

Maud Fargeallah

(1909 – 1995)

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“To be clairvoyant in politics, one must listen to what people say, search for the motive behind their attitudes, reconstruct narratives, discretely draw out confessions, and finally sum up the situation. Very often I foresaw the future and used this gift for practical ends (...) One must have a good memory for faces, be a psychologist, love contact with people and finally have politics in the blood, be dynamic, be interested in his/her society and country. And like me one must make it one’s goal in life. Despite all this, I was taxed as an agent on the payroll of ...But what has happened to this payroll if there was any?” (Maude Fargeallah).

Maud Fargeallah, the woman who “made and unmade ministers and presidents in her salon” ironically never held any official political post. However, her influence on the local and regional political scenes was not to be underestimated. Renown for her sharp analytical skills and clairvoyance, Maud was a woman who defied all the norms of her society for the cause she loved best: Lebanon’s integrity and sovereignty .

Family Background

Maud Fargeallah, born Moutran (bishop in Arabic) is a descendant of the Ghassanide tribe and comes from a family of prelates. Her great grand father Francis Moutran was a bishop and had written a number of theology books that were shelved in the Vatican library. She grew up in a family environment very much geared towards politics and public life. Sultan Abdul Hamid bestowed upon her paternal uncle Joseph the title of “effendi”. Her six remaining uncles were granted the title of “bey” with the exception of Nakhlé who was nominated “pacha”.

One of her uncles, Rachid, lived in France and was involved in a spying case with the Germans. He was forced to reside in Munich after that incident. Maud Fargeallah no doubts takes after her aunt Victoria Moutran who played a major political role at the international level. Victoria lived between Istanbul and Paris. She used to receive in her salon politicians, dignitaries, intellectuals and businessmen. She held meetings in her house for the “Young Turks Movement” and was instrumental in the signing of the famous loan between Turkey and France. According to Maud, had the British listened to her aunt’s advice, the 1914

war would have taken a totally different direction. Victoria had advised the British Prime Minister to keep his fleet in the Bosphorus waters to prevent the Turks from allying themselves with the Germans against the Allies.

Childhood years

Maud was born in Baalbeck on the 28th of July 1909 two years after her parents got married. Elias Moutran, her father, fell in love with Evelyn Malhamé who was only 15 when they met. Her parents were close friends of Nicolas and Maud Tabet, the parents of Zalfa, future wife of Camille Chamoun. Her father was very keen on calling her Maud after Maud Tabet. She was a very spoiled child. On her birthdays, her father organized festivities inviting all the villagers to eat, drink and dance as magnificent fireworks illuminated the sky of Baalbeck.

With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the Moutran family was still residing in Baalbeck. Her uncle Nakhlé, then her father, were arrested and detained by the Ottomans in Damascus. Both brothers were accused of sympathizing with the Allies and particularly the French. Her father remained in detention for four months while her uncle was executed. Two years later her parents were exiled to Changorie in Turkey. Upon the withdrawal of the Ottomans from Lebanon and the arrival of the British to Zahleh, the Moutran family returned home. During W.W.I, her father had drinking problems and suffered from liver cirrhosis. In 1920 he passed away leaving behind him a shattered 11 year-old Maud. Maud was then a boarder at the sisters of Besançon's school in which she stayed until 1922.

First Outings

Maud attended her first dancing tea party in 1926 when she was invited by Mr. and Mrs. Emile Tabet. At first she was very shy and refused to wear make-up but soon social life appealed to her and she gradually started to enjoy those flamboyant social gatherings. Despite her frequent outings, her mother was very strict with her. Maud was allowed to stay up late only in the company of her chaperon, Emir Fouad Arslan, Emir Majid Arslan's uncle. The Chihas, Sursocks, Trads, Tabets, and the Bustros were amongst her circle of friends. Marguerite Chiha used to accompany her to the dancing parties organized by the Literary Club in Zahleh. Among her many admirers were Ibrahim Sursock,

Robert Sabbagh, Edouard Tabet and Joy Tabet in addition to Camille Chamoun, who was a very awkward dancer and stepped on her feet. Her favorite suitor though was Henri Pharaon whom she was about to marry in 1925.

Marriage and Children

Maud finally fell for Georges Fargeallah who was 16 years older than her and teased her a great deal. They got engaged in the summer of 1927 against her mother's wishes. On April 28, 1928, Maud Moutran marched to the altar wearing an 80 meters white tulle wedding dress! The wedding ceremony was very simple, restricted to close relatives and friends. Georges Fargeallah was still in mourning for the recent death of his father who passed away 40 days before the wedding. Her son Chico was born on January 28, 1929. Médy, her daughter followed two years later on July 28, 1931.

Being a mother did not prevent Maud from pursuing her social life, "the dolce vita" as she called it (Fargeallah, 1989:58). She gained the reputation of a carefree woman living only for and through "mondanités". Maud confessed that such a heavily charged social life was the shield behind which hid a lonely woman who lacked affection and companionship (Fargeallah, 1989:69). Maud never failed to mention how at moments she envied the comfortable life of her husband Georges. While most of her evenings were spent at the Aero-Club one of the trendiest nightclubs frequented by jetsetters at the time, Georges preferred the tranquility of homey dinners. He was not into politics and enjoyed playing cards with a close circle of friends. Maud however attended and organized huge receptions for more than 200 invitees on a regular basis.



An Exuberant Public Life

Her circle of friends was not only the rich and aristocratic families of Beirut society but also included some of the most prominent political figures of the time. French High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon Comte de Martel was one of Maud's closest friends and used to call her "Maudichon", a nickname she was to keep for the rest of her life. He even confessed that "had he been 15 years younger he would have courted her" (Fargeallah, 1989:81).

As Maud stated she used to live vicariously through other people's lives, she was "intoxicated" by their stories. De

Martel was madly in love with the Countess Raïska de Kerchekove, wife of the Belgian Consul in Lebanon and did not decline any of her wishes. Raïska had convinced the Count to appoint Emile Eddé instead of Bechara al Koury as president of the Republic in 1936. But the president who owed his election to the Countess made the unforgivable mistake of not inviting her to his first public lunch. It was Maud who succeeded where everybody's efforts failed for over 2 years in reconciling president Eddé and Countess Raïska.

As early as 1937 when the country was preparing for parliamentary elections, the "demon of politics" started getting on to her (Fargeallah, 1989: 78). She was constantly invited to the table of the Count de Martel where she met a number of political figures. Her close connection to the count went as far as asking him favors for the growing number of solicitors of services who knocked at her door. For instance, she pleaded to the high commissioner to prevent mandatory authorities from exiling Hajj Amine el Husseini to Palestine in compliance to British pressure. However, her solid friendship with the Count de Martel did not imply support for his political options. She had a strong inclination for French culture, history, language and gastronomy. Nevertheless, she did not sympathize at all with the politics of the Vichy regime. She was much more inclined towards the British, which was publicly revealed when she "adopted" the British forces upon their arrival to Beirut. She had officers from the 9th army everyday at her table. Soon she came to know every one of the officer corps. She always circulated with high-ranking British officials, namely General Spears in whose office most of the major political decisions were taken. She was also a very dear friend of Spear's first secretary, Gerry Young and his wife, a friendship she maintained long after they left Lebanon. Between 1942 and 1948, she organized numerous dancing tea parties to the profit of the British Red Cross. Fund raising gatherings were scheduled every Thursday for 40 convalescent British soldiers.

Again, as she did with the French, Maud Fargeallah had always the courage to criticize the political decisions of her closest British friends. As early as 1943, she saw in Camille Chamoun the perfect and most suitable presidential candidate despite his young age, and openly blamed the British decision-makers who favored Bechara al Khoury. Despite her objectivity and bluntness, Maud was branded as anglophile or pro-British. She did not mind such a label, she "let people talk" in spite of the frequent services she requested from Spears for numerous solicitors (Fargeallah, 1989: 105). Her salon was always open to all sorts of guests, jour-

nalists, friends, and needy people who were received in her bedroom as early as 7 in the morning. She loved assisting people: "Thanks to my social life or in spite of it, I cannot tell, I enormously helped people. I never refused a favor to anyone and I almost always succeeded".

She was general Spears' "white pearl" as he liked to call her and often consulted her on several vital decisions (Fargeallah, 1989: 114). In one of her trips to London in 1952, Maud discovered that all her correspondence with her British friends were kept in Commodore Buth's office in 10 Downing Street. Some passages were even underlined in red. Her letters constituted a "living representation" of the state of affairs in Lebanon (Fargeallah, 1989: 222).

Maud Fargeallah traveled frequently to Palestine to attend to the matters of Zbouba, the village she owned there. The British officials at the borders always treated her royally and facilitated her passage despite restrictions imposed on travelers at the time. It was in Palestine, at the King David hotel, where she met for the first time Asmahane (Amale al-Attrache) the famous Syrian Druze diva. Her stays in Palestine were a continuation of the festive life she carried out in Beirut. Even there, Mrs. Fargeallah was solicited for favors. Using her connections with British security, she interceded for Asmahane to alleviate sanctions the British had imposed on her.

Maud and Nazira Jumblatt

Among Maud's achievements is her successful effort in joining Sit Nazira Jumblatt with General Holmes, commander of the 9th army. Not only was the visit an accomplishment, bearing in mind that Sit Nazira was a reputed Francophile, but having her accept to be photographed was another feat in its own right. The latter consented on one condition: being alone with Maud in the picture.

Independence Woman

Her input to the independence was not to be dismissed. She was eagerly and impatiently asking for the cessation of the French Mandate in Lebanon. During the political turmoil of November 1943, General Spears summoned her to spend some time in Jerusalem because her house was unsafe and surrounded by French security agents.

In May 1945, two years after Independence and shortly after the armistice was declared, Maud received from General Paget, commander in chief of the British armies in the Middle East, a letter thanking her for her efforts in collaborating with the Allies. Saeb Salam who was present at the reception remarked that "even a state does not own a simi-

*US ambassador in
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lar letter" (Fargeallah, 1989:153). Paradoxically, Mrs. Fargeallah could understand the content of the letter written in English only when her friend Ambassador Boswell translated it. Her conversations with British officers were always carried out in French!

Growing dismay against Bechara el Khoury

Maudichon, "like Voltaire", could not stand injustice and corruption (Fargeallah, 1989: 123). She could not tolerate el Khoury's abuse of power. Soon the opposition movement catalyzed by Maud started reacting to the deteriorating economic situation. Political meetings in her salon were intensified to Camille Chamoun's benefit. The President of the Republic saw in her the "instigator of spirits" (Ibid. 1989: 155). Her growing hostility to Bechara el Khoury's regime culminated when she fomented a coup d'etat with the help of Emir Nouhad Arslan, brother of Emir Megid during the spring of 1946.

For the first time in her life, she witnessed a violent outburst from her husband! He had never meddled into her political affairs, but this time it was way beyond limits. Not only was she endangering her life but that of her children and husband as well. The failed coup d'etat did not stop her from pursuing her struggle against the regime. She "could not but work with the opposition" (Fargeallah, 1989: 139). Salma Sayegh, president of the Nahda el Nissa'iyya (Women's Renaissance), joined her ranks as well. On Maud's advice, she turned down the medal she had just received from the government.

Abdul Hamid Karamah then Prime Minister and a very close friend of Maud's commented on Mrs. Fargeallah's attempt to organize a demonstration against the regime by saying: "Maud, you are really strong, you are a 'labwa' (lioness)" (Fargeallah, 1989: 166).

In the opposition ranks

To her dismay, Sheikh Bechara el Khoury's mandate was renewed for six additional years. Assessing Maud's influence on the local political scene, the president tried in vain to win Maud to his side and persistently sought to please her. "Are your British friends satisfied with my performance?" he would ask her whenever they met. He miserably failed in all his efforts to win her to his side and fatalistically stated: "she turns the crank and the opposition follows!" (Fargeallah, 1989:206).

Mrs. Fargeallah was reputed for her bluntness. Outraged by the president's refusal to meet a delegation from the Nahda

al Nissa'iyya who demanded women's suffrage, she called him and insulted him. She was also solicited to settle all sorts of disputes between the government and the "oil people" as she called them. Saeb Salam sought her aid for a serious problem Middle East Airlines was facing with the British I.P.C.

Received by Royalties and Presidents

Maud's admirers were numerous. Commodore Peachy, the admiral of the British fleet in Haifa fell for the eyes of Maudichon. He brought the whole fleet from Palestine to Beirut just to see her! Not only was Maud received by high ranking officials and political figures, she was also invited by King Abdallah of Jordan for lunch and by Queen Elizabeth for an afternoon tea party in Buckingham Palace. Her visit to Jordan was reported by the local radio stations as a major event. She was the first Arab woman to be received at the table of an Arab Monarch, seated at the right hand side of the King and had the privilege of sharing a cup of coffee with him after lunch.

While on a visit to Paris in 1955, Maud attended a parliamentary debate on Algeria at the Quai d'Orsay. She met President Antoine Pinay and freely and openly criticized French foreign policy in the Middle East and particularly in Lebanon and the way they treated Chamoun by branding him as anglophile.

Political Victory: Camille Chamoun Elected President

In the fall of 1952, the long awaited presidency of Camille Chamoun saw the light when Bechara el Khoury was over-

thrown. Maud's dream finally came true. Zalfa did not share her opinion and was terrorized by the new role she had to assume as first lady. Zalfa Chamoun sent Maud to Beiteddine on the night her husband became president: "Camille has asked for you. Go and see him 'khawita' (crazy one). Give him his pillow, he will not be able to sleep without it" (Fargeallah, 1989:232). Maud Fargeallah was to accompany the presidential couple to a number of their official visits to foreign countries. President Chamoun asked her to establish invitation lists for the banquet in honor of King Seoud. Thanks to her, more than one attempt fomented by Fouad Chehab and his followers to overthrow Chamoun's rule failed. Her relationship with Camille Chamoun cooled down for a period of 5 years. However, her political views and path had never stopped being 'Chamounist' in any way.

In 1953, Maud added to her record as a politician that of a businesswoman. She was in charge of providing supplies for Aramco's personnel. To that effect, she rented a run-

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down stable in Chiyah and renovated it to accommodate more than a hundred workers. Georges, her husband was supervising her work.

A Feminist Activist in Her Own Way

Maud was never interested in joining activist feminist movements. She attended unwillingly some meetings of the Nahda Nissa'iyya upon the insistence of her aunt Evelyne Bustros. She also assisted her aunt in designing and sewing folkloric costumes for the Artisanat. Maud wore folkloric dresses which belonged to Mrs. Bustros in the fashion show celebrating the launching of dolls wearing the national costumes of neighboring countries. Her friendship to the Sunnites whom she considered the most loyal friends she ever had as well as her close relationship to Adel Osseiran were behind granting the 'Christian weak sex' the right to equal inheritance (Fargeallah, 1989: 275).

New Alliances, New Friendships

In 1957, after several disappointments with the British and the way they carried out their foreign policy in the Middle East and in Lebanon in particular, Maud decided to cut off her relations with them. She stopped receiving them and accepting their invitations. She did not want to do with anything or anyone that was not to the advantage of her country. It was the time for a new alliance with the United States. She established a solid friendship with the US ambassador in Beirut, Donald Heath who told her once "My dear, you are a great man!" (Fargeallah, 1989: 289).

Coup d'Etat Instigator

Mrs. Fargeallah had to pay for being a sworn anti-Nasserite and anti-Chehabist: agents of the Egyptian embassy planted a bomb in her garden in 1955. Egyptian newspapers called her "Mode" (fashion) Fargeallah, the woman who "made and unmade ministers and presidents". During the 1958 armed crisis, the helicopter of Holloway, the 6th American fleet Admiral picked up Mrs. Fargeallah, who was spending the summer in Bois de Boulogne to Beirut to have lunch with him. During that same period, Maud with the assistance of US ambassador Mc Clintock, helped Sami el Solh and his men flee the country.

Her strenuous relationship to the Chehabist rule exacerbated and reached its peak after she confronted General Chehab and bluntly criticized his regime. However the price she had to pay for opposing the regime was yet to come. Chehab pressured the British and the Americans to stop collaborating with her. Her work for Tapline and Aramco suffered a great deal. Chehab did not spare any means to force her out of the political scene. However, Maud could not stay idle. As usual, the opposition, mainly constituted at the time of Antoun Saadeh's SSNP members, met in her salon and plans for overthrowing Chehab were clandestinely being drawn. The SSNP coup d'etat of 1961-1962 failed and Maud was forbidden to leave Lebanese territory. She was even interrogated for that effect.

Retreat from Public Life

By 1963, Maud had stopped her direct political activities. She was forced to sell her residence to settle her accumulated debts. This year witnessed the "end of castle life" as Maud described it (Fargeallah, 1989: 340). That same year, she left for France and spent two years and a half in Paris. Even there, she was under police surveillance.

The year 1969 marked the deaths of both her husband and daughter. Two years later, Zalfa Chamoun passed away. The accumulations of these sad events affected Maud tremendously.

The outburst of the civil war in 1975 left Maud completely chattered and devastated. She saw everything she had fought for throughout her life fall into pieces. In 1989, Maud dedicated her autobiography to "the youth of her country who are passing through rough times and to preserve the past in the memory of the future". Maud Fargeallah died at the age of 86 in 1995 leaving behind her a legacy of women's involvement in politics which is yet to be rivaled.

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