

Rafic Hariri and Mahatma Gandhi

Three months with the promise of non-violence for the Middle East

by Chibli Mallat* (May 9, 2005)

It may be difficult to imagine Rafic Hariri's ultimate sacrifice on 14 February 2005 standing in history like the murder of the Mahatma on 30 January 1948. One has learnt with Karl Marx that 'history never repeats itself, except perhaps as a farce', and with the French motto, that 'comparisons are no reason'. Still, the argument that Hariri is to Lebanon and the Middle East what the Mahatma was to India may be defended in more than one way. There was hardly a more peaceful soul in the Arab world than the former Lebanese Prime Minister: he was simply unable to conceive violence as a tool for policy. Not only did he never use violence against rivals or enemies in his formidable political life, but he has always refused to get drawn, in a country and region where violence is a daily occurrence, into a process that *might* turn into bloodshed. Even his opposition to President Emile Lahoud, which was real and palpable, never developed into an attitude which might be conducive to an armed confrontation. And like Gandhi, his killers did not have any scruple in resorting to violence to get rid of him.

Non-violence prevailing on the political scene is therefore the critical test for those who, like us and over half the Lebanese population on March 14, 2005, have adopted Hariri as the icon of a fight that will lead to the restoration of democracy in Lebanon, after having succeeded in the battle of sovereignty. March 14 is both a fulfillment and a message: a fulfillment of the silent and steady resistance of the Lebanese people to humiliation, domination and corruption over the previous fifteen years; and a message of active non-violence from Lebanon to the region and the world, so that people like us and our friends in the streets of Beirut should from now on take the political lead in society.

The current political class does not correspond to the restored democratic spirit of Lebanon. One ambition commensurate with Hariri's sacrifice requires the change of the political scene so that it does. A parallel, larger ambition is to project this Lebanese message of active non-violence across the region, starting with the establishment of a network of similarly minded creative professionals and democratic activists across the Middle East.

On the Lebanese scene, the current president must be held responsible for the unconstitutional, undemocratic extension of the presidential mandate beyond the terms designed by the Lebanese Constitution, as well as a violation of international law. The next Lebanese president must be a woman or a man who thinks and acts like those who stood up all day in the centre of Beirut, on March 14, asking for truth and accountability.

Nor is the continuation of the speaker of the National Assembly democratic after over ten years in power. All top positions in our constitutional system need to better reflect the will of our people. This can best be achieved by direct popular suffrage that enhances national choice over sectarian regroupments. While one is aware that the sectarian legacy has offered checks and balances preventing dictatorship from taking root in Lebanon, it has also acted as a systematic block to the fulfillment of

the merit and equality of citizens. A decisive task is to reduce the sectarian space by enhancing the personal and national creative talent of all Lebanese on the basis of merit and equality. Renewing and enriching the democratic experience requires the appointment of our constitutional leaders by direct popular vote. There are other ways to increase the democratic circle of Lebanon in the world: with Lebanese here and across the planet, a Lebanese Vote Abroad initiative was started to respond to the deafening call of our families and friends abroad to make their voice heard in their country.

On the larger Arab and Middle Eastern scene, freedom and human rights must become both the goals and means of the democratic renewal, and require similarly minded citizens across the region to repeat the Lebanese non-violent experience, in contrast with the association of our country with a meaningless and brutal civil war for a quarter of the 20th century. This means peaceful alternation at the top, and the organization of national, free, inclusive elections for the choice of all leaders in the Arab world.

Lebanon in the past three months has inspired the region in ways unprecedented in history, and peaceful sit-ins and demonstrations have taken place in Bahrain, Cairo, Riyadh, Damascus and Tunis. With the freedom achieved in Lebanon, we need to active nascent networks of free citizens across the region, starting with the release of all prisoners of conscience, and the organization of further non-violent action to change the current state of irresponsible and brutal government, from Nouakchott to Islamabad, passing through Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus and Riyadh. Some of this may at first seem to go beyond the image of Rafic Hariri as a Lebanese leader. But his regional and international image is well established. With his assassination, one which is rooted in the retrograde and brutal order in the Middle East, one should not hesitate to project his gentle manners, and his firm belief in human rights, so that they transcend Lebanon and inspire all democrats in the region.

The confluence of sharply contrasting factors, domestically and internationally, makes the developing fight for independence and democracy in Lebanon the more challenging for those who are determined, in a Hariri-like spirit, never to resort to violence to win their political battles. Some holders of the old order will not hesitate to inject blood-shedding into an equation that Hariri was never ready to even contemplate as a remote tool to prevail. Already five bombs have shattered since February 14 that peaceful course in Beirut, and those responsible for these crimes, like the assassins of Hariri, need to be arrested and tried.

If our challenge is won, his sacrifice may herald a Middle East where his consistent refusal of the use of force for political ends could slowly transform him into a Mahatma Gandhi figure for Lebanon and the region. Much has been achieved since the brutal killing of Lebanon's most impressive Prime Minister three months ago. These achievements are, and should be, the tip of the democratic and non-violent iceberg.

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