

## Lebanon between kakistocracy and kleptocracy

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Corruption has always been in the hands of those in power, in both developing as well and developed countries. It hampers both economic and human development. But what we are witnessing today is a criminal corruption if I might say. When a corrupt leader who has become unstoppable has sunk a nation into cruel poverty and harsh recession, destroying people's lives continuously and stubbornly, political leadership becomes similar in criminality to that of the tyranny in the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, that is the case of many countries around the world today, though the impact on the developing countries is often more destructive.

Two forms of regimes perfectly fit the description of such "ruling": kakistocracy and kleptocracy. And I think that Lebanon is somewhere between the two.

In a kakistocratic regime, the government is led by its worst qualified or most "unprincipled" citizens. The definition, of Greek origin, goes back to the 17th century and used throughout the years to describe the degraded political systems. Under the disguise of democracy and market economy, incompetent corrupt political leaders abuse their power to satisfy their personal interests.

While the government ideally is responsible to protect the society against fraud, violence and injustice, it becomes itself unjust, merging with the oligarchic class of the country to siphon people's assets for the benefit of the few and sell out national resources to foreign capitals based on "self-beneficial" interests. It becomes, as the American poet James Russel Lowell said in 1876, "a kakistocracy for the benefit of the knaves at the cost of fools."

This results in more corruption, economic collapse, poverty, chaos and war. And the only way to mask their incompetence is to deprive citizens more and more of their basic needs, creating more pain to distract them from the real cause of the country's crisis while fulfilling their egoistic desires.

While kakistocracy grows in weak and chaotic political systems that call for the inept and corrupt, and deter the qualified and competent, kleptocracy is the "rule of the thief." However, the two "cracies" often reinforce each other, resulting in an incompetent and criminal government.

In fact, kleptocratic leaders, who may or may not be competent, misuse power to steal from their people through practices of frauds. They restrain policies that promotes economic and human development if it undermines their own interests and embed policies that grow their fortune at the expense of the nation's growth. They exploit the countries' national resources and use revenues of taxes and foreign aid and grants to greedily increase their own wealth.

Often, they place family, relatives and friends in key positions, even if inept, to protect their status and maintain their fraudulent acts, leading to nepotism. To protect their illegal fortunes, they proceed to international money laundering by hiding them through international secrets accounts, shell companies, foreign investments and real estate. In this regard, globalization is criticized for helping kleptocratic leaders protect their money and "clean" their reputation.

Unfortunately, Lebanon is collapsing between kakistocratic and kleptocratic political leaders, who happened to be the warlords in the country they pretend to love and care about. What is worse is that we have various groups (instead of a collective one) of kakistocratic and kleptocratic politicians, who are competing on who is the most criminal and corrupt to get the biggest slice of the pie.

According to the 2021 US News and World Report Rankings, Lebanon is among the top 10 most corrupt nations, ranking 8. The hyper corruption, growing for decades, has reached all forms of social structures to the extent that it has affected people's culture. In this sense, most Lebanese citizens are now used to exercise, witness or acknowledge corruptive practices to get "things done."

With this toxic environment, the task to eradicate corruption and establish reforms has become harder, at both the micro and macro levels.

Furthermore, Lebanon has a polarized political system. The “us versus them” approach used by kakistocratic leaders have increased the ethos of hate and hostility among politicians with opposing viewpoints, leaving no space for dialogue. The political reaction to the persistent failure of growth and progressivism is extremely troubling, by continually blaming the other without assuming any responsibility or admitting their incompetence that led to what is horribly happening.

Luckily, people are becoming vigilant, wary and rational about their leaders’ failures, an important step toward beginning to end the “age of kakistocracy.” However, the need to deprive oneself from any political, sectoral or religious affiliation, to speak facts instead of slogans, to create functional systems for accountability and reform instead of supporting lingering corrupt structures, is key to our salvation.

It is sad and shocking how Lebanese people are well known around the world, for their kindness, generosity and ability to mingle, adapt to and live with other world communities and cultures, but in their country, they cannot come to a consensus for the sake of the country.

Last Friday, a new government was formed, with the approval of the kleptocratic circles (which would not be granted if it doesn’t guarantee their benefits). To the new Cabinet I address a quote by Mikeal Lewitt in his Forbes’ article on “Investing in a kakistocracy” (October 13, 2016): “It is going to be difficult to govern a country that is repulsed by its leaders. Just ask Venezuelans.”

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