also for more participation in the government. They have to be more aggressive regarding their rights. Christians should adopt the good slogans from both camps and be very strict when it comes to Hezbollah's arms, the international tribunal, Lebanese sovereignty, independence and freedom and the alignment with the West. At the same time, they should ask for more rights and a better electoral law that would ensure a fair representation for them.

WSN: What do you think of the law from 1960 and the Fuad Boutros alternative?

SG: The Foud Boutros law is a very good one, although it is not easy for the population to understand because it mixes the proportional system with the majority system. It needs more clarification and awareness campaigns at the local level.

WSN: For the time being, would the 1960 law work?

SG: The law of 1960 is better than the law adopted today, but we think it is not sufficient. We want to have three deputies by area, and thus smaller constituencies. With the 1960 law you have bigger areas.

WSN: Have you had talks about this law with March 8?

SG: No. Not yet. We think that the talk about the electoral law is a diversion from electing the president. We don't want to divert the focus from the presidential elections to something else.

WSN: Will you have a president before the summit?

SG: You should ask someone who reads the moon and stars.

WSN: There have been talks on this matter for a long time now. Is there agreement on who should be the next president?

SG: Officially everyone agrees on the person.

WSN: Then what is the problem? The March 8 requests?

SG: At first they asked for a consensus president, they did not ask for anything else. When we agreed, they started to put up more conditions and ask for more - from the formation of the government, to minister distribution, the electoral law, the president of the government and this can go on and on. This is why we think they do not want elections to be held.

WSN: We talked about Hezbollah's weapons. Has there been a discussion as to how to disarm Hezbollah? Any new developments on the matter? I know Nabih Berri initiated the talks in 2006, then the war broke out and everything stopped.

SG: We never reached an agreement on this problem. This is a delicate subject for "March 8". They do not want to talk about it.

WSN: Then this is not a subject on the table?

SG: It is on the table. It's just that "March 8" does not want to talk about it.

We should start by not complying with their requests. We should start a political debate on the matter of the weapons and let the Lebanese people decide what to do about them. After the July war and taking into consideration what Hezbollah is doing today, I believe that the people of Lebanon are convinced that we cannot continue to tolerate a militia that remains outside the control of government decisions.

WSN: Did "March 14" enter into a defensive mood? And if it did, why? In 2005 you had momentum - everyone backed "March 14" - but then something happened and "March 14" started to step back.

SG: We wanted to remove Lahoud from office. That was the situation back then. Today, we are paying the price for the bad decisions that were taken a few years ago.

WSN: It appears that Lebanon is being used by various countries regionally and internationally in their struggle for power and influence in the region. What are your thoughts on this?

SG: You have the regional conflict today opposing Sunni and Shiia in all of the Middle Eastern countries. The United States and Europe are concerned because oil is crucial and so is the energy exported from the region.

That's why this conflict is very important for the West and that's why everybody is putting their nose into the current crisis. What we have in Lebanon is a small example of the whole picture. If the Shiia win, Iran will have the upper hand and alongside it, Syria. If the Sunni win, Saudi Arabia will be the winner. Maybe 50% if not more of the current crisis is a consequence of a much larger conflict at greater level.

WSN: It has then gone beyond being a national crisis. That makes it more difficult for the Lebanese to make decisions for themselves.

SG: It would have been easier without the problems that we have at the regional level. However, this is an internal problem based on the problem of power sharing between communities.

WSN: The international, regional and national problems are then intertwined?

SG: It has always been like this in Lebanon. When the war started in 1975 between the Palestinians and Christians, it was pushed by the United States and by Israel. The Kissinger plan was to settle the Palestinians here.

The eternal division along sectarian lines (Christian and Muslim) was added to the Kissinger project. In 1958 when Gamal Abdul Nasser brought Egypt and Syria together to form the United Arab Republic and tried to pull Lebanon into this plan, there were also conflicts between Muslims and Christians on the identity of Lebanon. One way or another, it is always the division between the Lebanese that has been exploited by regional powers. If the Lebanese were united and really close to each other, the regional problems would have little or no consequence on our internal affairs.

WSN: In your opinion, do you see any solution being adopted anytime soon?

SG: No.

WSN: Things will remain status quo?

SG: Yes, status quo until there is change on a certain level - regional, international or maybe internal.