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To cite this article: Geha, C. (2020). Our Personal Is Political and Revolutionary. *Al Raida*, 44(1), 23-28. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v44i1.1818

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v44i1.1818>

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Article type: Article

Published online: 20th August 2020

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: eScienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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Our Personal Is Political and Revolutionary

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Keywords: Politics, women, Lebanon, revolution, solidarity, women's rights

Introduction

Last summer, I walked into the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg without really knowing what to expect. I was with a group of friends, mostly from Egypt, Pakistan, Cameroon, and Zambia, as we were handed tickets. Those who got tickets with “white” written on them got to go in through one door, and those of us who got tickets with “black” on them got to enter through another door. It was, as intended by the curators, a most uncomfortable and unpleasant moment. The museum, for those of you who have not visited it, recreates the history of the systematic segregation of white and black South Africans under apartheid. During our visit, there were tears, moments of silence, and sheer astonishment that so much violence and discrimination had lasted for so long. This was not some barbaric nation from “oh so long ago.” The apartheid regime officially ended in the mid-1990s. Less than 30 years ago, apartheid was still a legally structured sociopolitical system that justified beatings, killings, and imprisonment, all based on the color of a person’s skin.

I remember that I kept trying to imagine such a museum in Lebanon. I pictured us a century from now, our great-great-great-grandchildren walking around the museum, shaking their heads in horror and shame. “Muslims to the right.” “Christians to the left.” “Muslim Sunni women here.” “Muslim Shia women there.” “Christian women here.” “Druze women there.” At that moment I

realized that we, Lebanese women, are living under apartheid. When the revolution started on October 17, 2019, with clear slogans and actions blaming them all (*kellon yaaneh kallon*), I knew that, as women, this was our revolution, and that we had to be at the heart of it. More than anyone else, we women know what it means to be discriminated against, beaten, thrown in jail, refused custody, raped, paid less, and treated differently, all based on some ticket someone gave us, some national ID that names our gender and sect. This ticket condemns us to comprise only 23% of the workforce, for example, to be legally subject to child marriage and marital rape, and to a mere 5% representation in parliament.

I have kept a diary since I was about eight years old. When we were given free time in school to draw or play outside, I always had a book in my hand. I loved reading, and still do. I was not talented enough to become a novelist or a storyteller. Instead, I became an academic and told my story through my research, driven by the motivation to write about things I love and experiences I live through. My research agenda has been and always will be about self-reflection and the critique of my real-life experiences. And yet the only way I think I can explain my thoughts about this revolution is through my diary voice. Although I have researched and published a lot about protests in Lebanon from an academic perspective in the past few years, I do not think I can write about the past 100 days or so except by being personal. Surely the personal is political, and in our case, as Lebanese women, the political is revolutionary. For it is only through revolutionary, radical change that we will have the chance to be properly heard and meaningfully represented. Here's why.

For many years, we have campaigned for basic rights and legal protection. By "we" I mean those of us in activist circles, whether taking collective action, advocating for policy changes, or building protests and social movements. The rights we have long worked toward, such as the rights to citizenship, custody, and sexual freedom, challenge the very basic pillars of Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system. Lebanese politics since 1989, after the Civil War, has literally been a game among a group of around 15 men. They got down from their tanks, washed their hands of the war

crimes they had committed, and declared themselves the leaders of the nation. To stay in power they need weapons and money, but also religious leaders and courts to support their legitimacy. They also need to protect the clientelist system that keeps their supporters happy while they proceed to steal state resources (Leenders, 2012). Under the guise of sectarian political representation, these warlords-turned-politicians have divided up state institutions and resources among themselves. Over three decades they have depleted the state budget and marginalized the role of national institutions, replacing parliament, for instance, with off-the-record deal-making through a National Dialogue Table (Geha, 2019b). They have also built an intricate system of rewards and benefits for their supporters, including education, healthcare, and employment (Cammett, 2014). This handful of corrupt warlords-turned-politicians will never yield to any campaigns for gender equality, because any rights for women mean, in their minds, fewer rights, powers, and privileges for them. While Lebanese NGOs have been able to challenge some oppressive practices against women, they have not been and will not be able to challenge the basic structure that allows this group of men to control our lives. I have had and continue to have these conversations with friends, and to engage in expanding critiques of NGOization (see Jad, 2003). Real change cannot be founded and structured alongside nonprofit organizations shaped according to Western standards. That realization is the reason why I stopped believing in the role of civil society organizations, mostly NGOs, and wrote a book and series of articles about why this does not work (Geha, 2016). At that time, I thought we needed locally driven grassroots solutions and coalitions for change to happen. What I did not know or consider then is that what we really needed was a revolution.

In 2017, I was appointed a member of the National Commission for Lebanese Women. At that time, I was naively excited about the possibility of changing things from within. While state feminism has been widely criticized by feminists all over the Arab region, in Lebanon it is a twofold oxymoron: its structure and makeup negate the very objectives it sets out to achieve, in two ways (see e.g. Hatem, 2005). First, its basic makeup is not representative of the women it seeks to protect, but only of the men and political parties that rule the system. Since its inception it has been headed by first ladies and tasked with reporting to United Nations structures and

international laws, which Lebanon violates all the time. Without working on a substantive increase in women's representation, the commission, like NGOs, ends up implementing programs rather than tackling holistic structural change. The commission could not and will never be able to advocate for structural change, because the structure it rests upon is that of the handful of men who agreed to create it in the first place. My most frustrating moment before I resigned in 2019 was being told by the other members of the commission, women like myself, that their parties would not nominate women for elections because there were not enough competent and able women. In a country where men had led us into public debt, rising cancer rates because of pollution, and widespread poverty, the excuse that women were incompetent baffled me. Second, the commission's broader project to "empower" women could not and will never be able to change the rules of the political game. I tried to instill this idea from the day I joined the commission. We did not need to spend money training women in how to speak or how to be noticed. We did need to democratize the political parties' internal practices and the electoral law to truly enable women to run as candidates. Clearly, state feminism in Lebanon, like elsewhere, cannot change the rules of the game. Real change cannot seek approval from men, and cannot be gender-mainstreamed according to some international legal standard. I spoke to more than 100 women about their experiences of political empowerment programs, and published my findings in an article (Geha, 2019a). But this work had little impact: the 2018 parliamentary elections came and went, and of course neither the commission nor anyone else could convince the parties to enact quotas and increase the representation of women in parliament. I ended up resigning. I thought we needed women to sit at the table and design solutions for change to happen. What I did not know or consider then is that what we really needed was a revolution.

The revolution, which I had never imagined, finally came. It has now been over 100 days, and women have transformed political life as we know it. We did not wait for any donor, NGO, or government to come and empower us. We waited for each other and looked out for each other. We knew intuitively that the only way to organize was a feminist one, through inclusive, horizontal, and decentralized forms of leadership. We did not let the men monopolize the scene and tell us what to do. Actually, that part was easy—because we were the majority and they could not

monopolize the spaces, and because frankly they did not know what to do and so could not mansplain the revolution to us. I had not connected with my own city and politics in such a deep and meaningful way before in my life. Suddenly I felt that we, as women, belonged to this place and were able to contribute to changing it. I am convinced that women have experienced this revolution very differently than men, because our struggles with the system are so existential. It is about our livelihoods, bodies, and voices. My women friends are more involved, stressed, and anxious, because they are expending more time, effort, and emotion in the revolutionary process, knowing that they stand to lose the most if the revolution is unsuccessful. Our personal is not only political, but it is revolutionary. If we go back to the way things were before October 17, we go back to being treated on the basis of whichever sectarian ticket we are handed. While we are different, our lack of rights to our bodies, to custody, to divorce, and to travel is oppressive, no matter the ticket we were born with. This time, we will not allow a handful of men to continue to push this country to the brink of apocalypse and then ask them to come and empower us. We will not let a handful of men, warlords or otherwise, design a system that keeps them powerful and rich at our expense. This time, our private political actions are revolutionary. The mere fact of marching down the streets with banners making feminist demands makes our personal choice to engage with politics revolutionary. The idea that the new political system must espouse gender equality is born out of our conviction that we have a personal duty to shape the trajectory of the revolution. Our visualization of the current system as a gender apartheid means that this revolution can only succeed to the extent that it is revolutionary enough to enable women to sit at the table and decide about the future. The revolution falters if we go back to a version of NGOization and state feminism that blames women for the system's long-standing discrimination. Yes, we need to replace these politicians. We need men to step aside as we rebuild a personalized version of the revolution that recognizes our agency and our role in the uprising.

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