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Consolidating Traditional Sectarian Leadership:

The 2022 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections

by

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Abstract

Almost 33 years after the end of the civil war, Lebanese citizens have still sustained their support for traditional sectarian parties who fought during the war and have dominated the political scene. By focusing on the 2022 Lebanese parliamentary elections, this research examines the reasons that drive voters to re-elect the same figures notwithstanding compounding crises and deteriorating living standards since 2019. The study argues that some of the main factors that influence voter behavior include the structure of the Lebanese system, the obstacles faced by independent candidates and opposition groups, as well as the role of the media in shaping public opinion. Although alternative parties have been gaining momentum during the past few years, several fundamental issues still need to be addressed to challenge current politicians and accomplish substantial wins in the upcoming elections.

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Abbreviations

- Corruption Perception Index (CPI)
- European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)
- Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM)
- Proportional Representation (PR)
- Supervisory Commission for Elections (SCE)

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Case Study Overview

Since the end of its 15-year civil war, Lebanon has fallen victim to uninterrupted cycles of political, economic, and social crises. The end of the war did not unveil any tangible attempts at peacebuilding, as former warlords were granted amnesty, allowing them to evade accountability. This resulted in the consolidation of a dominant oligarchy composed of influential families from numerous sects who became the legitimate state rulers. Despite incessant fraud and deteriorating conditions throughout the past three decades, many Lebanese citizens have adapted to the country's situation and maintained their support for the aforementioned political class. Indeed, several indicators have highlighted the country's worsening situation coupled with subsequent acclimatization. Between 2014 and 2016, politicians failed to elect a new president, culminating in a 2-year political vacuum. The "You Stink" protests in 2015 embodied prevalent feelings of dissent among people towards the ruling class. Nevertheless, the protests eventually slowed down, and citizens returned to accepting their situation. The October 17th protests in 2019 put forth the prospect of substantial change, as they were able to mobilize individuals from all religions and districts to demand change and call for technocratic elites. Likewise, the Beirut Blast was met with pervasive protests, outrage, and discontent with the government's response. Nevertheless, both these protests gradually lost momentum. The situation has undeniably exacerbated since 2020, following the COVID-19 pandemic and coinciding health and monetary crises. For instance, food insecurity among Lebanese population is estimated to have increased by more than 10% (Kharroubi, Naja, Diab-El-Harake, and Jomaa, 2021). Economically, the country has witnessed the devaluation of the Lebanese pound, an increase in public debt and living costs, and a significant decrease in net foreign assets (Bitar, 2021). According to the World Bank (2021), Lebanon's economic crisis

is among the three direst crises worldwide since the 1850s. Since the summer of 2021, the country has faced a waning health sector and a grave shortage of critical medicine, including those utilized to treat cancer, diabetes, and other illnesses (Das, 2021). All these challenges were coupled with inadequate shelter, lack of access to water and hygiene facilities, and continuous blackouts amid an electricity crisis and fuel shortages.

Following the aforementioned, the 2022 parliamentary elections presented the opportunity for citizens to change their fate and elect alternative candidates into the parliament. The traditional ruling class had proved its incompetence and inability to save the country from its crises, and electing independent and non-sectarian groups became a concrete possibility. Nevertheless, traditional political parties and figures still secured more than 80% of parliamentary seats. Although powerful oligarchs did not directly run for elections, they have endeavored to guarantee that their power is transferred to their offspring, who would in turn hamper opposition groups' attempts to make it into parliament. Today, the country is once again in presidential vacuum, and people continue to bear the brunt of corruption, with limited access and capability to afford basic necessities and more than half of the country living below the poverty line. Similar to prior parliamentary elections, Lebanese citizens resorted to choosing the same politicians, which has served to continually re-legitimize their failed state.

1.2 Research Question

This study will endeavor to answer the following research question: In light of Lebanon's 2022 parliamentary elections and its overlapping crises, why have Lebanese citizens re-elected the same elites since the end of the Civil War? Answering this question and tackling Lebanese residents' adverse acclimatization to bad governance are of utmost importance to identify the barriers hindering prominent change in the Lebanese scene. Unless this widespread apathy is reversed, Lebanon will be obstructed from enjoying legitimate democratic

establishments, advanced fiscal growth, and authentic social justice. The pertinent literature has put forth compelling arguments for people's adaptability to corruption. Nevertheless, in the case of Lebanon, it is important to acknowledge the role played by the structure of the Lebanese sectarian system. Indeed, sectarianism and patron-client relationships have constituted a fundamental component of Lebanon's structure since its establishment. The predominant religious narrative has created a sense of belonging among people of the same group. This renders citizens prepared to support corrupt elites for the sake of avoiding alienation and upholding the sectarian structure to which they have grown accustomed.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 Reasons that Push People to Tolerate Corrupt Politicians

Various studies have tackled the phenomenon of condoning corruption and inept political leaders who govern countries' political and executive branches. Building up on the literature, this study will use the term corruption to denote a situation where a person in a principal-agent contract abuses his/her unrestricted influence for personal benefit (Colombatto, 2003). Moreover, this study will consider corrupt politicians as those who unveil various behavioral characteristics, including being dishonest, egocentric, conceited, or incompetent, violating human rights, intimidating or marginalizing others, prioritizing their desires over the population's welfare, and underestimating possible successors. They can psychologically exploit citizens to remain in power, and they surround themselves with groups who exhibit unconditional loyalty and trust. Thus, individuals believe that they have been "chosen" and benefit from their belonging to the politicians' entourage through goods, services, or ideological fulfillment. In his book, Lipman-Blumen (2004) explains that although condemning politicians for their corruption is easy, it is public compliance that keeps them in power. The tradeoff argument postulates that if the advantages of supporting the leader

outweigh the costs accompanying corruption, incompetency may be overlooked (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). Consequently, citizens obey their leader blindly and avoid expressing dissent to ensure their safety and continue profiting from resources (Pelletier, 2012). Others have maintained that political institutions and cultural traits in societies impact people's acceptance of corruption. Furthermore, states might have limited options for non-corrupt candidates. A third argument proposes that people might be unaware of corruption if politicians hide their endeavors and the media is unable to challenge them (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). Lipman-Blumen (2004) argues that corrupt leaders manipulate their followers by reminding them of their need for protection and authority, making them feel superior, and fostering a sense of belonging. Similarly, they feed off people's fears of being excluded or left powerless. Because supporters depend on their leaders in times of instability, the latter relies on phases of uncertainty to remain in power. Citizens who are faced with incompetent officials tend to find excuses to neglect their mistakes. They feel powerless and fear facing the risk of a crueler successor (Lipman-Blumen, 2004).

In the case of Lebanon, this research will reason that the information argument does not fully apply, since Lebanese people are informed about their corrupt environment and have the courage to stand up against politicians who underserve, as they have already done many times before. The tradeoff argument fits Lebanon's case, albeit the literature misses an overarching theme. The reasons why Lebanese people adapt to corrupt leadership – including the need for security, benefits, and a sense of belonging – all fall under one main theme: sectarianism. The sectarian system has long provided Lebanese citizens with benefits that overshadow the ills of corruption.

1.3.2 Evidence of Corrupt Leadership and Acclimatization in Lebanon

Corruption entails an unlawful abuse of power by public officials for their satisfaction (Haykal, 2017). Lebanon suffers from many forms of fraud, ranging from minor ‘petty corruption’ to ‘grand corruption’ which happens at a governmental level and impacts the political, judicial, and fiscal structures (Haykal, 2017). Lebanese citizens have been aware of the aforementioned. In fact, a report by the United Nations in 2001 concluded that 96% of Lebanese citizens blamed the government for fraud (Abdelnour, 2001). Abdelnour (2001) argues that the leaders’ greediness has intensified bribes and worsened national debt, which has augmented from \$20 billion in 1995 to \$160 billion in 2020 (Thebian, 2020). Political elites have relied on clientelism and patronage for more than two decades to garner popular support, and the practice infiltrates nearly all public institutions (Abdelnour, 2001). Since 2020, Lebanon bore witness to countless political, financial, and security predicaments that have aggravated fraud and uncertainty (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2020). Moreover, its score on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) has decreased from 30 to 24 between 2012 and 2021. Haykal (2017) argues that it is normal to be corrupted in a country that sees rampant corruption as normal conduct, since 23.3% of Lebanese citizens accept bribes. Thus, this systematic corruption represents a national agreement to tolerate fraud. People do not feel guilty when undergoing corrupt acts, and social punishment is absent (Haykal, 2017). This entices politicians to break the law and makes citizens condone corruption as a social norm. Corruption has accordingly become a mode of survival fostered by a weak state, fragile institutions, and rivalries between political elites.

The literature can also be studied to determine patterns of adaptation in Lebanon. The Lebanese society displays trends of mass demonstrations followed by periods of adjustment to their reality. Thebian (2020), one of the organizers of the 2015 “You Stink” protests, points out that the Lebanese government tends to disregard protests when they begin. Eventually, when the demonstration gains traction, the elites start supporting the citizens’ demands, although

they are not willing to change the system. Finally, when the state feels threatened, it uses violence to limit dissent until the situation returns to normal. The same trend can be observed in the October 19 revolution, which revealed nationwide dissatisfaction with the regime's party-based clientelism. Demonstrators called for political reforms and a new government. This came at a time when the financial condition was worsening, hampering living standards and hindering the government's capability to solve its problems (Mizrahi, 2019). More than a year later, the revolution failed to achieve its purpose, as the situation had aggravated and protestors' demands remained unanswered (Mizrahi, Schweitzer, Even, & Fadlon, 2020). Lebanese citizens returned to a feeling of despair, while leaders remained unaffected, including Prime Minister Hariri who was reappointed. In 2022, unemployment levels remain high, water and electricity are not always accessible, the Lebanese pound continues to lose its value, and governmental institutions remain corrupted. Thebian (2020) relied on Maslow's pyramid to argue that the protests declined due to people's hopelessness and their need to rest and survive.

The aforementioned supports the argument that Lebanese people have fallen victim to corrupt leadership. The literature spans over several decades and is not limited to a distinct period, indicating the ever-present nature of corruption. It also attests how Lebanese citizens have adapted to their situation as time passed, especially as revolutions lost momentum. However, this research will reject the argument that adaptability is caused by hopelessness and despair. The next section will highlight the benefits offered by sectarian relations that render Lebanese people hesitant to abolish sectarianism.

1.3.3 Patron-Client Relationships and Sectarianism in Lebanon: Security, Goods, and a Sense of Belonging

Sectarianism and patron-clientelism have been at the core of Lebanon's structure since its inception, and they have led to numerous economic and political complications (Thebian,

2020). Samir Khalaf (1997) wrote that Lebanon's history consists of different factions attempting to safeguard patronage. The 1975-1990 civil war was fought between religious paramilitaries, and sectarianism was further strengthened through the Ta'if accord which left patron-clientelism arrangements intact. Diverse sects fear each other, and party leaders appoint positions based on clientelism and sectarian lines to garner their clients' faithfulness and guarantee that they will serve their interest (Clark & Salloukh, 2013). For instance, founding a national workers' movement has been unsuccessful and all activities or associations are structured on a religious basis (Malley, 2018). Genuine political influence exists in unofficial networks controlled by religious leaders. As such, not belonging to a sect alienates a person from the system. Lebanon is being led by former warlords who divide their shares based on their power, resulting in pervasive neo-patrimonialism, manipulation, and inequity in the allocation of public resources (Salti & Chaaban, 2010). Politicians have countless supporters who either like or fear them. Regardless, citizens are inclined to accept their leader's actions to avoid alienation, ensure protection, and profit off nepotism. This became evident during the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections, whereby independent parties failed to make substantial breakthroughs. During the former, independent candidates only gained one seat (Deets & Skulte-Ouaiss, 2021). In 2022, 13 independent candidates were voted into parliament, and traditional political parties did not witness any considerable decrease in their votes (Abouaoun, 2022).

While the literature puts forth compelling reasons behind Lebanese people's acclimatization to incompetent elites, it still exhibits several gaps. First, the majority of articles tackling the re-election of leaders focus on democracies with secular states. Thus, studies regarding religiously-polarized societies remain limited. Second, few studies have been done on Lebanon, where sectarianism has constituted the foundation of the country's structure and political elites have been in power since the end of the Civil War.

CHAPTER II

STRUCTURE OF THE LEBANESE SYSTEM

1.1 – Confessionalism, Power-Sharing, and Sectarian Patronage

Having had an impact since the Ottoman Empire, confessionalism was legally integrated into Lebanon's structure after the establishment of the National Pact in 1943 (Salloukh, Barakat, Al Habbal, Khattah, & Mikaelian, 2015). The country's framework is thus built on power-sharing among 18 sectarian groups, rendering religion the prime factor for inclusion in political and educational institutions as well as civic organizations. Following the end of the Civil War, the 1989 Ta'if Accord culminated in various political reforms that re-evaluated the role of different sects and laid the groundwork for new collaboration between religions (Nedelcu, 2014). Although the Ta'if Accord demanded the gradual abolition of political sectarianism, sectarian leaders would gain power in the ensuing period and develop widespread clientelist networks (Abed, Sawaya, and Tabbal, 2022). As a result, all of Lebanon's influential political figures serve their own communities and gain their loyalty through their monopoly over public sector services. The pervasiveness of non-state welfare and sectarian patronage led to extensive corruption, nepotism, manipulation, and inequities. Therefore, citizens have become highly reliant on sectarian elites to acquire jobs, monetary support, loans, legal aid, and other amenities. Moreover, Lebanon's deepening economic crisis decreased the number of services provided by the state and public institutions. With no recourse to state aid, the dependence on these clientelist networks amplified. For instance, more than 200,000 individuals are employed in the country's non-military public sector (Deets & Skulte-Ouaiss, 2021). According to Lust (2009), in countries with rivalries between different identities – whether based on religion, tribe, or race – and a weak rule of law, politicians can “manage elections with relative ease.”

Thus, the dependency on non-state services has allowed powerful leaders to maintain their hold over the numerous facets of Lebanon's political scene and use it to their advantage during parliamentary elections, including the 2022 elections. In fact, a study revealed that the majority of respondents believed that alternative parties would rule more effectively and were more capable of improving Lebanon's financial problems and living conditions and govern without fraud. Despite this awareness, 32% of individuals who intended to elect traditional sectarian lists attributed it to the financial support that these parties provided to their village or district (Abed, Sawaya, and Tabbal, 2022). As previously discussed in the literature review, the tradeoff hypothesis stipulates that some citizens purposefully vote for corrupt politicians since they believe that the benefits they will receive will overshadow the consequences of corruption. In Lebanon, the data proves that some voters are prepared to disregard fraudulent behavior so long as they continue profiting off political patronage (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013).

1.2 – Collective Amnesia and State-Sponsored Amnesty

Another factor that contributes to the re-election of traditional oligarchs goes back to the collective amnesia approach that Lebanon adopted following the end of its civil war in October 1990. Throughout the war, Lebanon witnessed ongoing violence between sectarian militias, with all parties committing atrocities (Szekly, 2015). Instead of paving the way for peacebuilding and the gradual elimination of sectarianism as denoted in the Ta'if Accord, Lebanese officials resorted to a state of amnesia. Prominent figures avoided any conversations and open discussions related to the war and the issue of "who did what to whom" (Barak, 2007). In 1991, the General Amnesty Law was passed, which granted forgiveness for all crimes committed during the 15-year war and spared warlords from legal liability (Hall, 2009). As such, combatants and political figures were not held accountable for multiple accounts of sexual violence, assassinations, torture, and arbitrary disappearances (Mikdashi, 2019).

Instead, militias were immediately dismantled and transformed into political parties and previous warlords became the politicians who controlled Lebanon's executive and legislative branches. Therefore, discussing the war could prove detrimental to their success in parliamentary elections.

Without the proper mechanisms to institute positive peace, this state-sponsored amnesia obstructed truth-telling, incentivizing sectarian groups to impose their memories onto the whole nation (Aboultouf and Tabar, 2019). This has engraved divisions among confessional parties that still reverberate today, impacting how citizens cast their ballots and how sectarian candidates appeal to their voters. Indeed, 50% of citizens who planned to vote for traditional political figures justified their decision based on "historical reasons" as well as commitments to their family and village (Abed, Sawaya, and Tabbal, 2022). Likewise, the age groups who lived the war were more prone to elect traditional oligarchs compared to those who were younger than 30 and older than 61. The data additionally reveals that 40% of citizens who believed that the ruling class's performance was "bad" still planned to re-elect the same parties (Abed, Sawaya, and Tabbal, 2022). This demonstrates that many individuals still vote for traditional parties on a sectarian basis, instead of the candidates' programs and competencies, due to an underlying fear of other sects that has emerged decades prior and transmitted through generations. Similarly, political elites have persistently fostered this fear of others to justify and sustain their leadership, including minority groups who have mobilized followers under the guise of fighting "an extermination campaign" against them (Abouaoun, 2022). Accordingly, the collective amnesia approach that prevailed after the war obstructed true reconciliation between religious groups, and the trend in Lebanese society has been to vote based on history and identity rather than cause and expertise.

CHAPTER III

OBSTACLES FOR INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES

1.1 – Electoral Law

In 2017, Lebanon substituted its majoritarian voting system with one of proportional representation (PR), allocating seats according to the shares of votes. Its electoral system distributes the 128 seats in the parliament on a religious basis, dividing them equally between Christians and Muslims. Thus, candidates must nominate themselves based on their confession, albeit voters are free to elect anyone running in their district. In theory, the proportional representation system should have benefited alternative parties and minority nominees following years of adopting a winner-takes-all system that solely favored traditional and powerful elites. Nevertheless, in practice, the system exhibited numerous limitations that undermined new candidates and left the political class nearly intact. Two primary reasons why PR failed to introduce new faces to the Lebanese parliament included a high voting threshold as well as gerrymandering and sectarian quotas (Kanso, 2022). Lebanon's high electoral threshold, ranging between 7.7% and 20%, is incompatible with a PR system which favors lower thresholds under 5%. Consequently, this discrepancy hindered independent candidates' chances of success, as they were obstructed by traditional figures who had garnered larger influence over the years in addition to greater resources and stronger alliances. Furthermore, traditional parties have entrenched their power through gerrymandering and sectarian distributions. The calculated division of boundaries within the electoral law has instituted a distinct religious majority in every area, which has in turn limited confessional diversity and weakened votes for the opposition and marginalized groups (Kanso, 2022). According to the European Union Election Observation Mission in Lebanon (2022), the pre-determined number of seats allocated to the 15 and 26 major and minor electoral constituencies, respectively, culminates in substantial variances in the ratio of votes to seats. Coupled with the notable

disparity in the amount of voters within constituencies, the allocation of seats challenges international standards and the principle of equality of votes. This is further aggravated by the absence of legal and impartial criteria for the allocation of seats across districts. Finally, the preferential vote adopted in PR systems has also helped strengthen the positions of incompetent elites, as it allows them to exploit their political and monetary leverage in exchange for political loyalty and votes (LADE, 2022).

1.2 – Campaign Financing, Vote-Buying, and Intimidation

In addition to the electoral law, Lebanese citizens have resorted to re-electing the same politicians due to the latter's economic power and coercion. Although the law inflicts campaign-spending restrictions based on the district's size, the Supervisory Commission for Elections (SCE), which works under the authority of the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM), did not have adequate resources to confirm the financial information provided by candidates during the 2022 elections (EU EOM, 2022). Although it is illegal for candidates to accept foreign financial assistance, funding political parties remains authorized without proper oversight mechanisms. Similarly, not all candidates presented the compulsory monthly financial reports, and there still exists a lack of sanctions to ensure compliance with these legal provisions. Indeed, the latest elections witnessed highly monetized campaigns. According to Article 62 of the electoral law, the distribution of services and donations during campaign periods is legal if done on a consistent basis for the three years prior to the elections (EU EOM, 2022). Subsequently, wealthy parties can trade basic necessities with political loyalty, influencing the voting choices of vulnerable lower-class individuals who have suffered the ills of the ongoing economic crisis. Vote-buying and clientelist traditions embody themselves in various ways, including supplying bread and medicine, offering transport to polling stations, providing generators, fuel and electricity acquired through the black market, and donating money (Abed, Sawaya, and Tabbal, 2022).

During the 2022 elections, powerful parties also asserted their authority through intimidation, by targeting independent candidates and minorities, destroying campaign resources, and obstructing campaign events. Statistics from LADE's Gender Monitoring Report (2022) revealed that 57% of female candidates were met with direct and indirect pressures to withdraw their candidacy. 51.1% of these women also faced varying forms of social, psychological, and cyber violence, including defamation, threats, and insults. These offenses were not limited to one constituency, as the report recounts the experiences of female candidates from different areas in Lebanon. For instance, candidate Daad Azzi was physically attacked and threatened the day prior to the elections, with the perpetrators later firing shots in her office's direction and fleeing. This violence was not limited to female candidates but was rather targeted to independent candidates who threatened the previous political class as well as their supporters. For example, candidate Hicham Hayek was attacked and threatened during an event with his supporters, and Wassef al-Harakeh was intimidated the day of the elections (Lebanese Center for Human Rights, 2022).

Thus, although many people expected Lebanon's deteriorating condition to sway voters towards alternative candidates, the former solely strengthened traditional parties' ability to procure political power through vote-buying, clientelism, and resources. Their control was further strengthened by coercing alternative candidates and their supporters, which may have impacted voters' choices due to fear and pressure.

1.3 – Fragmented Alternative Parties

Although the electoral law and the strategies utilized by traditional parties disfavored non-sectarian candidates, other factors related to their organization also played a crucial role in determining the election's outcome. Independent candidates lack the strong clientelist networks, patronage, resources, and confessional pressure exploited and enjoyed by the ruling

elites. As such, unifying under a clear and common political discourse was indispensable for them to succeed in establishing a serious alternative and produce tangible change. Nevertheless, alternative parties remained largely divided under different slogans, admitted the heterogeneity of their policies, and failed to establish a strong coalition capable of overthrowing traditional elites. Although independent candidates will evidently have different discourses and fall on varying degrees of the political spectrum, sidelining these differences for the purpose of list formation is vital for Lebanon to establish a new political reality. Indeed, traditional figures unanimously perceived the opposition as being weak and fragmented, which helped them substantiate their anti-independent viewpoints (Abed, Sawaya, and Tabbal, 2022). Several voters may have been inclined to vote for previously-established political parties—albeit they had lost trust in them—as many new candidates had limited party or name recognition and were incapable of promoting a strong program that provided an improved substitute to the prevailing political scene.

CHAPTER IV

ROLE OF THE MEDIA

1.1 – Institutionalized Sectarianism

For many years, the media has played a central role in shaping public opinion, manufacturing consent, and regulating the narratives that prevail in societies. In Lebanon, television channels comprise the main media pillar, due to their diversity and notable ratings (Maharat Foundation, 2022). Because of their popularity, these channels become fundamental during parliamentary elections. Indeed, candidates rely on talk shows and news broadcast segments to announce their candidacy, present themselves, and promote their proposals to the Lebanese public. Although traditional figures have already garnered devoted supporters throughout their years in power, several emerging opposition groups were unknown to voters, rendering television coverage a determining factor in their success.

To understand how traditional parties have succeeded in retaining their positions in the Lebanese ruling class, it is important to consider the hold that they have on the media, most notably television channels. First, almost all channels in Lebanon are privately owned by parties and individuals. Following the end of the civil war, there were around 40 television stations, and the ruling class attempted to regulate the media and television licenses based on the Ta'if agreement. In 1994, Audiovisual Media Law No. 382 promoted media freedom and set the tone for privately-owned channels, undermining and revoking the monopoly of the country's single state-led channel, Tele Liban, which has since been neglected by authorities (Majzoub, 2015). Despite the emergence of the National Audiovisual Council of Lebanon, it only had consulting power and limited influence. Following Licensing Decree No. 7997 in 1996, four media licenses were issued to shareholders who had connections to political figures (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). Although the law specified that individuals are not allowed to

own greater than 10% of a station's stock, the clause was repetitively evaded through various methods (Majzoub, 2015). Eventually, every political party formally possessed a private channel, giving each sectarian leader their own mouthpiece. Therefore, the media institutionalized political sectarianism and legitimized traditional parties' control. With Tele Liban incapable of competing with prevalent channels, owners can exploit their privatized channels to choose who to give airtime to, manipulate content, and propagate their political stances. Today, television channels are either owned by a traditional political party, such as Al Manar, NBN, and OTV, or by individuals with known political orientations, including Al Jadeed, LBCI, and MTV (Maharat Foundation, 2022).

1.2 – Unequal Media Coverage

Building up on the aforementioned, the media played a crucial role in influencing the outcome of the 2022 parliamentary elections, since it remained divided on a religious and political basis, which hindered inclusive and unbiased media coverage. The majority of political content came from private channels, which are motivated by self-interest, and there were few television debates between nominees. Tele Liban merely aired one program that candidates could freely access, albeit it witnessed few participants due to limited audience ratings. Although the law mandates that all candidates and lists must have identical media visibility, this was hindered by politically-affiliated media channels—mainly Al Jadeed, MTV, and LBCI—backing certain candidates and creating unequal coverage that benefited traditional parties (EU EOM, 2022). A report by Maharat Foundation (2022) showed that independent candidates only received 5% of coverage during news shows between February 1 and May 15, as 95% of airtime went to traditional figures who have control over the bulk of television channels. During the same time period, new candidates were able to secure a higher rate of appearance in talk shows (37%), albeit it remained lower than that of sectarian groups (63%). These imbalances were more pertinent for female candidates who had less media access, in

violation of Article 71 of the electoral law which mandates equal coverage for both genders. Female candidates were only allocated 5% of airtime during newscasts, and they had to pay higher appearance fees (Maharat Foundation, 2022). Furthermore, several broadcasters failed to uphold their obligation of including the “sponsored program” logo whenever the coverage was financed.

Other violations by the majority of television channels included direct campaigning during the silence period. These infringements impacted citizens’ rights to make informed choices when voting. In fact, when a group of female voters was asked about where they learned about the different candidates, the majority—33.3%—said that they relied on traditional media to get their information (LADE, 2022). Thus, voters’ perceptions were influenced by predominantly politicized content that overshadowed the campaigns and messages of non-sectarian groups and lists. According to the EU EOM (2022), the SCE’s performance was not up to standard, as it failed to act impartially and transparently to guarantee that the media was complying with the pertinent policies. Reliable sources have revealed that the SCE had found 405 media abuses by April 28, partially related to provocative speech, but did not take action nor refer any case to the Court of Publications (EU EOM, 2022). Additionally, the Commission did not release any circular to impose equal media coverage for female candidates. Despite the discrepancy in access to traditional media, social media allowed candidates to move their campaigns to the virtual realm. The necessity of attracting the youth and encouraging them to vote meant that a lot of campaigns shifted online and relied on social media platforms to gain traction. Although this new method of mobilizing voters increased visibility for independent candidates, it chiefly favored wealthier candidates with the financial means to produce content and advertise it to reach a wider audience (EU EOM, 2022).

In terms of the protection of journalists, there were numerous cases of intimidation and self-censorship, accompanied with a few instances of using violence against media personnel

(EU EOM, 2022). For instance, independent journalist Hussein Bassal, who works with “Megaphone,” was harassed in Nabatieh-Ansar due to one of his videos portraying the election gaining popularity. Bassal was then chased and attacked, and he was forced to seek shelter in an opposition group’s office before being led out by the Lebanese army (Lebanese Center for Human Rights, 2022).

Thus, by failing to provide alternative groups with proper coverage, penalize infringements of the law, and protect journalists, media outlets and the SCE played a central role in swaying voters’ choices in favor of the previous political class. This allowed almost all political parties to preserve their position in the Lebanese parliament, despite repeatedly ascertaining their incapacity to save the country from its compounding crises.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

1.1 – Conclusion of Findings

Despite numerous crises that shed light on the political class's inability to foster robust state institutions and a stable economic situation, many voters have uncontestedly supported the former and consolidated their power. This study has put forth several reasons that have contributed to the re-election of traditional sectarian politicians since the Lebanese Civil War, including the structure of the Lebanese system, the factors obstructing opposition groups from securing a high number of parliamentary seats, and the role that the media has played in impacting voting results.

First, the country's sectarian power-sharing system, which was solidified by the National Pact and reinforced after the Ta'if Agreement, has allowed political elites to establish extensive clientelist networks. Through political patronage in the form of money, jobs, and other services, traditional parties have cyclically ensured that the absence of state-sponsored provisions will play in their favor and produce a loyal base of voters. Similarly, the collective amnesia that was adopted after the war, along with the Amnesty Law, has perpetuated a "fear of others" among communal groups. This fear is embodied during election periods, as citizens who lived through the atrocities of the war justify voting for sectarian elites based on historical reasons and the need for security.

Second, although many independent candidates have gained popularity after the October 17th protests, only few could translate this support into ballots. The implementation of the proportional representation system did not benefit these candidates, due to gerrymandering, sectarian quotas, and legal provisions that benefit wealthy elites with strong political alliances. Moreover, sectarian leaders have exploited their resources and power to manipulate results

through disproportionately financing their campaigns, buying votes, and relying on intimidation and coercion to silence opposition parties. These tactics, coupled with the fragmentation of alternative candidates and their inability to form a coalition, undermined non-sectarian figures and restricted their capabilities.

Finally, public opinion in Lebanon remains largely influenced by television channels, which serve to institutionalize political sectarianism and legitimize the rule of religious parties. During parliamentary elections, media coverage is still biased, yielding the majority of airtime to traditional male figures in both news and talk shows. In addition, the SCE was incapable of tackling reported media violations, including ongoing campaigning during the silence period and cases of intimidation across different social media platforms. Although the shift to social media platforms could have allowed independent candidates to garner wider support, wealthier candidates had more funds to advertise their content.

1.2 – Prospects for Change

Despite the ever-present obstacles, the 2022 parliamentary elections made it clear that non-sectarian candidates are gradually gaining momentum and making unprecedented strides. As previously mentioned, individuals who did not directly witness the civil war were more likely to support opposition groups, which might lead to more extensive gains for independent candidates in the future. Nevertheless, several necessary steps should be taken to ensure that Lebanese elections uphold international standards and provide an equal playing field for newly emerging candidates.

1.2.1 Legal Recommendations

Prior to the next elections, the electoral law must be revised to tackle current gaps, obscurities, and discrepancies, as well as align with the standards enshrined in the international

treaties that Lebanon has ratified. This includes decreasing the campaign-spending threshold and candidacy fees. Similarly, Article 62(2) of the law must be retracted, since it provides a loophole for traditional oligarchs and allows them to receive electoral aid from “candidates or institutions owned by candidates who have been providing such gifts and donations in the same amounts and quantities on a regular basis for at least three years before the campaign period.” Both these factors favor wealthy candidates with sufficient financial resources who could manipulate public opinion, hindering voting processes that are agenda-based rather than identity-based. Provisional measures to ensure equal gender representation in the parliament must be instituted, whether in the form of obligatory quotas or reserved seats. Female independent candidates fall victim to overlapping forms of discrimination manifested by the state, rendering it important to account for the patriarchal norms that obstruct women’s political participation.

1.2.2 Oversight and Protection Mechanisms

The 2022 parliamentary elections proved that the SCE was incapable of properly handling electoral violations due to limited powers and resources. Consequently, the Commission must be transformed into a body that is independent from the MoIM, and it must be provided with the necessary funds in a timely manner. These steps would allow the SCE to monitor compliance with the media, campaign, and monetary guidelines outlined in the electoral law. Moreover, other relevant public institutions – including, but not limited to, the MoIM, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), and polling centers – must play a role in monitoring and supervising electoral processes to certify that all electoral cycles and districts abide by legal provisions. This includes examining candidates’ electoral funds and expenditures, informing citizens about election procedures, prohibiting any campaigning during the silence period, and overseeing media coverage and advertisement costs. The same bodies should also coordinate with law enforcement agencies to efficiently tackle cases of

violence, pressure, and coercion faced by candidates and voters in order to guard them and hold wrongdoers accountable.

1.2.3 Media

Media outlets, most notably television channels, must provide equal access and coverage to all candidates during election period. Equally important, these outlets must abide by the determined silence period. As the only public channel in Lebanon, Tele Liban must additionally widen its scope and organize lively debates and discussions among candidates, which would allow voters to learn more about the different programs and make informed choices. From there, non-sectarian and opposition groups should utilize the resources available to them in order to promote a feasible short- and long-term agenda that can entice citizens to take risks and change their voting habits. This would progressively pave the way for a new national rhetoric that rejects the amnesia and amnesty cultivated by traditional oligarchs, relies on robust civic mechanisms for services, opposes confessional clientelism, and calls for the abolishment of the culture of impunity that has dominated the Lebanese scene since 1990.

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