

Lebanon and Tunisia: Educated Populations, Troubled Economies

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Global Research, July 29, 2021

[The Jordan Times](#) 27 July 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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*The Lebanese parliament concluded consultations on Monday on the appointment of **ex-Premier Najib Mikati** to head a fully-fledged government to tackle the country’s economic collapse, while Tunisians celebrated the dismissal by **President Kais Saied** of **Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi** and 30-day suspension of parliament. Saied also announced plans to strip legislators of their immunity and take over the office of state prosecutor.*

Lebanon has boasted a sectarian-power-sharing quasi-democracy since securing independence from France in 1943, while Tunisia gained independence in 1957 under revolutionary autocrat Habib Bourguiba, who was overthrown in 1987 by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. He was toppled during the 2011 Arab Spring and replaced by a semi-presidential representative democratic republic.

Lebanon has 4.5 million citizens and 1.5 million Syrian and other foreign residents. Tunisia has 11 million people. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, both countries have exported nationals seeking their fortunes elsewhere.

Both Western-leaning Lebanon and Tunisia have educated populations, well-developed but troubled economies stricken with high unemployment, mismanagement and corruption. Both are heavily dependent on tourism, foreign aid and remittances from citizens living abroad. Both are widely afflicted by COVID, which has deepened the miseries of their people.

Lebanon has been brought low by the most critical economic crisis suffered by any country since the middle of the 19th century; Tunisia by decades of underinvestment in infrastructure, agriculture, industry and job creation.

Unlike Tunisians, Lebanese did not rise up in 2011 but waited until October 2019 to pour into the streets demanding effective governance, the ouster of the political elite, and an end to the sectarian system of governance. Since then, the politicians have refused to grant the demands of the people and clung to power, driving the country to the brink of ruin.

Tunisians believed their troubles would diminish and, perhaps, be resolved after Ben Ali’s

departure, free and fair elections were held, and democrats took charge, but they failed to deliver the populace from graft and want.

While Tunisia remains a restive state, Lebanon never really attained statehood.

Tunisia's uprising was the first and only Arab Spring movement to adopt democracy. But after 57 years of post-independence autocracy under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, Tunisian politicians have been unable to make democracy work. There have been eight prime ministers in 10 years. In 2020, as the economy contracted by 9 per cent, the international community ignored Tunisia, the country was compelled to pay debts incurred during the authoritarian regimes and foreign banks refused to seize and repatriate ill-gotten funds of former rulers. The government dickered with the International Monetary Fund over a \$4 million loan.

Consequently, the past two decades have been characterised by multifactional political wrangling which has prevented the country from addressing its most urgent problems. The president's "coup" followed the government's failure to deal with rising COVID cases and continuing economic decline due to a collapse of tourism and fundamentalist attacks. After the 2011 uprising in Syria, alienated Tunisians swelled the number of takfiris seeking to overthrow the Damascus government, making the Tunisian nationals the largest group among the thousands of fighters from 50 countries.

By contrast with Tunisia's long experience with autocracy, Lebanon's politico-economic life has, essentially, been a free-for-all which has been exploited by sectarian and clan politicians to secure power, pelf and privilege.

The country has been frozen in the pre-independence regime imposed by France, under which the president is always a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni and the parliamentary speaker a Shia. The French also intended to make the Maronites the most powerful community in Lebanon by faking a census in 1932 which showed Christians, dominated by Maronites, were 50 per cent of the population. Sunnis, Shias and Druze were meant by France to follow the Maronite lead. While this imbalance was adjusted under the Taif accord which ended the second Lebanese civil war (1975-90), oligarchs and warlords who emerged from the conflict inherited the sectarian system, established patronage networks and the unregulated economy. Since the 2019 mass protests, the political elite has united to jeopardise the very existence of Lebanon to protect its interests.

Tunisian President Kais Saied and Lebanese putative Premier Najib Mikati also pose an interesting contrast. Saied, 63 is a constitutional law professor and jurist who entered politics in the 2019 presidential election on a anti-corruption platform. Following the transition to democracy, he provided advice in the drafting of the new constitution which, unlike most other constitutions does not mandate a separation of powers, but shares power among the presidency, parliament and prime minister.

A populist, who was elected by a 70 per cent majority, Saied favours radical change in the Tunisian system by cancelling the national parliament and empowering local councils. His suspension of the assembly and sacking the defence and justice ministers could be a first step in implementing his programme. Having tasted the complexities and uncertainties of democracy, many Tunisians may welcome a return to some sort of autocracy.

Telecom billionaire Najib Mikati, who served as premier twice, is seen by most of Lebanon's

the ruling elite as a safe bet. He was endorsed by 72 members of Lebanon’s 128 member parliament while 42 abstained, notably the two main Maronite parties — President Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces which have a combined total of 40 seats. During consultations over the formation of a Cabinet, Aoun is likely to complain that Mikati cannot be prime minister because he does not have the support of the “Christians”. Aoun relied on this argument when he blocked efforts by former prime minister-designate Saad Hariri to cobble together a cabinet which would have credibility with the international community and release \$21 billion in financial aid.

Mikati is no populist or reformer. He is the richest man in the country and hails from its poorest city, the northern port of Tripoli. While he has said he cannot produce the miracle needed to rescue Lebanon from bankruptcy and ruin, he has vowed to observe the French roadmap when assembling “specialist” independents for his Cabinet. Hariri tried and failed due to Aoun.

A politician few Lebanese want as premier, Mikati is likely to be met with protests in the street, particularly in his hometown, Tripoli, which has become the “hub of the revolution” that aims to throw out the sectarian system and establish a secular democracy.

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