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Lebanon: A Consociational Model to be Refined

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As conflicts continue to rage throughout the Middle East in the wake of the 2010 Arab uprising, divisions across ethnic and religious lines in several regional countries have brought consociational models of governance back into the spotlight. In an effort to reconcile inter-group conflicts and regulate power sharing in the region, public discussions have highlighted the role of consociational arrangements in resolving conflict in Lebanon. Lebanon has 18 officially recognized sects. Under the Lebanese consociational system, agreement among the leaders of the major sects (Sunni, Shia, and Maronite) is required to pass a policy, approve an official's appointment, convene parliament, or for a president to be elected (i.e., parliament does not convene and elections are not held unless the sects agree on the winning candidate in advance). The Lebanese model, or the "Lebanese formula" as described by Hudson (1997, 107), has regained prominence.

The Lebanese consociational structure was first implemented after the National Pact of 1943. The sectarian-consociational model was subsequently amended in the Taif Agreement, which ended the civil war in 1989. Most recently, the principles of this model were re-confirmed in the Doha Agreement in 2008. Lebanon's political history indicates that these consociational agreements reflect a common understanding that no viable alternative to consociationalism that would ensure the functionality and continuity of Lebanon exists. It was clear for the fathers of independence in Lebanon that a "communal representation" and power-sharing model is

required to achieve a stable political process and accommodate the concerns of sectarian groups (Hudson 1997, 106).

In light of this renewed attention on the Lebanese model, it is necessary to re-evaluate Lebanon's consociational system in order to gauge whether it would be useful for other countries in the region experiencing similar ethnic or religious divisions.

THE TAIF AGREEMENT

The Taif Agreement was meant to restore the consociational model as the country's governing mechanism and reduce institutionalized sectarianism. It was verbally agreed that the president of Lebanon must be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, and the speaker of parliament a Shia. To this end, the accord tasked the Chamber of Deputies with organizing a national dialogue on the country's political transition. The parliament was to establish a national committee that included the leaders of the three sectarian communities mentioned above as well as other national political figures. The accord stated that after the election of a national non-sectarian-based Chamber of Deputies, a Senate that would include religious leaders and would have authority only on the most important national issues was to be formed (Salamey and Payne, 2008, 461). Yet this transitional phase, as it were, has instead become the status quo, from which leaders of Lebanon's religious communities have little incentive to deviate. While initially formulated to



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establish a consociational democracy in which the role of sectarian leaders in the country was to be limited to certain national issues, the Taif Agreement has trapped Lebanon in a cycle of sectarian tension, conflicts of interest, and occasional violence.

BASICS OF THE ACCORD

The Taif Agreement was negotiated in Taif, Saudi Arabia, in September 1989 to end the Lebanese civil war. It introduced political, administrative, and other reforms aimed at re-establishing political and economic stability in Lebanon. It maintained the general characteristics of the existing power-sharing system, but redistributed domestic political power among the major sects—Maronite, Sunni, and Shia. Its main provisions state that Lebanon is Arab in identity and that its political system is a parliamentary democracy based on the principles of separation, balance, and cooperation among the three branches of government. And, most importantly, the accord lists abolishing political sectarianism as a basic national goal, to be achieved gradually over time, although no specific deadline or plan of action was provided for its execution.

Almost three decades after the Taif Agreement, the population is still divided, parliament is still sectarian-based, and the electoral system reinforces sectarian representation. Public offices are allocated in accordance with sectarian divisions. The central government has weakened, and sectarian communities are taking over its role by providing in-group services, as discussed below. The trash crisis that Lebanon has struggled with over the past three years—whereby the country's landfills have reached capacity, and there is no agreement on alternative ways to manage this issue, leading to garbage piling up around Lebanon—is a perfect illustration of the government's inefficiency in handling its basic duties. The crisis is the result of high levels of corruption and gridlock inside the government.

In this sense, Lebanon has moved away from democratic governance. What can be observed instead is the rise of a consociational communitocracy—a

system in which populist sectarian leaders rule, strengthening their communities and establishing transnational ties that undermine the central government. In this system, the sectarian leaders' chief interest is to maintain the status quo, thereby ensuring their hold onto power. One of the key mechanisms by which they achieve this is to focus the public's attention on the provision of daily needs such as electricity and water, which Lebanon has been suffering shortages of for more than four decades. By providing these services via established communitarian sectarian networks—including schools, hospitals, NGOs, media channels, and religious institutions—the sectarian groups further reinforce the existing system. Each caters to its respective members, which further underscores a sense of belonging to a specific sect rather than belonging to the larger Lebanese state.

As a communitocracy, Lebanon lacks both a unified national identity and national goals. Instead, communitarian networks undermine the efficacy of the central government, thereby elevating their positions as providers of services for their own communities. Lebanese citizens' persistent identification with their sectarian communities leads to recurrent internal conflicts and intolerance among the Lebanese population.

Many observers have come to view this confessional system as a major source of political gridlock in Lebanon. Yet others see this sectarian communitarian structure as a necessity to protect minorities, maintain political stability, and give each community a fair share of the political power. Scholars who study the Lebanese formula debate whether the consociational model of governance that was refined after the Taif Agreement was an adequate solution or if it conversely was part of the problem (Hudson 1997, 106). While both views have their merits, what remains obvious is that in such a deeply divided population, within which various sectarian communities mobilize around rival political visions and interests, the state and national identity are greatly undermined. This is particularly true because “the struggle for democracy requires the eradication

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of political clientelism, nepotism and patronage, and the establishment of national institutionalism” (Plattner 2010, as cited in Salamey and Tabar 2012). If a population is divided along sectarian lines, mobilized by sectarian leaders, served by sectarian-based networks, and focused on communitarian-defined interests, then favoritism, corruption, and a weak central authority will hinder efforts to establish an effective and legitimate state organization.

Lebanon’s inability to develop such a state stems from two issues: the societal fragmentation in a rigid confessional system of governance, and the country’s high susceptibility to external influences (Salamey and Payne 2008, 453). These sectarian groups, dubbed as sub-state communities, have formed strong ties with trans-border groups, organizations, or states and sought protection to compensate for the state’s malfunctioning. The two main examples include the Iran-backed Hezbollah and the Saudi-backed Future Movement.

What complicates the prospects for moving beyond confessionalism in Lebanon is lack of competition. The confessional elites do not face much competition for power or even calls for accountability from within their own communities. Disproportionate majorities in each sectarian community view their respective sectarian leaders positively. A survey conducted at the Lebanese American University (LAU) revealed strong sectarian populist sentiments among residents, which explain the lack of motivation among the general public to hold their leaders to account. The survey finds that 70 percent of Shiites, 53 percent of the Sunnis, and 41 percent of the Maronites believe that “their leader has rarely or never committed a mistake over the past five years” (Salamey and Tabar 2012, 505).

LOOKING FORWARD

Changes to the confessional system in Lebanon is urgently needed because the persistence of the existing confessional power structure has stalled progress toward the realization of consociationalism as a democratic form of governance and

threatens civil peace in the country. How can Lebanon move beyond communitocracy and establish its democratic governance in line with a consociational structure? Key steps include strengthening the parliament and introducing a proportional electoral system in place of the current majoritarian one to undermine the rigid confessional power-sharing structure.

The comprehensive implementation of consociational democracy in Lebanon hinges on establishing a proportional representation system—an essential condition for consociational systems—in order to move away from confessional representation toward a more responsive model that allows for newly emerging and independent candidates to win seats. The 2018 parliamentary elections, which were held under a new proportional law, offered hope in this regard. Lebanon tested a new proportional list voting system instead of a bloc vote majoritarian one; however, the sectarian quota feature was left intact in the new electoral law. Among its main shortcomings was the fact that votes in some districts had more weight than in other districts. Under the new law, voters cast two votes: one for a fixed electoral list in their district and a second for their preferred candidate within that list. Hence, the degree of proportionality varied from one district to another. If a list wins five out of eight seats, for example, the top five candidates on the list will each win a seat. The sixth candidate might have a total of 8,000 votes but will not get a seat because the list the candidate belongs to has already filled its five allocated seats. This will allow a candidate from a different list with significantly fewer votes to win this seat.

The electoral turnout in 2018 was 49.7 percent, 5 percent less than that of 2009. Only six women were elected, compared to four women in 2009. Several independent candidates and lists appeared on the ballots but only one candidate, Paulette Yacoubian, won. Populist sectarian leaders and patronage networks still dominated the political game, and the new electoral law continued to work in their favor as it largely inhibited independent electoral lists from winning. As a result, a majority of

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the previous members of parliament were re-elected.

Another crucial step to resolve the sectarian-driven conflicts and gridlock in Lebanon is moving toward a more secular form of governance. The religious and public spheres in Lebanon are not separated. Personal status courts are still managed by religious laws. Lebanese citizens must follow the laws of their specific sects in regard to issues such as inheritance, marriage, and divorce, among others. Unifying the personal status laws, of which there are 18 separate laws, will help in gradually moving toward a secular government. Such a move would aid in de-emphasizing the sectarian identities of Lebanese citizens, which can boost citizens' sense of belonging to and identification with Lebanon. Likewise, it can create a greater sense of equality under the law.

IMPLICATIONS

There are several problems associated with the Lebanese system that hinder Lebanon from becoming a better democratic state: well-established and deep-rooted communitarian networks that more and more resemble states within the state, an electoral system that reinforces sectarian divisions and communitarian power, and the religious repercussions Lebanese citizens face over personal status issues.

Lebanon remains a complex model to study due to its multilayered structure. The fact that no single group is capable of establishing hegemony implies that power sharing remains an essential prerequisite for an alternative to the current system. Simultaneously, however, it is in itself a major obstacle, hindering the country from reaching stability and further development. The latest elections were unable to induce change, and the same political figures remained in power.

As the response to the Arab Spring continues to unfold in the Middle East, a large number of dormant ethnic and religious divisions have regained significance in recent years. It is within this context that Lebanon has become the subject of discussions on whether it can serve as a model for other countries in the region in

their efforts to establish peace and stability. However, for various reasons discussed above, Lebanon falls short of being an ideal model for Arab states. Although Lebanon's consociational system helped mitigate conflicts within a deeply divided population, it remains stalled in a transitional phase almost three decades after the Taif Agreement was signed.

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