

Church, state and politics - cooperation or protest?

Practice and Perspectives of Reformed Churches

Executive Committee of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)
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The Middle Eastern Context questions:

Lately in the Lebanese Parliament elections in Lebanon, a Pastor from the Baptist Church, was running for a Parliamentary Seat that represents the Evangelical Community in the Lebanese Parliament where the constitution secures religious representation for Christians and Muslims and minorities. The Evangelical Community was divided on the idea whether a Pastor should run for such position, and the question of Church and political involvement became a hot debate and resulted with the Pastor running the Elections, winning and becoming the Evangelical Community representative and Parliament member.

The issue of a pastor getting involved in politics was seen by many as in appropriate, since many see that values in politics do not agree with church values. But the other main cause for rejection for a pastor to be involved in Politics related to the fear that this will encourage other radical Religious Muslim leaders groups to run for a parliamentary position and could infuse radical ideology in our political sphere and decision making.

I say this to think of the Context of the Middle East when we tackle the topic of Religion and State. We have to scrutinize the terms used. And ask the necessary questions, namely.

What religion we are talking about; Radical or inclusive and moderate?

What freedom do we have in a specific country?

What Juridical System and civil law do we have to secure freedom of the people involved?

What situation is the country in, peace or war, for wars “under religious titles” influence our involvement?

The Syrian Context:

The constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic guarantees freedom of religion. Syria has had two constitutions: one passed in 1973, and one in 2012 through the 2012 Syrian constitutional referendum.

The new constitution says that the state respects and protects all religions, but reaffirms that that Islamic jurisprudence is the source of inspiration, and “The religion of the President of the Republic has to be Islam”

Article 25

(1) Freedom is a sacred right. The state protects the personal freedom of the citizens and safeguards their dignity and security.

(2) The supremacy of law is a fundamental principle in the society and the state.

(3) The citizens are equal before the law in their rights and duties.

(4) The state insures the principle of equal opportunities for citizens.

Article 26

Every citizen has the right to participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural life. The law regulates this participation.

Article 27

Citizens exercise their rights and enjoy their freedoms by the law.

Article 35

(1) The freedom of faith is guaranteed. The state respects all religions.

(2) The state guarantees the freedom to hold any religious rites, provided they do not disturb the public order.

The above a selection of the New Syria constitution which shows that people have equal rights and calls for religious freedom. If we look at several constitutions in the Middle East, we will find similar language. Still the war situation that surrounds the Middle East, change the situation on the Ground; when security becomes an issue, even written documents change.

Our Churches in Syria have had freedom to worship freely and hold meetings and were even protected when opposed by any Muslim position that would look down at Christianity. The secular government tried to focus on the national Identity and worked towards a secular society where religions are relatively treated alike. But in the last Syrian war, with the growth of Religious Political Islam, and specifically ISIS and their belief that they are fighting for God and they are obeying the right Islamic teachings, things changed and the government, became more cautious about scrutinizing the activity of churches and Muslim groups trying to control the

growth of any radical groups, whether Muslim or Christian. Special permissions from the government became necessary for religious activities especially conferences and big gatherings.

Christians in Syria are involved in Politics. For Example Hammouda Sabbagh who has been the Speaker of the People's Council in Syria since September 2017 is the second Christian to hold that post since Fares al-Khoury who was a Presbyterian.

Christians are part of the political involvement in Syria, but they are involved as individuals and not churches. There is always fear in the Middle East that religion getting involved in politics becomes a tool in the hands of Political Agendas. In the Middle East with the growth of Radical Islam, Judaism and even Christianity, where wars hide behind religion and abuse religion, any direct religious involvement becomes suspicious and negative.

Still in looking at the identity of citizens in the Middle East we discover that people understand their identity in religious terms. Habib C. Malik, Associate Professor of History at the Lebanese American University, and the son of the late Lebanese philosopher and statesman, Charles Malik says

“Identity on both the personal and group levels in a place like the Middle East remains conceived primarily in religious terms. If this is indeed a given, then it should hardly be surprising that religion and politics become intricately intertwined within and across both communities and states in the region.”

Personal Observations:

Identity in the Middle East is always religious. It is hard to separate the two. This is why a secular society is a safer ground and secures better future for the Middle East.

The Church prefers to work toward civil rights rather than direct religious intervention in politics.

The Church should not be a tool in the hands of Political Agenda.

The church cannot remain silent on political issues that lead to injustice even when that could mean that the church statements cross roads with politics.

The war situation in the Middle East has crippled the journey of the Church in its political mission. In a context of divisions, political involvement of the church would push the church to take sides.

We are called as church to create a balance in our country that would rectify any pendulum swings towards opposing groups and try to be a bridge of reconciliation.

We are concerned when Political statements in the West are seen by Christian radical religious groups as fulfilling the will of God, or when a leader or President with unjust actions is supported publically with prayers by religious Evangelical Groups.

Politics is Pragmatic and it can change according to interests. The Church could lose integrity in such situations when taking a clear political stand.

The Church is called to remain a free Prophetic voice against any injustice. Remaining on equal distances from struggling groups. Silence of the Church on political issues encourages injustice.

We are called to have our eyes open on politics, to have our own reading and interpretations for the signs of the times and dare to present a prophetic stand that might not sound popular to many.

Christians in Syria suffer from the war situation like any other citizens. The war is not directed towards Christians. At the beginning of war the issue was reform in Syria. With ISIS it became a war against Radical Politicized religion. The Church can be more involved in Politics in a context of Moderation, freedom and Inclusive Religion where difference is respected and dialogue is possible.