

Without strong Sunni leader, Lebanon risks becoming next Syria

Rodger Shanahan

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The early success of the Arab Spring that saw genuinely popular movements toppling long-term dictators has given way to a much less altruistic struggle. In this phase, the uprising has moved from popular revolt to sectarian conflict as power is being stripped of its thin patina of nationalism to reveal the true nature of its sectarian foundations.

Whether it be Sunni crackdowns on Shia reformists in Bahrain, or Shia Iranian support for the Alawite regime in Damascus, what the Middle East is experiencing is a bloody rivalry being played out between Iran and the Saudi-led Sunni states. This is a conflict about influence rather than democracy, about religious identity rather than the right to vote.

The recent assassination of the Lebanese Internal Security Force's police chief of information, Wissam al-Hassan has once again brought Lebanon to the fore in this sectarian battle for influence. Lebanon had traditionally been the proxy battleground for other states' political and sectarian rivalries as its patchwork of religious communities provided fertile ground for external powers seeking to extend their influence in a strategically important state.

But this time its formerly stable neighbour Syria is the one who is in the throes of a sectarian civil war, while Beirut feverishly tries to avoid becoming embroiled in a sectarian conflict that could tear apart the fragile peace holding this country together.

Concerns about the impact of the Syrian conflict on its neighbour Lebanon have normally centred on what it will mean for the future prospects of Hezbollah. But in a region that is increasingly dividing along sectarian lines, the cause of any descent into sectarian violence in Lebanon may well be elements within the Sunni community.

This may appear somewhat counter-intuitive given that there is every chance that the pro-Iranian Assad regime will give way to a government much more representative of its Sunni majority population.

But the ability of Lebanon's fragile sectarian political system to withstand the pressure applied to it by external events relies to a large degree on the ability of its communal leadership to control its various elements. And it is the lack of strong leadership among the Lebanese Sunni community that is most worrying.

While the Lebanese political system is highly complex, the Shi'ites feel themselves politically dominant given the government coalition is dominated by a pro-Hezbollah bloc, including an unlikely bedfellow in the previously anti-Syrian Christian political leader and former military head Michel Aoun.

The opposition is largely a Sunni-Christian affair still smarting over their fall from power following the Hezbollah-inspired collapse of the national unity government of Saad Hariri. The Druze shift their loyalties depending on the wishes of their political leader Walid Jumblatt.

For the Shi'ites, Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and to a much lesser extent the parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri maintain tight control over large parts of the community. Jumblatt does the same for the Druze, while the Christians, although split between pro- and anti-Assad camps do retain strong leaders.

In the event of a largely Sunni rebel victory in neighbouring Syria though, it is going to take leaders of real stature to ensure that some in the region do not see Lebanon as the next place to assert Sunni power. On the evidence of the funeral of al-Hassan though, there are serious concerns that such leadership is present. Hariri, the ex-prime minister son of the assassinated ex-prime minister Rafiq Hariri is considered by many as a result of his wealth and name to be the de facto Sunni communal leader.

But he is absent from the country, dividing his time in self-imposed exile between Riyadh and Paris. This means that his ability to influence events through radio and TV broadcasts is limited. The fact that the crowd for al-Hassan's funeral numbered several thousand largely partisan supporters despite Hariri's call for all Lebanese to attend illustrates his limited influence amongst his own support base, let alone among other communities.

Supporters from the Sunni political bloc then attempted to storm the prime minister's office following another former prime minister Fouad Siniora's call for the government to resign, and armed clashes between the military and Sunni gunmen in Beirut and between Sunni Islamists and Lebanese Alawites in Tripoli followed.

A resurgent Lebanese Sunni community bolstered by a victory of their co-religionists in Syria, and fuelled by Sunni money from the Gulf may convince some that the time has come to reassert political control of Lebanon. Lebanon's Sunnis are going to have to find a strong leader if they are to avoid Syria's problems from becoming Lebanon's.

Rodger Shanahan is a non-resident fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy