

## A Democratic Future for Lebanon

By Fouad Makhzoumi

Even before the latest conflict, Lebanon faced political stagnation, over \$40 billion in public debt, and an uncertain future.

Today, the situation is desperate. The United Nations Development Programme estimates there are almost 900 thousand Lebanese citizens that were affected by the war, a great number of whom are still displaced. Our infrastructure has been shattered, causing our weak economy to crumble with it. The lack of food, water, and humanitarian assistance is a crisis that has called for the attention and priority of the world community. There is also an urgent need to build a sustainable democratic political system.

Lebanon is looking into an abyss. There is the potential for my country to become a failed state, chronically beset by political and economic instability and subject to interference from outside parties, including radical jihadist groups and armed militias whose influence may be growing. A failed Lebanon would be a disaster for security and stability in the Middle East. Recent headlines about the negotiations on the composition of an international peacekeeping force should not detract from the deep underlying political challenges that have yet to be solved or addressed.

Lebanon requires immediate assistance from the international community, but aid must be conditioned on a political reform program that supports a sustainable democratic future. If we Lebanese do not look within ourselves for some of the answers to our problems, we are doomed to repeat our mistakes and let others repeat theirs.

In order for the Lebanese people to achieve our aspirations, there are three steps to be taken.

First, the international community must deliver economic assistance and debt relief to Lebanon through independent bodies. Prior to the Israeli strikes, there was talk of an international donors' conference to start the process of rescheduling our public debt and getting Lebanon on the road to a stable and prosperous economy. Given the destruction to our infrastructure and economy, the mandate of this conference must be expanded. While we appreciate the \$230 million offered by the United States, the \$800 million offered by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and other amounts offered by friendly countries, these are a mere drop in the bucket towards improving our economic situation. We need many such offers, and these offers should be tied to encouraging a political reform program for Lebanon.

Second, Lebanon's long term security and stability depend upon political and economic reforms that support sustainable democracy and meet the expectations and ideals of March 2005: independence, peace, democracy, and sovereignty. The foundation of a political reform program for Lebanon is a new electoral law. My party, the National Dialogue Party, believes that the Lebanese people deserve a government that is free, democratic, and responsive to their needs. As we work on a political reform agenda for Lebanon, it is imperative to establish electoral reforms based upon democracy, transparency, secularism, and proportional representation.

Lebanon needs to end sectarianism and confession-driven politics. Our political system must be changed so that the population sees itself as first and foremost Lebanese, rather than Sunni, Druze, Maronite, Shiia, or any one of the other religious identities in Lebanon. Our current electoral law, instituted by pro-Syrian factions in 2000, virtually disqualifies all non-sectarian candidates. Fixing our electoral system and strengthening Lebanese democracy will help bring stability to our country.

Third, Lebanon is part of a regional security dynamic that cannot be detached from the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict and the rest of the Middle East. There can be no sustainable security in the region without direct engagement by the United States with Syria and Iran.

Based upon my own meetings with Arab leaders, I believe Syria is ready to engage in substantive diplomacy on all of the issues of regional concern, including the Golan Heights, Shebaa Farms, Hezbollah, and Hamas. I cannot predict the outcome of such talks, but for the sake of Lebanon and the Middle East there should be dialogue, especially between Israel and Syria.

These steps will play a concerted role in helping the Lebanese people realize the goals of the Cedar Revolution, minimize the influence of extremism, and help bring solutions to seemingly endemic regional conflicts. And perhaps most importantly, these reform measures will help the Lebanese people see a bright future for our country.

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