

Domestic Politics (originally *Politique intérieure*; Internal Politics) by : Michel Chiha
Beirut: Éditions du Trident, 1964

Introduction to Lebanese Politics A constituent in 1926

The title of this article is well-deserved, as the reader will find here a true introduction to a system of politics for Lebanon. As you will notice, it develops a definition of Lebanon and its distinctive characteristics while at the same time, and with shrewd realism, suggesting practical ways to create a permanently balanced state in the heart of a national community. The basic realities that Michel Chiha highlights from 1937 onwards are later recalled and underlined repeatedly, with the aim of confronting the Lebanese with their identity so that they might better understand themselves and feel more a part of their homeland.

Will the Lebanese youth of today allow me to address their judgement and their fine (if at times undisciplined) intelligence in order to try (quickly and briefly) to clarify—at least partly—a situation which justifies many current concerns, and poses a threat for the future?

Lebanon is clearly a very small country, but its uniqueness is indisputable. It is a very old country that today we claim is very young. Its geographical location on the Mediterranean is one of the most prominent and exposed of any country¹, located between the most important land and sea routes on the globe. Arguably, from a certain angle, it has contributed more than any other country to facilitating connections between different cultures from the four corners of the globe².

Races, beliefs, rituals, languages, ways of thinking and customs all confront each other in Lebanon. It is a country that is at once a 'refuge' and a place from which many people have emigrated, a country of mountains and plains, varied climates and different cultures. In Lebanon you'll find all the different forms of the human race, and human endeavour.

¹Lebanon covers an area of 10,452 km² on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean. Syria is to the North and East, whereas Palestine and Israel are to the South. The country is mountainous with Mount-Lebanon constituting its spine. This mountain belongs to a chain which extends along the Mediterranean from Mount Taurus (Turkey) to the sands of Sinai.

²Lebanon was conceived by Mr Chiha to be the natural bridge between the Arab world and the West.

All things being equal, you'll find as many schools in Lebanon as in more advanced countries. You'll find all levels of teaching and of science, as well as all levels of ignorance. Alongside extremely enlightened men, you'll find others (even in the cities) who are a century, or even thousands of years, behind. You'll find the full gamut of people, from the Crazy Man of Carrel to primitive man, dating back through the ages.

Briefly, Lebanon contains the most pronounced contrasts, the most varied mentalities, the most disparate customs, and the least uniform faces. It is a microcosm of humanity³.

For lack of a better option, we use confessional labels to compartmentalize this mass of people into main groups, each with their own divisions and subdivisions. Thus we are able to include a certain number of spiritual 'families'⁴ that tend to 'morally' and 'intellectually' sustain themselves in very different ways, and who also 'assimilate' the sustenance they receive differently.

Except when it comes to personal status laws⁵, which creates more sovereign jurisdictions in certain domains, all these people are subject to the same laws. They live under the same sun and form a national homeland which, such as it is, would not be possible unless the majority of them deemed it a necessity.

And it is indeed a necessity. An appealing one at that: nature has bestowed upon the Lebanese people one of the most 'balanced' and beautiful 'habitats' in the world. Here disorder resides not in things, but in people.

³The Lebanese political and social canvas is composed of 18 religious communities (Christian, Muslim and Jewish). The Constitution proclaimed on May 23, 1926, and promulgated by the French High Commissioner, transformed Lebanon into a Republic. M. Chiha was the secretary of the committee that drafted the Constitution. The Constitution guaranteed (in articles 9 and 10) religious freedom and the respect for the personal status regulations of the various religious communities. It also established political confessionalism (article 95) which divided the different state functions along confessional lines. The Lebanese State remained, then, as in the past, confessional and community-based in both sociological and political spheres.

⁴By 'spiritual families' M. Chiha means religious communities.

⁵All Lebanese citizens are subject to the same laws governed by state tribunals except for matters of personal status. These are governed by the Islamic "Sharia" for Muslims. For Christians, canon law applies except for matters of inheritance, which are of the competence of civil tribunals.

My dream of course is to see all Lebanese people suddenly agree. This is not, nor ever will be, anything more than a dream. No one can perform a miracle and unify all these people in one day. It would be costly and foolish to believe that hasty, large-scale concessions would bring about a joining together of all, including the most rebellious, minds. People have thought it before. People say it today.

While the Lebanese govern themselves in a way that mitigates their paradoxical situation, they must 'hang on' for long enough to achieve a state of 'permanent' balance.

The way to achieve this is to understand that when facing a similar problem, the 'time' factor is instinctual. As the leader (whatever and wherever you lead) you must find time and save time by acting more like a wise man or a well-informed diplomat than a firebrand. Without violence, time makes and enshrines habits⁶. In order to get used to things you must, by definition, deny yourself changes and excesses as much as possible. Rather than arouse lusts and desires, you must temper them. Rather than overturn the chessboard, you must move the pawns slowly and use the rook rather than the knight and the bishop.

The way to achieve this is to realize that one cannot bring together and unify so many diverse elements except by letting them *act together in a political sense*, letting them *make their laws together* within an Assembly, and controlling the way in which these laws are enforced. One is also held back, in a country like Lebanon, by the lessons of the past; and much less by excessive democratic tastes than *by the very laws of balance*. *The important* and essential thing is that Lebanon live. Perhaps we have not always had Assemblies that are entirely admirable. But what Lebanese government has?

If the Executive branch, which is well-equipped compared to the Assembly, only uses its power to ruin it, if its ulterior motive is to bring it into disrepute by slowly wearing down a *necessary institution*, rather than to help it improve in every way possible, then it is the Executive branch which must first be changed.

We will become less members of a confession (in the narrow sense this word has in the Near Eastern context), and more citizens of this country, in that we will take a *direct* interest in the life of the state. Further, we will gain from this progress *on the confessional front itself* where group action, with the public good in mind, will thus come up against much fewer difficulties than it does today.

We must not solve confessional and social anarchy in Lebanon by deliberately ignoring the *political* order. When the confessional idea wins, *it is the Nation that loses*.

But on the other hand, everything that *the Nation wins* can only help to temper the confessional disorder that we are sadly witnessing today.

2 July 1936

⁶Kamal Salibi maintained in his "A House of Many Mansions – The History of Lebanon Reconsidered" (University of California Press, Ltd. London, England – 1988 – page 180) that "as a young man, Chiha had carried out some free study in Britain, where he developed a great admiration for the resilience of the unwritten British constitution whose forcefulness struck him as deriving entirely from tradition. Such a constitution, Chiha thought, would be ideally suited for Lebanon, because it could accommodate differences without recourse to artificial legal rulings which could please one group, but anger another possibly to the point of violence."