

The Lebanese Syndrome: Devices and Arrangements

In its previous issue, *li Monthly* published Mr. Adra's paper on the Role of International Interference, Pre and Post Taef in Lebanon and Post Syrian Era. In this issue, *li Monthly* publishes Devices and Arrangements.

Devices and Arrangements

Having reviewed the historical background a question is put forward, is the word "corruption" an accurate description of the Lebanese syndrome? The Lebanese are aware that "corruption" is "wrong". A survey "Benchmark Polls on Corruption" funded by USAID and conducted by *Information International* in 1999, showed that a high percentage of the Lebanese 46% to 72% are aware of the concept of corruption and what it entails (bribery, abuse of power, mismanagement of funds, multiplicity of laws etc.), while only a small percentage of citizens showed apathy to the topic (1.2% to 9.4%). Moreover, an overwhelming majority of 98.6% believed that corruption is all pervasive in Lebanon, and 95% asserted that it is not a new phenomenon (45.1% dated it back to the Ottomans, and 12.7% to the French mandate). As for the most corrupt segment of the Lebanese society, 24.3% answered that it was the state as whole, 21.4% believed that it was the political class, 14%, the ministers, 10.3% members of the parliament, and 9.5% viewed the senior civil servants as the most corrupt. The main causes of corruption identified were: the inefficiency of regulatory agencies, non existence of citizen protections laws, and weakness if civic education. Moreover 65.2% agreed that corruption is caused by the influence of the religious clerics, and condemned the religious interference in the political and administrative affairs of the state. Therefore, the Lebanese people, from various sects, age categories, gender, educational level, income groups, and places of residence have reached a consensus on the existence, parameters and connotations of corruption⁽¹⁾.

A more recent poll published by *Information International* in September 2005 showed that 75.8% viewed combating corruption ought to be the priority of the new parliament, compared to 46.5% who demanded a new electoral law, decreasing public debt (43.2%), annulling political sectarianism (35.4%), freeing Samir Gaegae (24.2%), disarming Hizbullah (21.2%), balanced development plan (19%), naturalizing Palestinians (14.1%), new law pertaining to political parties (6.6%), and independent judicial system (5.8%). It is one of the very few issues that has the consensus of Lebanese⁽²⁾.

Considering this high level of awareness and vocal complaints about "corruption", the obvious question would be why has no change taken place and why do the Lebanese continue to conduct their life in an opposite manner to what they proclaim? Lack of judicial independence, in addition to bad electoral laws, might be cited among the hindering factors. More importantly however, is the Lebanese acceptance of the system and its symbols.

Maintaining the Status Quo

Some would argue that the Lebanese in fact want to preserve the status quo since it has been serving their best interest. Dr. George Yacoub asserts in his previously mentioned study that "the great majority of Lebanese, regardless of religion, social status, location, political affiliations, or wealth are unwilling to change the present system, not because they are blind to its hazards, but because they have developed a stake in maintaining it. Any change to the status quo is perceived to involve uncertainties concerning their established rights and privileges, both material and virtual." Furthermore, corruption has become an institution or a way of life of a fearful people and society that prefers to continue to draw immediate benefits from it rather than summon up the courage to try new experiences and adopt new options.

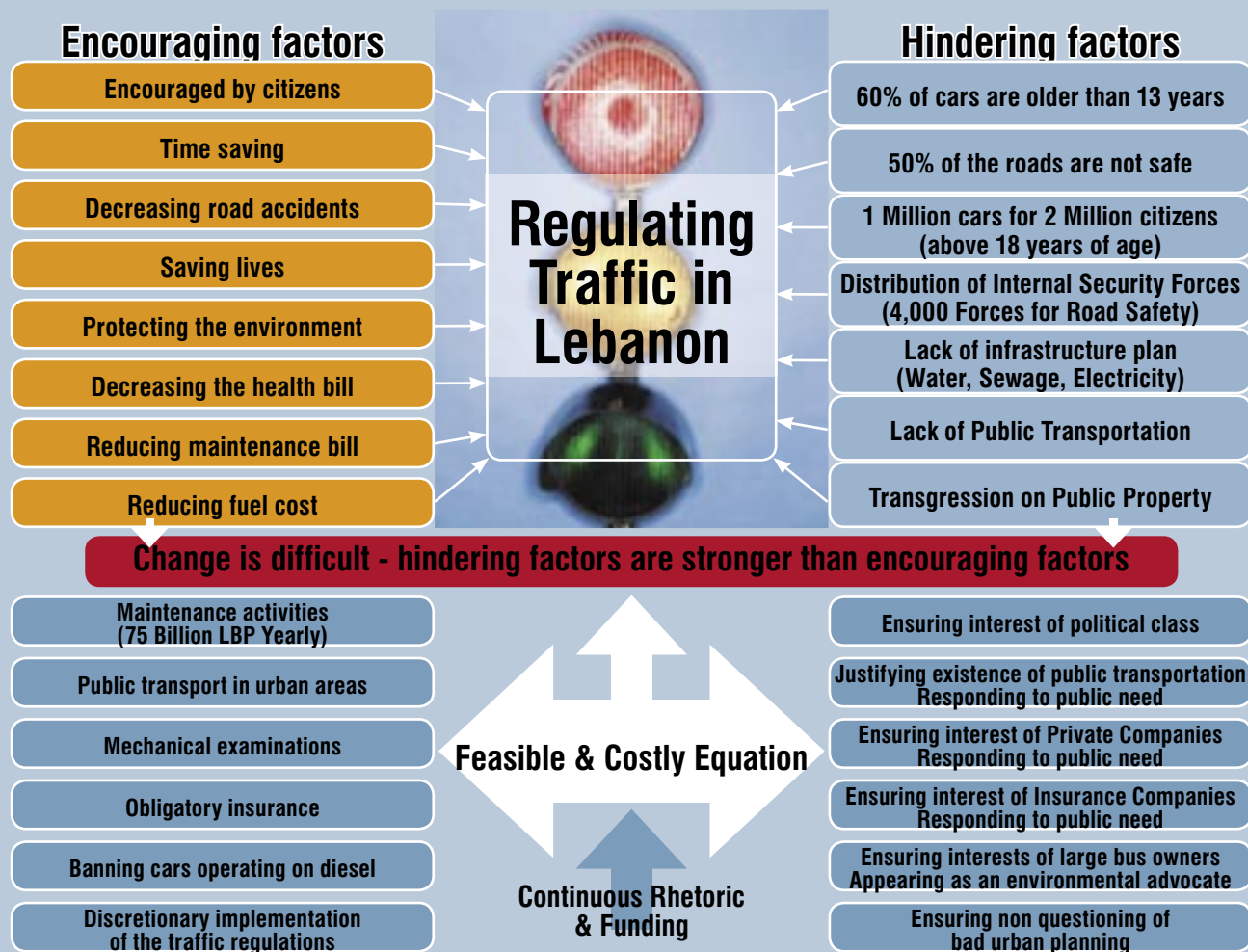
Getting appointed to a job in the administration despite its over staffing, not paying

taxes, infringement on public property, and an endless list of law breaking activities, are considered to be benefits. The beneficiaries are urged to overlook the services' quality and to pass over other laws' and systems' rights and obligations that allow them to progress in order to become full-fledged citizens.

Thus the characteristics of the syndrome can be deduced. It is enduring since it has survived from the Ottoman era to today's Lebanon; it is an organic constituent of the socio-political structure in Lebanon. Complaining from the "syndrome" has become an ingredient of the syndrome itself, politicians, religious men and the public have nagged about "corruption" which they perceived as wrong, however, they have learned to cope and benefit from it. "Corruption" can be viewed as a form of social solidarity varying from waste, sharing the spoils, looting, and embezzlement to benefiting from mere trickling drops. The syndrome forces the players to practice the blame and praise game according to circumstances and without any substantive meaning except for the survival of the system itself. The different players admit the "immorality" of the system, although they are aware of their active role in it. Foreign intervention is invited depending upon the regional circumstances, e.g. France, England, Egypt, Syria, U.S., and Israel.

In his book *Hozooz Ijtinab Al Azma Wa Shoroot Takhatiha* (Chances of Avoiding the Crisis and Conditions to Overcome It – A Fiscal Reform plan), Dr. Charbel Nahhas, affirms "...what seems constant in all these experiences ... is first handing the authority to non-political technocrats in return for handing the legitimacy of the authority to foreign powers, and second is the technocrats' maintenance of the system without attempting to formulate a socio-political plan. Thus crisis are absorbed rather than solved (as in the 90s), stopping the war rather than rooting its causes (as in the 80s) or through balancing Lebanon's position on the regional setting without comprehending its development (as in the 60s)"⁽³⁾. This is the devisal that the Lebanese have created in order to arrange their life under semi permanent socio-political conditions. The arrangement is rational and organized contrary to what many have observed. The case of traffic in Lebanon is a good example of a non-contentious issue, where no major reform has been witnessed. Immediate benefits

Figure 1



Mc Gilvary, M., 1920. *The Dawn of a New Era in Syria*. N.Y.: Fleming H. Revell Company

USAID Kuluma Masoul, 1999. *Benchmark Polls on Corruption*

Ii Monthly, issue 35, May 2005, *Corruption in Lebanon*. Beirut: *Information International*

- (1) USAID, 1999, *Benchmark Polls on Corruption Report*
- (2) *Ii Monthly*, 2005, p.:6
- (3) *Nabhas*, 2002, p.:128

to both the citizens and the political class are reaped at very high costs as shown in figure 1. Maintaining the status quo due to major hindering factors that are linked to the socio-political situation becomes a rational, albeit costly solution.

Zero or Non Zero Sum Game?

The Lebanese have been able to live beyond their means at very high standards relative to the region due to three main reasons: Money transferred from immigrants to support their families residing in Lebanon, the inflow of capital from the Arab gulf countries, and the availability of cheap labor from Syria, Sri Lanka, and African countries. It also encouraged the development of values of a consumer, rather than a productive society, both at the public and individual levels. As a result, the successive Lebanese governments, particularly those that came after the Taef agreement, have been able to borrow extensively from privately owned Lebanese banks at very high interest rates to finance the inefficiency, waste and corruption of the public sector. Therefore, the general public and the officials alike have assumed that the resources are abundant (despite the growing public debt), and thus perceived the system as a win-win situation, which encouraged them to preserve it, and hindered any attempts of reform, and accountability.

However, the system implies a zero-sum game as far as the political leaders and confessions are concerned due to their fierce competition over posts and resources. Thus one confession's gain is another's loss. This zero sum game also ensured the continuity of the syndrome, and weakened acts of accountability. A good example would be the agreement between different confessions not to "open files" or conduct investigation in

obvious cases of corruption, despite continuous rhetoric on curbing corruption and promises of reform.

Another example is the capital punishment law. It is both interesting—yet sickening—that the first question asked by many when an execution takes place, is not the usual why, what, when, where and how, but what sect does the condemned belong to? In order for the death penalty to continue, murder in Lebanon will have to be committed proportionately by people belonging to all its sects and the sentences passed must be equally meted out 'at par' with the number of people belonging to each sect. With a total of 18 sects in Lebanon (six of them 'main sects'), mathematics and the laws of probability render the continuous implementation of the death penalty impossible.

Once again, as in other fundamental matters, such as the causes of the civil war, the electoral law, the Lebanese University or corruption, the Lebanese will be spared the agonizing soul-searching debate about the death penalty and its legitimacy. The sects of Lebanon will take care of that job: Maintain the status quo, draw on the resources and appear to carry some kind of reform.

In the next issue part 4: Consequences