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Democracy redefined or the case for communitarian liberal democracy?

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Abstract

Chibli Mallat's *Democracy Redefined: Michel Chiha and the Lebanese Constitution* offers a major reappraisal of Lebanese constitutionalism while advancing a provocative reconsideration of the meaning of democracy itself. Drawing on the recently accessible Constitutional Papers of Michel Chiha, Mallat reconstructs the genealogy and making of the 1926 Lebanese Constitution and challenges accounts that reduce confessional power-sharing to a colonial imposition or a residue of pre-modern sectarianism. He instead presents Chiha's constitutional thought as an attempt to institutionalize political coexistence among historically constituted communities while safeguarding individual liberty. The book's central theoretical intervention is to redefine democracy beyond majoritarianism: the effective constitutional representation of historically subordinated groups becomes a constitutive condition of democratic legitimacy. This review situates Mallat's argument within a broader tension between liberal individualism and communitarian conceptions of political membership. While recognizing the force of Mallat's critique of the abstract, disembedded citizen, it argues that communal representation cannot by itself secure democratic emancipation. Bringing Mallat into dialogue with my concept of "symbolic liberalism" and proposal for a communitarian liberal democracy, the review calls for a constitutional equilibrium between collective recognition and individual autonomy. It further places Mallat's interpretation in critical conversation with Fawwaz Traboulsi's political-economic reading of Chiha, emphasizing that constitutional arrangements cannot be disentangled from class relations, inequality, and structures of power. The review concludes that democratic justice requires not only representation across communities but also protection against domination within

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them, together with social equality and dialogical institutions capable of sustaining pluralism without reifying communal identities.

Keywords
Lebanese constitutionalism, Michel Chiha, communitarian liberalism, democratic representation, sectarianism

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Introduction

Lebanon's political divisions have always found their mirror in its historiography. Few questions have generated more enduring scholarly disagreement than the place of religious communities in the country's constitutional order. For one influential tradition, confessional communities are relics of a pre-modern social order that entrench sectarianism and obstruct the emergence of democratic citizenship. Scholars such as Fawwaz Traboulsi, Bassel Salloukh, Rima Majed, and Paul Tabar have viewed them largely through this critical lens. Others – including Samir Khalaf, Farid el-Khazen and Bashar Haydar – regard them not simply as obstacles but as enduring political communities whose continued existence must be acknowledged and whose integrative potential deserves careful cultivation.

For much of my academic life, I stood closer to the first position. As someone committed to defending liberal democracy against the long history of authoritarianism in the Arab world, I tended to see communal politics chiefly as an impediment to democratic life. More recently, however, my work on what I have called *symbolic liberalism* – the tendency of contemporary liberalism to privilege abstract individualism while neglecting the social and historical conditions that make freedom meaningful – has led me to a more complex position. Rather than abandoning liberal democracy, I have come to argue for a communitarian liberalism that recognizes both individual rights and the legitimate claims of historically constituted communities. Liberal rights and communal belonging, I believe, should be understood not as opposing principles but as mutually corrective ones.

It was from this perspective that I approached Chibli Mallat's *Democracy Redefined: Michel Chiha and the Lebanese Constitution* (2025). Organized into 14 chapters across 4 parts, and drawing on the newly accessible Constitutional Papers of Michel Chiha (1891–1954) – a remarkable collection of handwritten drafts, annotated typescripts and correspondence – Mallat has written a work that is at once a gripping historical detective story excavating Levantine constitutionalism, a painstaking reconstruction of the making of the Lebanese Constitution with meticulous legal analysis, and a bold intervention in democratic theory. The result is a work that combines the excitement of archival discovery with a sophisticated contribution to constitutional history and democratic theory. The result is far more than a work of constitutional history. Mallat seeks not only to recover Chiha as one of the 20th century's most original constitutional thinkers, but also to challenge one of the deepest assumptions of modern liberal democracy: that democratic

legitimacy rests primarily on the rule of numerical majorities. Against this orthodoxy, he argues that democracy reaches its fullest expression only when historically marginalized communities are constitutionally represented in political power. Whether or not one ultimately accepts this ambitious reformulation, the intellectual audacity of the project commands serious engagement.

This review argues that Mallat has produced a work of exceptional scholarly significance. His archival reconstruction is unlikely to be surpassed for many years and will become indispensable for anyone interested in Lebanese constitutional history. At the same time, his theoretical intervention opens an important conversation about the relationship between communal belonging, individual liberty and democratic representation. While I share much of his critique of abstract individualism, I remain less persuaded that constitutional representation has a great weight for securing democratic justice. The challenge, I suggest, is not simply to recognize historically constituted communities but to balance their claims with individual autonomy, social equality and institutions capable of fostering dialogue across communal boundaries.

The archival revelation: Recovering a constitutional imagination

The book's most enduring contribution lies in its extraordinary archival recovery. At its heart are the Constitutional Papers of Michel Chiha, a remarkable collection of handwritten drafts, annotated typescripts and correspondence that had remained inaccessible for almost a century. From these materials, Mallat reconstructs with impressive precision the making of Lebanon's 1926 Constitution, settling long-standing questions about its authorship and original language. The evidence is unequivocal: Chiha drafted the Constitution in French, in Beirut, beginning in early 1926. The earliest surviving manuscript, written in his own hand, consists of 85 articles and already reveals a remarkably coherent constitutional vision.

Some of the book's most memorable pages read almost like historical detective fiction. A handwritten annotation in the margin of one constitutional draft, unusually bold and authoritative, led Mallat to suspect the hand of a senior French official. A brief exchange with the granddaughter of Henry de Jouvenel, the French High Commissioner, confirmed the intuition almost immediately: the annotation was indeed de Jouvenel's. The anecdote is more than an archival curiosity. It encapsulates Mallat's method. Constitutions emerge not as abstract legal texts but as the product of conversations, negotiations, revisions and identifiable historical actors whose fingerprints remain literally inscribed on the page.

Mallat's reconstruction also broadens the temporal horizon within which Lebanon's constitutional history is usually understood. Rather than treating 1926 as the beginning of the story, he traces the genealogy of constitutional government back to the Simqaniyya agreement of 1697 and follows its evolution through Ottoman reforms, Egyptian rule and the 19th-century administrative councils, drawing on previously neglected archival material, including council minutes preserved at the American University of Beirut. This longue durée perspective challenges the widespread assumption that Lebanon's constitutional order was simply an institutional transplant of the French Mandate. Communal power-sharing,

Mallat argues, developed gradually through centuries of political experimentation in governing a religiously diverse society. The Mandate undoubtedly shaped the final constitutional settlement, but it did not invent its underlying logic.

The drafting of the Constitution itself emerges as a remarkably participatory process by the standards of its time. Mallat follows its development from Henry de Jouvenel's decision in December 1925 to entrust the Representative Council with preparing a constitution, through Chebl Dammous' ambitious consultation of nearly 200 Lebanese notables, to the Constitution's adoption in the early hours of 23 May 1926. What emerges is neither the image of a constitution imposed unilaterally by colonial authorities nor that of a purely indigenous political compact. Rather, it was the outcome of sustained negotiation among Lebanese political actors operating within the constraints of French tutelage.

Mallat never romanticizes this process. The constitutional experiment unfolded under the shadow of colonial power, and French intervention remained pervasive. High Commissioners repeatedly suspended constitutional life, intervened in domestic politics and inserted provisions safeguarding the prerogatives of the Mandate authorities. The Constitution therefore embodied a fundamental tension that has marked Lebanese politics ever since: it expressed an aspiration to self-government while remaining circumscribed by an external sovereign. One of the book's strengths is precisely its refusal to reduce this ambiguity to either colonial domination or national autonomy. Both realities coexisted.

Out of this archival reconstruction emerges a portrait of Michel Chiha that is considerably richer than the familiar image of the banker-philosopher of Lebanese liberalism. Mallat presents him as a constitutional thinker of remarkable intellectual range: a financier attentive to the institutional conditions of economic stability, a cultivated essayist equally at home in Arabic and French intellectual traditions, an uncompromising defender of freedom of expression and against Zionist colonial project in Palestine, and above all, a constitutional pragmatist who recognized that Lebanon's religious plurality could not be governed through a purely majoritarian conception of democracy.

Chiha's famous conception of Lebanon as an *association of minorities* occupies the centre of Mallat's interpretation. For Chiha, confessional diversity was not simply a historical burden to be overcome but the political condition that had made coexistence possible. Lebanon's geography, commercial vocation, multilingual culture and long experience as a refuge for religious minorities had produced a distinctive constitutional ethos in which no community could plausibly claim to embody the nation as a whole. Constitutional stability therefore required institutions that distributed political power among communities while simultaneously safeguarding individual liberties.

Importantly, Mallat does not portray Chiha as an apologist for the existing confessional order. Chiha criticized systems of appointed deputies, warned repeatedly against clientelism, defended constitutional limitations on executive power and opposed amendments designed to prolong presidential mandates – including the controversial 1948 amendment that benefitted his own brother-in-law, President Bishara al-Khuri. His constitutional philosophy rested not on preserving communal privilege but on preventing the concentration of political power.

This distinction is crucial, for it separates Chiha's constitutional imagination from many later justifications of Lebanon's confessional system. For Mallat, Chiha was less the theorist of sectarian privilege than the architect of constitutional coexistence.

Yet the reader is left with an important question. Does the remarkable longevity of Lebanon's Constitution testify to the resilience of Chiha's design, or merely to the inability of successive political actors to agree on an alternative? The Ta'if Accord of 1989, which amended the Constitution in order to end the civil war, redistributed executive authority from the Maronite presidency to the Sunni prime ministership and enhanced the institutional role of the Shi'i Speaker of Parliament. While these reforms undoubtedly altered Lebanon's constitutional balance, they arguably preserved rather than transcended the confessional logic of the original constitutional settlement. Although Mallat discusses the Ta'if amendments with care, he stops short of fully confronting the central question they raise: should Ta'if be understood as a faithful adaptation of Chiha's constitutional vision to new political realities, or does it represent a decisive departure from that vision? The answer to this question has profound implications, not only for understanding Lebanon's constitutional evolution but also for assessing the broader theoretical claims that Mallat develops in the second half of the book.

Rethinking democracy

The archival reconstruction, remarkable as it is, ultimately serves a larger intellectual purpose. Mallat is not simply interested in recovering the origins of Lebanon's Constitution; he seeks to recover an alternative democratic imagination. The historical excavation becomes the foundation for a bold normative claim: the Lebanese constitutional experience invites us to rethink the meaning of democracy itself.

This is where *Democracy Redefined* moves beyond constitutional history and enters the realm of political theory. Mallat's central proposition is both simple and radical: democracy is incomplete unless historically subordinated groups are constitutionally represented in political power. Representation is not merely a safeguard against majoritarian excess; it is a constitutive principle of democratic legitimacy. A democracy that systematically excludes vulnerable communities, however procedurally fair, falls short of democracy properly understood.

To develop this argument, Mallat draws on an unusually wide range of intellectual traditions. He invokes American constitutional jurisprudence – most notably the famous *Carolene Products* Footnote Four and its concern for 'discrete and insular minorities' – while engaging democratic theorists such as Jane Mansbridge on representation. Yet he ultimately moves beyond both. Historically subordinated groups are not merely entitled to judicial protection or symbolic inclusion; they must participate directly in the exercise of political authority. Their presence within government becomes a condition of democracy itself. Importantly, this argument is not confined to Lebanon's confessional communities. Mallat extends the logic to women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, sexual minorities and other groups whose historical exclusion continues to shape their political opportunities. As he puts it,

> Democracy requires government to look like the people by letting in members of the subordinated groups, in an arithmetical sine qua non commensurability, together with an intensity and

> effectiveness to be gauged in a perspective that ends the concerned groups' subordination. (pp. 343–344)

Under this interpretation, Lebanon's constitutional order is no longer a regional anomaly or a uniquely Levantine compromise. Instead, it becomes what Mallat presents as a global constitutional resource – a 'best practice' demonstrating how political power can be shared among multiple historically subordinated communities without relying upon the logic of numerical majority rule. This reconceptualization – what Mallat deliberately calls *Democracy*, with a capital *D*, to distinguish it from conventional majoritarian democracy – is both provocative and potentially transformative. What Mallat describes is perhaps better understood as extreme case of *communitarian democracy*: a constitutional order that seeks to reconcile democratic equality with the political reality of enduring communities.

Mallat thus mounts a direct challenge to one of liberalism's deepest assumptions: that equality is best secured by abstracting from group identities and treating citizens exclusively as autonomous individuals. One of the book's most powerful conceptual distinctions – already implicit in Chiha's constitutional reflections – is that between the *individual tout court* and the *individual*-in-a-historically-subordinate-group. Mallat insists that 'simply proclaiming equality of all under the law, as a silver bullet solution, is naive, inadequate, and therefore wrong' (p. 335). The individual-in-a-historically-subordinate-group cannot be adequately represented by a system that pretends groups do not exist.

This insight brings Mallat's argument into an interesting dialogue with my own critique of what I have called *symbolic liberalism* (Hanafi, 2025). Whereas Mallat develops a constitutional theory grounded in the institutional representation of historically subordinated groups, my concern has been with a form of liberalism that mistakes symbolic inclusion for substantive justice. Symbolic liberalism celebrates diversity through visible gestures – the appointment of a handful of minority figures to prestigious offices, the public celebration of inclusiveness or the fulfilment of representational quotas – while leaving untouched the deeper structures through which power, wealth and opportunity continue to be unequally distributed.

In many respects, Mallat anticipates this critique. He is acutely aware of the dangers of tokenism, referring to 'the odd woman as prime minister or pharaoh, the odd Black man as president of the United States' (p. 347), and insists that representation must be not merely formal but effective. The presence of a subordinated group member in government is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one. Genuine democratic representation must ultimately 'lessen and eventually remove the subordination' (p. 343). This distinction is crucial. Mallat is defending neither symbolic inclusion nor descriptive representation alone; he is arguing for institutional arrangements capable of redistributing political power.

At this point, however, an important tension emerges. Mallat's conception of Democracy remains focused primarily on the composition of political institutions – governments, legislatures and courts. To be sure, he occasionally extends the argument beyond formal politics. His discussion of equal pay, for example, illustrates how Democracy should reshape relations in the workplace as well as within the different

authorities of the state. Nevertheless, the architecture of his theory remains predominantly constitutional and state-centred. Mallat might respond that institutional representation functions as the engine of broader social transformation. He reminded us of Charles de Gaulle's famous dictum, *L'intendance suivra* – the logistics will follow. Once historically subordinated groups obtain meaningful political representation, economic and social reforms are likely to follow. Moreover, token representation, if gradually expanded and institutionalized, may evolve into genuine power-sharing.

Yet history offers reasons for caution. The relationship between political representation and social emancipation is neither automatic nor linear. Lebanon itself provides a sobering illustration. For almost a century, the country has maintained a constitutional order in which all major religious communities enjoy guaranteed political representation. Nevertheless, this same system has also generated governmental paralysis, recurrent sectarian conflict, entrenched clientelism and persistent social inequalities. Political inclusion has not always translated into social justice. Representation of historically subordinated groups is therefore a necessary condition of democratic justice, but it cannot be regarded as a sufficient one. Political institutions alone cannot dismantle the social, economic and cultural structures that reproduce domination. In this respect, Mallat's theory, for all its originality and sophistication, leaves underdeveloped the mechanisms through which constitutional representation becomes genuine emancipation. The transition from institutional inclusion to substantive equality remains more assumed than demonstrated.

This observation should not be read as a rejection of Mallat's theoretical intervention. On the contrary, one of the book's greatest achievements is precisely that it forces us to rethink the relationship between liberal equality and communal belonging. It reminds us that democratic theory cannot continue to rely exclusively on the image of an abstract, disembedded citizen while ignoring the historically constituted communities through which many citizens continue to experience both domination and political agency. Whether one ultimately embraces Mallat's conception of Democracy or seeks to qualify it – as I do – by situating it within a broader theory of communitarian liberalism, the questions he raises are too important to be dismissed. They deserve to become part of the contemporary conversation on the future of democratic theory.

The communal–individual tension

Mallat's theoretical intervention naturally leads to a broader question concerning the relationship between communities and individuals in democratic politics. Elsewhere, I have argued that the crisis of contemporary liberalism stems less from its commitment to individual rights than from its tendency to detach individuals from the social worlds through which they acquire identity, meaning and political agency. Communities are not merely constraints upon individual freedom; they are also among the conditions that make freedom possible. They provide belonging, moral formation and forms of collective action without which citizenship itself becomes increasingly abstract. Yet the converse is equally true. Communitarianism, when left unconstrained by liberal rights and constitutional safeguards, can become oppressive in its own right, demanding conformity, suppressing dissent and reproducing internal hierarchies. For this reason, I have

argued for a conception of *communitarian liberal democracy* that seeks to balance rather than privilege the claims of individuals and communities. Liberal rights and communal recognition should be understood as mutually corrective rather than mutually exclusive principles. Individual rights protect citizens against the tyranny of communities, while communal recognition protects historically constituted groups against the homogenizing tendencies of abstract individualism.

Mallat's theory appears to resolve this tension primarily in favour of communal representation. His conception of *Democracy* requires the constitutional representation of historically subordinated groups, but it offers fewer criteria for determining when group representation itself risks becoming a new form of domination. To be sure, Mallat is fully aware of the institutional risks associated with Lebanon's constitutional order. He discusses governmental paralysis, constitutional deadlock and the difficulties of decision-making within power-sharing arrangements. His proposed remedies are essentially institutional: stronger judicial oversight, and, where appropriate, more extensive forms of federalism. His remedy of greater mediation among communities resonate strongly with my own call for a *dialogical sociology* (Hanafi, 2025), in which political conflict is managed not through domination but through sustained processes of negotiation, mutual recognition and public reasoning.

Yet an important normative question remains insufficiently explored. What happens when constitutionally recognized communities themselves become sites of domination? A constitutional order that protects communities from external marginalization may simultaneously empower communal elites to marginalize dissenting voices within those very communities. Liberal constitutionalism has traditionally been concerned not only with protecting minorities against majorities but also with protecting individuals against the coercive power of the groups to which they belong. This issue is particularly salient in Lebanon. Religious communities are rarely homogeneous actors. They contain profound differences of class, gender, generation, ideology and political orientation. Women, secular citizens, religious reformers, members of sexual minorities and political dissidents may all find themselves marginalized within communities that nevertheless enjoy constitutionally guaranteed representation. The constitutional recognition of communities does not automatically guarantee the democratic inclusion of all those who live within them.

This is where I believe the distinction between *community* and *communal leadership* becomes indispensable. Constitutional recognition should not be interpreted as unconditional deference to existing communal authorities. Rather, it should empower communities while simultaneously protecting the pluralism that exists within them. A communitarian liberal democracy must therefore recognize communities without reifying them. Communities are internally contested moral and political spaces, not monolithic entities speaking with a single voice.

Here, I believe, Mallat could have engaged more directly with an insight that runs through liberal democratic theory from John Stuart Mill to contemporary deliberative and communitarian democrats (e.g. Will Kymlicka, Michael Walzer): every political community contains minorities within minorities. Constitutional design should therefore address not only relations among communities but also relations within them. The challenge is not simply to ensure that historically subordinated groups are represented; it is

also to ensure that dissenting members of those groups retain meaningful avenues for political participation and legal protection. This concern also raises broader questions about the dynamic character of communal identities. Mallat's framework understandably treats historically subordinated groups as relatively stable constitutional actors. Yet communities themselves evolve. Individuals change affiliations, adopt multiple identities or refuse inherited communal labels altogether. Modern constitutional orders must therefore accommodate not only historically constituted communities but also citizens whose identities are fluid, hybrid or intentionally non-communal.

A balanced communitarian liberal democracy would thus rest on a double constitutional commitment. On the one hand, it would recognize communities as legitimate political actors whose historical experiences of exclusion justify institutional representation. On the other hand, it would guarantee every individual the freedom to question, reinterpret, leave or simultaneously inhabit multiple communal affiliations. Neither principle should eclipse the other. Such an approach also broadens the constitutional conversation beyond representation alone. Mallat, to his credit, is aware that representation matters profoundly, but democratic justice ultimately depends upon a wider institutional ecology that includes an independent judiciary, constitutional review, robust civil liberties, social rights, educational equality and mechanisms of public deliberation capable of sustaining dialogue across communal boundaries. Communities require constitutional recognition, but they also require institutions that encourage cooperation rather than permanent competition.

In this respect, my own proposal differs from Mallat's less in its diagnosis than in its constitutional emphasis. We agree that the fiction of the abstract, disembodied individual cannot adequately address historically rooted inequalities. We also agree that communities remain enduring political realities rather than temporary obstacles on the road to liberal modernity. Where we differ is in the constitutional balance between communal representation and individual autonomy. Mallat places the centre of gravity on the former; I would seek a more explicit equilibrium between the two.

Mallat and Traboulsi: A fundamental divergence?

The contrast between Chibli Mallat's interpretation and that of Fawwaz Traboulsi – another major interpreter of Lebanese history – reveals a fundamental disagreement about how to understand both the origins and the failures of the Lebanese constitutional order. Whereas Mallat presents Michel Chiha as a constitutional visionary and the consociational system as a pragmatic and historically grounded response to Lebanon's diversity, Traboulsi portrays Chiha as the 'bourgeois ideologue of free trade and sectarianism', whose constitutional vision reflected and reinforced the interests of Lebanon's emerging commercial and financial oligarchy (Trabulsi, 1998).

For Traboulsi, the 1926 Constitution cannot be understood primarily as a neutral institutional framework designed to manage religious diversity. Rather, it represented a political-economic project that consolidated the power of a dominant social class. The principle of the 'association of minorities', in this interpretation, enabled Lebanon's commercial elites to preserve their influence through a constitutional system that prioritized elite bargaining and sectarian equilibrium over broader democratic participation.

The presidency, parliament and administrative structures functioned less as instruments of social transformation than as mechanisms for managing communal competition while protecting existing economic interests.

From this perspective, the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) was not simply the result of external interventions, institutional distortions or the betrayal of Chiha's constitutional ideals. Rather, it was the outcome of accumulated social and economic contradictions. Deep inequalities, class tensions, uneven development and the marginalization of peripheral populations were translated into sectarian political struggles. Sectarianism, in Traboulsi's analysis, was not the primary cause of Lebanon's crisis but the political language through which underlying social conflicts were expressed.

Mallat acknowledges, albeit briefly, this Marxist and political economy critique. He refers to Mahdi Amel's Marxist interpretation as well as Traboulsi's more nuanced approach (see p. 242). However, he does not fully engage with the implications of this critique for his broader constitutional argument. His defence of Chiha's vision remains largely focused on institutional design and constitutional principles rather than on the social forces that sustain or undermine those institutions.

This difference does not mean that Mallat ignores economic questions. On the contrary, he provides important discussions of Chiha's economic thinking: his concerns with fiscal discipline, his preference for a liberal economic order, his support for limited state intervention and his understanding of Lebanon as a service-oriented economy rather than an industrial society. Yet these economic considerations remain secondary within Mallat's analysis. For him, the central question is how constitutional arrangements can enable diverse communities to coexist democratically. For Traboulsi, by contrast, constitutional arrangements cannot be separated from the economic structures and class relations they reproduce. The difference can therefore be expressed more precisely as follows: Mallat views the constitutional architecture as the primary arena through which political conflict should be managed, whereas Traboulsi views the political economy underlying that architecture as the key determinant of its possibilities and limitations.

Nevertheless, Mallat's argument is more nuanced than a simple defence of the status quo. His redefined conception of Democracy does not imply the preservation of poverty or social hierarchy in the name of communal representation. On the contrary, he explicitly recognizes that a democratic order must address economic exclusion. Poverty, precarity and marginalization – whether affecting slum dwellers, factory workers or other vulnerable groups – cannot become permanent social categories reproduced through constitutional arrangements. Indeed, when social mobility is blocked and historically subordinated categories remain trapped in conditions of exclusion, Mallat appears to endorse more significant state intervention. In the later parts of the book (pp. 348–352), he extends the logic of representation beyond traditional communal categories to include groups whose social position reflects structural disadvantage. His argument therefore moves closer to a substantive conception of democracy in which political representation must be accompanied by efforts to transform the conditions that produce subordination.

Yet a crucial difference remains. For Mallat, the fundamental problem is the distortion and betrayal of an essentially valuable constitutional framework by corrupt elites,

foreign interventions and political actors who failed to respect its democratic potential. For Traboulsi, by contrast, the problem lies deeper: the framework itself was built upon a social order designed to preserve elite power and contain, rather than overcome, Lebanon's structural inequalities. Both perspectives illuminate important dimensions of the Lebanese experience. Mallat reminds us that communal representation cannot simply be dismissed as an irrational obstacle to modern citizenship. In deeply plural societies, institutional recognition of communities may be a necessary condition for democratic inclusion. Traboulsi, however, reminds us that constitutional recognition alone cannot resolve inequalities rooted in political economy. Communities do not exist outside relations of class, wealth and power; they are often shaped by them.

The challenge for contemporary democratic theory, therefore, is to integrate the insights of both approaches. A democratic constitutional order must recognize historically constituted communities without allowing communal representation to become a mechanism for reproducing elite domination. It must protect individuals against both majoritarian exclusion and communal coercion. In this sense, the debate between Mallat and Traboulsi ultimately returns us to the central question of this review: how can democracy balance recognition of collective identities with the pursuit of individual freedom and social justice?

Conclusion

Democracy Redefined is a work of remarkable scope, ambition and intellectual courage. Chibli Mallat has produced not only a definitive archival reconstruction of the origins of the Lebanese Constitution but also a sophisticated portrait of Michel Chiha as a constitutional thinker and a provocative intervention into contemporary democratic theory. His argument that democracy requires the meaningful representation of historically subordinated groups is both timely and theoretically significant, particularly in an era marked by rising inequality, renewed forms of nationalism, democratic backsliding and deepening societal polarization.

The importance of Mallat's contribution lies in his challenge to one of the dominant assumptions of modern liberal democracy: that equality can be achieved primarily by treating citizens as abstract individuals detached from their historical, social and communal contexts. He reminds us that formal equality before the law, while indispensable, may be insufficient when historical patterns of domination continue to shape political participation and access to power. Democracy requires not only equal rights in principle but also institutional arrangements capable of correcting inherited structures of exclusion.

Yet the book also leaves several important questions unresolved. The central one concerns the relationship between representation and emancipation. Does the representation of historically subordinated groups in government necessarily weaken or eliminate their subordination, or can it sometimes institutionalize and legitimize existing communal divisions? Representation is undoubtedly necessary, but is it sufficient? This question becomes particularly urgent in the Lebanese case. If one accepts Mallat and Chiha's argument that major religious communities – Maronites, Sunnis and Shi'is, among others – should be constitutionally represented because they have historically experienced

vulnerability or exclusion, several difficult institutional questions immediately arise. Should the highest constitutional offices – the Presidency of the Republic, the Prime Ministership, and the Speakership of Parliament – be subject to systematic rotation among communities? Should Lebanon conduct a census in order to reassess political representation according to demographic realities?

From the perspective of what I would call *communitarian liberal democracy*, these questions cannot be avoided. Rotation, for example, serves an important democratic function by preventing the permanent monopolization of power by one community and reducing the possibility of political hegemony. At the same time, communal recognition must remain compatible with individual rights. While personal status matters may continue to be administered through religious communities – as is the case in many plural societies – the state must ensure legal protections for citizens who do not wish to belong to any recognized religious community, including atheists, agnostics and those who seek forms of civil personal status.

This raises a broader question about how constitutional systems can recognize diversity without freezing identities into permanent categories. Can a democratic order acknowledge communal belonging while also allowing individuals to cross, reinterpret or reject inherited affiliations? Can diversity be institutionalized in a flexible manner rather than through rigid communal classifications? These are not merely Lebanese questions; they are among the central challenges facing contemporary multicultural democracies. In this respect, the emphasis placed by Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa on the need to recognize social diversity through *informal intervention and not quotas* – even if not yet implemented in practice – reflects a broader regional search for political formulas capable of accommodating plural identities without reproducing authoritarian or sectarian structures. The challenge is to move beyond the false choice between forced homogenization and rigid communalism.

A successful communitarian democratic order must therefore accomplish two simultaneous objectives: it must recognize the historical experiences of communities that have suffered exclusion, while ensuring that individuals are never reduced to the communities into which they were born. It must protect collective identities without allowing communal institutions to become instruments of internal domination. Above all, it must connect political representation with broader struggles for social justice, economic equality and human dignity.

The ultimate question, therefore, remains whether Lebanon's century-long constitutional experience – marked by remarkable survival but also by civil war, foreign intervention, political paralysis and social inequality – confirms Chiha's constitutional insight or reveals its limitations. Mallat's answer is characteristically cautious: 'The Lebanese constitutional regime, ungovernable as it may be, remains superior to other constitutional systems in the region' (p. 297). This may appear to be a modest defence, and Mallat himself recognizes the limitations implied in such a comparison. Lebanon is not presented as a constitutional model to be exported wholesale. Rather, it functions as a laboratory of democratic possibilities: a historical experience that forces us to reconsider what democracy might mean in societies characterized by deep diversity, competing identities and histories of unequal power.

Whether one accepts Mallat's conclusions entirely or seeks to modify them through a stronger emphasis on individual rights, social justice and dialogical institutions, *Democracy Redefined* deserves serious engagement. Its greatest achievement is not that it provides a final answer to the dilemmas of democracy in pluralistic societies, but that it reframes the questions. It reminds us that constitutional debates are never merely technical disputes about institutional arrangements. They are ultimately debates about human coexistence: who belongs, who is represented, how power is shared and what kind of society citizens wish to build together.

In this sense, Mallat's book arrives at a moment when liberal democracy itself is experiencing a profound crisis of legitimacy. By recovering Chiha's constitutional imagination and transforming it into a broader democratic theory, Mallat invites us to reconsider whether the future of democracy lies not in abandoning communities in favour of abstract individualism, nor in surrendering individuals to communal identities, but in developing new constitutional forms capable of holding both together.

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