The Lebanese Blogosphere

Speaking For and Against Sectarianism

Elisheva Yun Cornell University, 2008
Near Eastern Studies, History of Art
Research Intern at Hudson Institute

Over a decade after the close of the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War, the cultural and political landscape of sectarianism has shifted significantly in Lebanon. Circumstances of uncertainty and upheaval in the past couple of years—Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri's assassination in 2005, the subsequent Cedar Revolution that spurred Syria's withdrawal from Lebanese territory, a string of assassinations of anti-Syrian politicians, the Israel-Hizbullah War of 2006, anti-government protests and Hizbullah's seizure of sections of Beirut in May 2008—have both fed into and arose from tensions between religious groups. Recent events suggest the centrality of sectarianism to questions about Lebanon's stability. The momentous political changes that Lebanon has witnessed have raised questions as to the changing nature of sectarianism as well. In particular, given that sectarianism has fed into significant conflict, is it appropriate or productive to maintain sectarianism as the guiding principle for the political system? How have new avenues of discussion influenced Lebanon's experience of sectarianism?

Blogs, collectively referred to as the blogosphere, have provided an increasingly popular means of expression in Lebanon. Blogging has become more prominent through moments of conflict, namely the Cedar Revolution in 2005 and the Israel-Hizbullah conflict in the summer of 2006. As the Lebanese blogosphere virulently debates the unfolding events and the role of sectarianism in Lebanon, blogs offer an illuminating lens as to whether the Lebanese population deems sectarianism to be an appropriate organizing principle for its government.

Sectarianism in Politics

The Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990 inspired sharp debate over the obliteration or the preservation of the confessional system. After reading approximately 100 blogs' entries, generally written between 2005 and 2007 by Lebanese both in the country and abroad, I have found that the debate over whether sectarianism is an appropriate political organizing principle is largely irrelevant to many Lebanese bloggers. While Lebanese bloggers may often superficially appear to occupy pro-sectarian and anti-sectarian camps or, in other words, camps that advocate either the continuation or elimination of the confessional political system, such a distinction often becomes impossible; the majority of bloggers fall into a grey area. Those who promote the continued presence of sectarianism most actively, and

even polemically at times, can also appear anti-sectarian at times in their criticism of the present strain of sectarianism's deficiencies. Those who advocate the continued presence of Lebanon's sectarian government do not deny the reality that political sectarianism can be problematic as well. Furthermore, those who appear to argue for the obliteration of sectarianism point to specific and potentially reconcilable problems within political sectarianism that often coincide with "pro-sectarian" critiques.

For instance, The Thinking Lebanese blog demonstrates critical support for sectarianism as an organizing principle for the government. The blog, founded by Faysal, a young Lebanese male located in Beirut, posted Michael Young's article, "In Praise of Lebanese Sectarianism." Young argues that sectarianism "is the only system reflecting the true nature

of social relations, imposing humility on all the parties, and offering the Lebanese a pluralism so abysmally lacking elsewhere in the Middle East" (Young quoted in *The Thinking Lebanese* 2005). Yet, Young also acknowledges the varied shortcomings of sectarianism, namely that "confined to confessional boundaries, politics or public service means that the most ambitious must either tie their fate to sectarian political leaders to get somewhere, or emigrate" (2005). Young then asserts that a revised sectarian political system is necessary (2005). Anton Efendi of the blog, *Across The Bay*, asserts that "Michael's opinion is similar to mine, and I would say similar to Raja's [a contributor to *Across the Bay*]" (2006).

Comments on the *Thinking Lebanese* blog about Young's article evidence that support for sectarianism is often nuanced by a desire to improve the system. For example, Firas asserts that "the Lebanese are sectarian," and thus "we should work to change it, bravely and with determination" (*The Thinking Lebanese* 2005). The *Lebanese Political Journal* blogger, Charles Malik, similarly advocates the perpetuation of sectarianism as an organizing principle for the government, yet acknowledges the destructive elements of the current system of sectarianism in Lebanon. Malik argues that, "the problem in Lebanon is not sectarianism. It's the inability of the state to protect its citizens" (2006). He also argues that, "the trouble with the sectarian system is that it does not breed national leaders, thus creating a national spirit is quite difficult" (Malik 2006). In this sense, his word choice is crucial. Creating national spirit is "difficult," not impossible. Furthermore, the *Blacksmiths of Lebanon* blog encourages an altered sectarianism: "That way relies on us moving forward towards a political equation that guarantees equality, democracy, sovereignty, stability, and security for the nation as a whole, in such a way as to minimize the importance of sectarianism when compared to the nation that guarantees all of the above" (2006).

Lazarus from the *Letters Apart* blog

features an image with the word "sectarianism" in Arabic crossed out. He superficially appears to argue for the elimination of the sectarian government, taking issue with Michael Young's article, "In Praise of Lebanese Sectarianism." Lazarus argues that the "main reason there is not much (if any) anecdotal evidence in Lebanon to the contrary (which would have been enough to disprove his conclusion [that sectarianism is the only system truly reflecting Lebanese social relations]) is that sectarianism is the ONLY system Lebanon has ever tried" (2006). Yet, even as Lazarus writes in the context of his agenda towards a non-confessional system, he also writes that,

only after gathering information with regards to these different scenarios, such as their likelihood and the possible introduction of methods that mitigate various and justified worries (such as introducing a system of civil liberties and rights), can we really make the best decision of whether to simply 'modify' the current system, as young and others suggest, or to deconfessionalise it (Lazarus 2006).

In contrast to an advertising campaign that urges Lebanon to install a non-confessional government, the response to advertisements in *Lebanese Bloggers* was more targeted. R, of *Lebanese Bloggers*, evaluates the advertising campaign in the specific context of personal status laws, asserting that, "everytime I think about the piece of crap (discriminatory) laws we have that govern marriage and citizenship I just remember where we are to where we should be" (2006). R, in this particular context, urges the Lebanese specifically to change "the sectarian (and sexist) laws" rather than the confessional structure itself. Hence, the frustration that is apparent in seemingly anti-sectarian blogs often suggests that anti-sectarian arguments occupy a grey area. While they primarily advocate the erasure of political sectarianism, the details of their arguments often criticize specific failures within the current sectarian system.

As the line blurs between anti-sectarianism and pro-sectarianism,

dissatisfaction and frustration with political elites prevails through blogs of nearly all stances. In this context, discontent with political leaders lies at the juncture between many profoundly different discourses about Lebanese sectarianism. For instance, Sophia of the Les Politiques blog argues that, “we should not accept to look at war criminals mutated into statesmen dictate what we should do and think,” expressing a common and often broad rejection of those in power—of elites that bloggers often vaguely define or that bloggers define with the exemption of their own sectarian leaders (2007). Jonathon Cook of the Beirut Live blog also posts and praises “The Wise,” a video that was written and directed by Pierre Dawalibi. Cook argues that, “This is probably one of the strongest messages I have seen so far [...] Don’t follow your leaders, follow your nation” (Beirut Live 2007). The Simply Human blog clearly communicates the frustration towards the leaders as well, pleading, “Don’t you all know that whether its Nasrallah, or Hariri, or Seniora, Fatfat, Aoun, Jounblat, Gemayel, Geagea, [...] THEY DON’T CARE ABOUT YOU!” (2007). Yet, amongst the truly widespread frustration towards Lebanese political elites, many bloggers stress the agency of the Lebanese people in sustaining the elites. For instance, Charles Malik of the Lebanese Political Journal blog argues that, “The Lebanese political parties do not control sectarian anger, despite popular belief that the war will only start if the leadership orders it” (2007).

The bloggers’ deep frustration with the political elite coincides with a pervasive criticism of the political elite amongst the scholarly community. Both the lack of legitimacy of many politicians and the discontent towards Lebanese politicians largely stem from the installation of militia leaders—politicians who likely committed war crimes—in the post-civil war government. Judith Palmer Harik asserts that, “With few exceptions, militia representatives were made ministers without portfolios” (1998).

Fawwaz Traboulsi also asserts that, “The only ‘legitimacy’ the warlords, militia-leaders and assorted Mafiosi [in the government] can claim is one based on terror and intimidation” (1990). Moreover, Aida Kanafani-Zahar argues that the leadership of the sectarian elites intensifies sectarianism, as “Militia chiefs succeeded during moments of the war in transforming a political conflict into a religious one” (2002). Thus, dissatisfaction with the political elites often forms an intersection between the scholarly community, bloggers, individuals of different sects, those in favor of a modified sectarian system, and those who encourage the obliteration of political sectarianism.

The Role of the Blogosphere

While “blogging remains the activity of a tiny elite, as only a small minority of the already microscopic fraction of the Arabs who

regularly use the Internet actually write or read blogs," the blogosphere presents a critical juncture between many different physical and social spaces (Lynch 2007). As Marc Lynch argues, "A large portion of the readers of Arab blogs are political activists, journalists, and other politically influential elites (as well as foreign scholars and governments trying to gauge Arab public opinion), a high quality audience even if a relatively small one" (2007). Blogs offer an intersection of voices that rarely emerges from other means of communication. In this sense, the mere interaction between different communities presents a space for coexistence on a variety of levels, even in the form of acerbic online arguments. As bloggers and blog readers log on from a multitude of locations, undoubtedly possessing profoundly different political outlooks and sharply different experiences, they partake in a common dialogue and reading experience. While this dialogue is often far from rational, it exists between various communities and thus fosters a sense of Lebanese solidarity, as limited as it may be.

Those in Lebanon can blog their experiences alongside the Lebanese diaspora population. Thus, the blogosphere cultivates solidarity of mediated experiences across localities. For instance, Vivian Salama writes that, "For Jij, the violence being meted out on his country, Lebanon, on this lazy Sunday afternoon [in Massachussetts] is all too real," and "Jij, or Jihad Ibrahim as he is more commonly known, was not alone as an Arab in America writing about the Israel-Hizbulla War online" (2007). The result, according to Salama, is that "the strong participation of the Lebanese diaspora in blogging the war demonstrates the potential of the medium in bringing together shifting and disparate commentaries, and in juxtaposing multiple overlapping identities" (2007). Both within and beyond territorial Lebanon, individuals of different sects and political dispositions post blog entries for one another to read and comment upon. In fact, Sune Haugbolle

stresses that, "These media [the new generation of media] are characterized by their interactive nature" (2007). It is this interactive nature of the blogosphere that lends itself towards dialogue across sects and political stances.

For instance, Ms Levantine describes her dialogue about sectarianism with Abu Ali, a blogger who strongly disagrees with Ms Levantine:

I have been having an ongoing argument about sectarianism with Abu Ali for quite some time. I am of the opinion that it is overly inflated by our political class in order to serve its own narrow interests, and that we should fight it at any cost. Abu Ali on the other hand insi[s]ts it is a Lebanese reality and that it should be dealt with accordingly. He keeps repeating that Lebanon is not Ras Beirut, and that I need to have realistic expectations (2007).

Ms Levantine also engaged with a dialogue on the comments section of Letters Apart, Lazarus' blog, about Michael Young's "In Praise of Sectarianism" and about sectarianism in general. She thus contributes to a comments section that included profoundly different analyses and viewpoints. While bloggers certainly do not agree and, as Lazarus notes, "the different sides do not seem to really convince the other," the blogosphere's existence as a space for cross-sectarian interaction begins to break down barriers between sects (2006).

Conclusion

Hence, in their response to recent events, bloggers often aggressively argue for either the eradication of sectarianism as a polluting political force or the modification of sectarianism as the potential basis for egalitarian politics. Yet, it would be simplistic to divide bloggers into pro-sectarian and anti-sectarian camps as both often present common arguments. Nearly all bloggers reject sectarianism as it stands now. Both bloggers who advocate the erasure of sectarianism and bloggers who advocate its perpetuation actually agree upon many of the destructive forces within political sectarianism. The

blogosphere's ability to foster dialogue between individuals of different sects and political opinions that perhaps otherwise would not debate presents a promising, although limited, means for coexistence and negotiation. Perhaps as bloggers from diverse positions continue to interact, they may begin to notice the striking similarities in their seemingly opposing arguments.

Bibliography

- Blacksmiths of Lebanon*. 2006. <http://blacksmithsoflebanon.blogspot.com> (accessed April 4 2008).
- Lebanese bloggers*. 2006. <http://lebanesebloggers.blogspot.com> (accessed April 10 2008).
- Ms. Levantine*. 2006. <http://ms-levantine.blogspot.com> (accessed April 10 2008).
- The thinking Lebanese*. 2005. <http://thethinkingleb.blogspot.com> (accessed April 4 2008).
- Bey, Tony. 2006. *Across the bay*. <http://beirut2bayside.blogspot.com> (accessed April 3 2008).
- Haugbolle, Sune. From A-list to webtifada: Developments in the lebanese blogosphere 2005-2006. *Arab Media & Society* (February 2007), <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=40>.
- Kanafani-Zahar, Aida. 2002. The religion of the 'other' as bond: The interreligious in Lebanon. In *Religion between violence and reconciliation*, ed. Thomas Scheffler. Beirut: Ergon Verlag Wurzburg in Kommission.
- Lebanon Vendetta. 2007. *Simply human*. <http://simply-human.blogspot.com> (accessed April 20 2008).
- Lynch, Marc. Blogging the new arab public. *Arab Media & Society* (February 2007), <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=10>.
- Malik, Charles. 2007. *Lebanese political journal*. <http://lebop.blogspot.com> (accessed April 5 2008).
- Palmer Harik, Judith. 1998. Democracy (again) derailed: Lebanon's ta'if paradox. In *Political liberalization and democratization in the arab world*, ed. B. Korany, B. Brynen and P. Noble. Vol. 2. Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner.
- Salama, Vivian. From long island to Lebanon: Arabs blog in America. *Arab Media & Society* (February 2007), <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=18>.
- Traboulsi, Fawwaz. 1990. Confessional lines. *Middle East Report* 162, (January-February 1990).
- Photo Courtesy: advertisement, part of a 'Stop Sectarianism Campaign,' highlights the pervasiveness of sectarianism within Lebanon