



# L'ÉCHO DU CÈDRE

**Jeunesse du Liban, lève toi et marche !**

**L'Echo du Cèdre**, est un journal par les jeunes et pour les jeunes.

Le journal est destiné aux libanais qui rêvent d'un Liban meilleur, où qu'ils soient dans le monde.

C'est un mensuel de langue française d'information économique, sociale et culturelle, fondé en novembre 2012 par deux étudiants franco-libanais nouvellement installés en France.

Il a pour objectif de rassembler les jeunes libanais de France et de la diaspora.

L'Echo du Cèdre cherche à encourager ces derniers à partager leur vision du monde et à faire découvrir à tous ceux qui l'ignorent la grandeur culturelle et intellectuelle de leur pays d'origine.

**L'Echo du Cèdre** is a monthly electronic newspaper in French and English, featuring analytical economic, social, cultural, and political information from Lebanon.

It was founded in November 2012, by two Lebanese students who had moved to Paris to pursue their studies.

L'Echo du Cèdre targets those students living overseas who are proud of their ancestry and who are willing to contribute time and effort in building a new and modern state.

Its main objective is to bring together the NextGen Lebanese diaspora and provide them with an interactive platform where they can share their vision and exchange their views freely.

## Gender Equality: A Lebanese Economic and Political Necessity

Lebanon's modern history has been defined by its unique and complex confessional system, which has attempted – and failed, many times – to balance the often-conflicting goals of various religious sects. Yet in a country where so much time has been spent in the pursuit of a method that satisfies the diverse interests of these groups, the continuing lack of gender inequality is a national shame.

While the security crisis on Lebanon's borders and within its cities remains the country's most pressing issue, the lack of empowerment for Lebanon's girls and women is just one of the many institutional handicaps to growth once the crisis has been resolved. Lebanese may largely revel in their common distinction as one of the most tolerant, progressive societies in the Middle East, yet this image begins to crumble when faced with the facts: 3% of seats in Lebanon's national parliament are held by women, a distinction which puts the country in the bottom 15 of states worldwide and below such oppressive societies as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. Women currently hold no ministerial positions, and the country has fallen almost 20 places in world equality rankings since 2010 (from an already shameful 116th to an abysmal 135th). According to an infographic published by the Daily Star, Lebanese women earn on average less than a third of what their male counterparts can expect to make annually, while only 26% of women participate in the labor force – another disturbing statistic that puts Lebanon behind a whopping 134 other countries. Even on metrics of education, Lebanon is failing its women: 97% of boys are enrolled in primary school, compared to 90% of girls (128th in the world).

It is no secret that female empowerment is one of the most instrumental motivators of economic growth as well as a sign of a developed, stable nation. According to the public policy think tank Chatham House, only oil-rich Oman, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia have managed to achieve a GDP per capita of over \$10,000 without a ratio of girls to boys in primary education of more than 90%. Well-educated women add to the nation's labor force, spur economic growth and foster lower rates of child mortality and illiteracy.

With economic and educational empowerment comes increased political participation. Since independence, Lebanon's future has quite often been dictated by the decisions of a few families who – while claiming to represent the larger communities from which they hail – have been content to foster an almost feudal line of patrilineal succession. While Lebanese as a whole have long been fed up with the rampant nepotism within their government, there remains an entire half of the population that has been denied a chance at righting the wrongs of their predecessors. This must change. The Old Boys of Lebanese politics have had decades to improve the nation, and it is now past time to let more fresh voices into the political arena.

It is important to not dwell solely on Lebanon's faults in the matter of gender equality. While more women may sit in the Afghani and Saudi parliaments, both nations are far and away more sexist and unequal than Lebanese society. Women within Lebanon need not fear modesty police or imprisonment for driving a car. Whether they wear a hijab or not, they are free to embrace Western styles, and they do, fueling a large beautification industry that revolves around expensive makeups and plastic surgeries.

Yet in the end, much of this tolerance only runs surface deep. Women who are permitted to wear whatever they would like yet who cannot find a well-paying job with which to comfortably support themselves are still living in an oppressive, sexist environment. One of Lebanon's many national ironies is that the most successful Lebanese are often expats who have capitalized on opportunities not available in their birth country. Amal Clooney (née Alamuddin), a brilliant international lawyer whose clients have included Julian Assange and Yulia Timoshenko, was forced to flee Beirut for London in 1980, at the age of two, due to the raging civil war. It is a shame that her achievements may never have been possible if she had grown up in her native country. In pushing for gender equality, the Lebanese would do well to remember not only the girls currently growing up within the country, but all the women throughout the decades who were denied similar life-changing opportunities simply due to their gender.

**Claude Khalife**

## From State Paralysis to Democratic Failure

Presidential vacancy in Lebanon is nothing new. Over the past four decades, Lebanon has survived many constitutional deadlocks, however, this time around, the political paralysis the country is experiencing is unprecedented, and has become critical for the future of Lebanese democracy ... which is still a work in progress.

Indeed, the country has been without a head of state since 25 May 2014, and constitutionally, without a Parliament since June 2013.

Nevertheless, the two operational arms of the state remain functional.

Before his departure, President Suleiman appointed a government of “national unity” as care taker, until such time as a new president is elected.

In the meantime, the Members of Parliament (MPs) managed to renew their mandate twice so far, to avoid any institutional vacuum.

For the ordinary citizen, and in practice, life goes on. However, beyond the farce, democracy has taken a serious dent.

But who’s watching?

Lebanon is one of those countries that has earned its independence from France, and as a result has inherited a certain governance system that had all the ingredients of a democratic state. Over the years, the country became victim of its environment and failed to build a strong central government, thus surrendering all powers to a certain elite, supported by a well-entrenched tribal system.

Lebanon declared its independence in 1943, and in 1973, it lost its soul and fell into the abyss. Since then, it has been trying to recover its autonomy and self-governance.

The absence of an elected President, and the presence of a Council of Ministers who’s function is that of a care-taker and of a Parliament that has lost constitutional legitimacy, have added to the ills of the country.

### Constitutionally

From a constitutional point of view, the Council of Ministers became paralyzed, requiring that all decision, be adopted unanimously, opening the door to constant and abusive deadlocks.

The Parliament on the other hand, lost its powers to legislate, until such time as a new President is elected. Today, the only item on the MPs’ agenda is the election of a new President. All their other functions have been suspended, until further notice. No new laws can be adopted ... except those necessary to avoid a total collapse of the system. One such exception related to the release of salaries of civil servants until the end of the year 2014.

This is not the first time that the country experiences such shutdown.

In 2007-2008, Lebanon remained without a President for a long while, following the expiration of Emile Lahoud’s then extended mandate, until an agreement, brokered by Qatar, France, Syria, and Saudi Arabia (the infamous Doha Agreement), put an end to the deadlock.

Politicians have forewarned us, that this time around, it may be a while before a new President is elected. Apparently, there are other pressing issues that take precedence.

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Among those listed so far: agreeing a “consensus” candidate prior to convening the MPs to an election session, agreeing a new electoral law, recovering some of the powers the “Christians” lost at the table in Taef, lifting of the US sanctions on Iran, potential meeting between the head of states of Saudi Arabia and Iran, world peace, etc. ...

The cynics may ask: what’s the difference anyway? What does the President do that is so material? In 1989, the Taef Agreements, had already stripped the President’s office of most of its executive powers and had transferred the real powers to the Council of Ministers.

To those cynics we reply that contrary to popular belief, and despite the dilution of certain of his powers, the President of the Republic still holds numerous prerogatives, making him the guardian of the country’s unity and the ultimate representative of the nation.

For information, the Queen of England, the President of Italy, and that of Germany, to name just a few, have less executive powers than the President of our Republic.

Lebanon prides itself of being the only true democracy among Arab countries.

Perhaps it is, judging from the prevalent freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and the freedom to transact, and despite the various challenges it has faced over the past forty years.

However, democracy is in the eyes of the beholder.

We may well enjoy certain freedoms that are not available in neighbouring countries; however, we miss the political stability that goes with such freedom.

## Economically

Such a paralysis on the political level, is starting to have an impact on an economy already weakened by forty years of civil strife. With increasing instability at its borders, a 1% growth, and a public debt in excess of 167% of GDP, Lebanon is facing serious challenges.

In the absence of growth, the country will face bankruptcy, with a public debt expected to reach \$100 billion in less than five years, as some economists warn.

Economically, Lebanon has been on hold for several years. Tourism, its major source of revenue, and Foreign Direct Investments, mostly from neighboring Arab countries, have been hit hardest.

The system is under so much pressure that social upheaval may break out any time.

Political actors are taking heed and acknowledge that the pressure cooker is about to burst. The recent agreement extending the life of the Nemech discharge, brokered by leader Walid Jumblatt, and other initiatives dealing with the security in prisons, electricity and water shortages, and food safety are proof that something is happening behind the scenes, and that public opinion still counts.

## **Greece the birthplace of democracy**

On the other side of the Mediterranean an interesting scenario is unfolding.

Greece is on the brink of chaos and is choking from an austerity imposed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF - (Troika). ----->

Its public debt is nearing 175% of GDP, while unemployment is at 25%, one of the highest in the world. The population has taken to the streets demanding change.

Late in December, the Hellenic parliament rejected the nominee for presidency, of the then Prime Minister Antonis Samaras. At a vote in Parliament, the Greek left-wing opposition party SYRIZA vetoed the government's presidential candidate, forcing an early national election eighteen months ahead of schedule. It is now riding high in the polls, ahead of the next elections scheduled for 25 January, prompting the European Union, and more specifically, Germany, to revisit its policy towards weaker economies, such as Greece.

The current coalition government (between the Conservative party, New Democracy and the socialist PASOK party) has positioned the elections as a de facto referendum on Greece's future in the Eurozone, raising the specter that SYRIZA's policies could lead to the country's exit from the EU (the famous Greexit).

In the meantime, the Eurozone is witnessing some of its most stressful times, with the Euro tumbling versus a number of major currencies, such as the US dollar, and more recently the Swiss Franc.

### **Any lesson we can learn?**

To date the Lebanese Parliament met sixteen times to elect a President, without success.

Unlike the case in Lebanon, the Greek constitution offers a mechanism to avoid a presidential vacuum. Should the Hellenic parliament fail to elect a new president within three rounds of voting, the Parliament is dissolved automatically within 10 days, and a general election is called to elect a new parliament.

No such mechanism is available under the Lebanese constitution. A loophole has emerged, that throws the presidential election into a loop.

In Lebanon, a controversy has arisen about the interpretation of Article 49 and of Chapter 3 of the Constitution.

Article 34 provides that a "majority" of MPs (65 of 128) is required to form a quorum and to conduct an election, while Article 49 – which lays out the process of electing a president – provides that a two-third majority is required to elect a President.

Some scholars submit that in the absence of a specific requirement that two-third of the MPs be present, a President may be elected at the two-third vote of those MPs present at the session.

Others, on the other hand, insist that two third of the MPs should be present, and that the vote of the majority is sufficient to elect a president.

Unfortunately, the Constitutional Council, the only body capable of resolving this matter, has been put on hold since 2005. No consensus had been reached in appointing its members. In the meantime, the country has become hostage to the whims of its elite and tribal leaders.

In Greece, the underlying issues are economical. In Lebanon, they are political.

Threatening to exit the EU, has caused a number of political actors to come to the rescue of Greece, and try to alleviate the sufferings of its people.

Using the same analogy, should Lebanon threaten to leave the Arab League, and would such a threat, cause the Arab countries to come to the rescue of Lebanon, and agree to spare its people from the dangers of a chaotic future?

Has Lebanon, a founding member of the United Nations and of the Arab League, become so irrelevant?

In times like these, We, the People, can only pray that wisdom will prevail, and that the dialogue among the various factions will start sooner rather than later. A dialogue that is open, transparent, and respectful.

The youth of Lebanon, the Future, as some may like to call them, are on a mission: To promote the cause of peace and of national unity and to work towards a new democratic and fair political system.

**Erik. W Chiniara**



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Youth of Lebanon, rise and move forward !

## L'Echo du Cèdre ... Information

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