



Photo by Fadi Abou Chalcoum

Elefteriades: "They confess that their decisions have been made by Syrian intelligence."

Lebanese artist: We had no say – so we should not pay

BEIRUT Lebanon's crippling public debt prompted Michel Elefteriades, a Greek-Lebanese artist, producer and businessman, to launch a campaign earlier this week inciting Lebanese to stop paying taxes until a "righteous financial investigation committee is formed to look into the accumulation of the country's public debt."

The campaign, called *We Won't Pay, Lebanon's Debts Are Odious*, is meant to ratchet up the pressure on the state to take action on Lebanon's crippling public debt of about \$40 billion. The idea for the campaign occurred to him as he read the French expression *dettes odieuses* in the Parisian newspaper *Le Monde*, media reports said on Wednesday.

"I found it as if the theory of odious debts had been made especially for Lebanon," Elefteriades was quoted as saying.

Odious debts is the term given to debt piled up by a regime that does not enjoy popular legitimacy or a regime controlled by a colonial or occupational authority. The doctrine of odious debt dates back to the end of the 19th century, when the US government repudiated Cuba's external debts after seizing the island in the Spanish-American war.

US authorities argued that Cuba's debt had not been incurred for the benefit of the Cuban people nor with their con-

sent, and that the loans helped to finance their oppression.

Elefteriades said he believed the theory could be implemented in Lebanon by reason of stands taken by the ruling class in the past two years.

Officials say "their will has been stolen from them, and they have been put under the control of an occupying or tutelage regime," he said. "They confess that their decisions have been made by Syrian intelligence. They also say they have extended President Emile Lahoud's term by force."

Country's massive debt was built up 'according to Assad's conditions'

According to Elefteriades, "the first partners in this game are the countries that blessed the occupation at the time, while confirming today that they will not allow its return."

"Those countries assume the responsibility of giving loans to Lebanon under a tutelage regime and in the absence of legitimacy," he said.

He said Lebanon incurred most of its debts in the 1990s, particularly since 1993, "under a government that gained the confidence of a Parliament that was elected by only 13 percent of the Lebanese people."

"Those loans were given to Lebanon according to [then-Syrian President Hafez] Assad's conditions," he said, "and with very high interests ranging between 18-42 percent."

Elefteriades said he would form a committee that would launch awareness campaigns inside and outside the country in a bid to incite the Lebanese to support the cancellation of the country's public debt.

He launched his campaign on Monday at a small restaurant in Downtown Beirut which has closed since the opposition's open-ended sit-in began last December.

"The choice of the place is aimed at outlining the size of economic difficulties which investors are suffering from," he was quoted as saying. "And those difficulties may lead to the closure of several institutions."

As for the date, he chose October 8, the date when Argentine-born revolutionary Che Guevara was executed in 1967.

Elefteriades, 37, is known for his eclectic style and creations, as well as for his unorthodox beliefs and opinions. He has laid out the foundations of a new social and philosophical, as well as political and cultural approach to a new nation he named *Nowheristan*.

His principal business interests center mainly on the music and entertainment industries. — *The Daily Star*