# Democratic transition and sectarian populism: the case of Lebanon

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Despite being considered as one of the oldest constitutional democracies in the Middle East, Lebanon has been confronted with periodical institutional crises and civil violence. A protracted transitional period towards democracy has threatened the autonomy of deeply fragmented sectarian groups, and has instigated a polarizing struggle over nationhood. Fearing the degradation of their power to a majoritarian order, sectarian leaders have resorted to various mobilization strategies to obstruct the emergence of a unifying national identity and democratic state. Consequently, a chronically weak state has emerged, divided along antagonistic sectarian loyalties with power shared according to sectarian consociationalism. In order to reveal the tenets of sectarian populism in Lebanon and their impacts on nation-building, the state and democratic transition, a nationwide opinion survey was conducted by the Lebanese American University (LAU), Beirut, during January of 2011 with a random sample of 586 Lebanese respondents divided along sectarian affiliation. The survey examined differential populist mobilization among major sectarian groups and revealed potential explanatory variables. The results shed light on the formation of populism in a divided society and the challenges it poses for democratic transitions in Lebanon and perhaps in transitional Middle Eastern states.

**Keywords:** democratization; populism; sectarianism; divided society; power sharing; consociationalism; Lebanese politics

## Populism and democracy

The impact of populism on democracy has been an extensively debated topic in the literature. At face value, both populism and democracy share a central theme that the state must be founded on the power of the people. Yet, fundamental to populism is the concept of the 'people' going against the existing power structure (Arditi 2005, Canovan 1999, Lukacs 2005). In the liberal tradition, the 'people' are politically heterogeneous and tolerant of dissent in contrast to populism's notion of homogeneity and communal solidarity. This relates to the analysis of Ernesto Laclau who stresses this antagonistic notion between populism and democracy (Reyes 2005, p. 105). For populists, there is always resentment towards 'an elite', whether real or perceived, which is seen to exclude the masses from the political processes (Arditi 2005, p. 76).

Several key aspects of populism have left their imprint on different populist movements (Table 1). Historically, many characteristics of populism have originated from

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Table 1.    Characteristics of populist movements.

Antagonism against the status quo
Anti-elitist views
Communal orientation
Emphasis on homogeneity of the group
Isolationist and exclusionary – a clear divide between 'us' and 'them'
Charismatic authoritarian leader
Crowd action as a source of power
Discourse ruling out compromise – no recognition or demonization of opposition
Use of moral judgement as a source of authority
Forced dependence on the leader through lack of true empowerment of the people
Political inactivity outside the election period or other transitional phase
Lack of trust in institutionalism
Calls for fundamental reform

nationalist ideologies. However, depending on the social, cultural and ideological context, certain characteristics may have emerged as a dominant orientation of a populist movement (Howarth 2005, p. 205, Roberts 2000, p. 1). Common to populists are their tendencies towards isolationism so as to maintain close ranks among their adherents as well as to differentiate themselves from the outsiders, those typically perceived as 'elites' or 'foreigners'. Within Western democratic countries, populist movements have generally detested the 'elitist' values of liberal individualism, cosmopolitanism, and internationalism in favour of communalism and nationalism (Canovan 1999, p. 4).

Central to populism is a strong charismatic leader who takes on an absolutist role in uniting the people against the status quo (Roberts 2000, pp. 4–6). Populist leaders who are distinctively successful in mobilizing the masses often do so through crowd action to exemplify the tangibility of belonging to a group (de la Torre, 1997, p. 15, Roberts 2000, p. 4). Through discourse, interaction, symbolism and the creation of unity for a cause, the people identify strongly with the leader. In essence, the leader begins to symbolize the people and transfers the popular will into governance through the authority vested in him by the people (de la Torre 1997, p. 15). Herein lies the importance of the leader's personal attributes, as political support in populism is not based on organizational loyalties but rather in the popular trust vested in the person of the leader (Roberts 2000, p. 6).

With reference to the emergence of populism, populist movements in history have not been confined to specific geographical regions or political structures. Similar to Gramscian's views towards populism, Reyes (2005) considered that 'the emergence of populism is historically linked to an instance of organic crisis, which manifests itself as a proliferation of popular demands that cannot be neutralized by the existing framework of state power' (p. 103). Hence the conditions which enable the emergence of populism often arise from the under-represented lower classes' struggle, and as a reaction to authoritarian governments or political breakdowns (Panizza 2005, p. 14; Roberts 2000, pp. 2–3). It is unlikely that such mobilization will occur in strong civil societies with organized and inclusive political parties (Roberts 2000, p. 7). The emergence of populist movements can therefore be seen as an indication of weakened political structures within a nation. As populist leaders are often characterized by their

reluctance to join in day-to-day politics, it is argued that they feel obliged to mobilize the masses only if inherent inequalities or serious deficiencies exist in democratic institutions (Taggart 2000, p. 115).

Yet the consequence of extensive popular trust and the power vested in the hands of the populist leader sets the movement on a contradictory course of action (Roberts 2000, p. 3). Despite preaching the importance of democracy, populist leaders are often guilty of undemocratic means and ends, and are prone to corruption through a lack of institutional accountability. They see democratic institutions as restricting their political autonomy in the face of political change, and wish to transfer all authority to the executive power (Roberts 2000, pp. 13–14). In the absence of the resources of a political party, populists are often reliant on private contributions, leading to potentially dangerous interaction between public authorities and vested private interests (Roberts 2000, pp. 17, 18).

## Populism in transitional and divided societies

Another ambiguous aspect of populism lies in its impact on divided societies undergoing democratic transitions. Since populism advocates that the source of sovereign rule derives directly from the people, it is argued to have an inherent democratic nature. Populism draws on this notion as part of its political programme for greater political inclusion of the historically underprivileged members of society, considered undeserving based on their class, religious, regional, tribal and ethnic backgrounds (Panizza 2005, p. 11, Roberts 2000, pp. 13–14, Taggart 2000, p. 112). As a consequence, populism may play a pivotal role in advancing national integration for the various subaltern groups throughout the struggle for political inclusion and nationhood during democratic transitions. Under such circumstances, populism may serve to unify society and bring it closer towards national solidarity (Richards & Waterbury, 2008).

Thus, populism may contribute to nation-building particularly when a society would have been otherwise deeply divided. The national experiences in Turkey, Latin America and many post-Cold War as well as post-colonial regions are evidence of populism's primary role in the formation of modern nation-states (Richards and Waterbury 2008). Recent failures and civil conflicts in deeply divided states such as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen, among others, might be attributed to the absence or eradication of a strong national populist movement and leadership.

The impact of populism on nation-building in transitional and divided societies appears ambiguous, yet it is important to examine. On the one hand, a transition towards democracy may require a national populist movement to unify the nation and build a viable state. On the other hand, such a movement may undermine and defeat the very purpose of its inception by placing in power an authoritarian leader and structuring the state's apparatus to suppress opposition and to undermine the basic principles' mechanism of accountability and democratic transition. This paradoxical outcome can be seen in the examples of Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and Turkey under Ataturk, Syria under Hafiz and Bashar Al-Assad. In a deeply divided society, various populist movements which mobilize supporters behind rival political visions of state and nationhood may radically undermine both national unity and democratic transition.[1] This is particularly true because the struggle for democracy requires the eradication of political clientelism, nepotism and patronage, and the establishment of national institutionalism along with some forms of majoritarian rule (Plattner 2010). Thus, the drive towards democracy is antithetically placed against the very basic

methods of populism. This is evidently reflected by the isolationist and anti-statist appeals of ethnic and sectarian populist leadership in many divided societies in reaction to the call for state institutionalism. In Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen, for instance, ethno-sectarian populisms have deepened societal divisions, raising the spectre of separatism and autonomous authoritarian-based groups which directly challenge the national authorities and institutions (e.g., the Huthies in Yemen, the Shi'a Sadrists and Kurds in Iraq, the Shi'a Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hammas in Palestinian Territories, etc.). Ethnic and sectarian-based cantons in many divided countries have emerged as authoritarian enclaves directly challenging centralized authority.

In response to the fragmenting ethno-sectarian tendencies of populist groups in divided societies undergoing transition, various consociational power-sharing arrangements have been proposed as an alternative solution to centralization and majoritarianism. As early as the 1960s, political scientist Arendt Lijphart formulated the principle of consociationalism as an arrangement that can achieve collective interests between the different groups, and perhaps populist leaders or cartels (Lijphart 1969). This arrangement was suggested as a means to establish a democracy that works to preserve the autonomy of groups, while maintaining a sense of a collective nationhood. The consociational model has been widely implemented in the post-Cold War era, particularly in countries where geographical reasons have prevented deeply divided groups from separating or from establishing federal or confederal arrangements; countries where such a situation has risen include Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq and Lebanon.

Still, the experience of consociationalism has not been encouraging: ethnic and sectarian populist movements with rival notions of nationhood have emerged to compete directly for state resources. This competition has necessitated militant sectarian mass mobilizations under populist leadership, thus deepening divisions and undermining the state and its democratic transition. Lebanon is one of the first countries to have experienced consociationalism. Since independence in 1943, the division of the Lebanese state under different spheres of sectarian influences has resulted in an unwavering struggle for power within a populist sectarian dynamic. These sectarian divisions not only halted state-building and democratization, but repeatedly brought the various sectarian groups to open conflict and civil wars (Sharrara 1985). Taking Lebanon as a case study, this paper reveals the characteristics of deeply divided populist constituencies and their attitudes towards the inevitable consociational power-sharing framework. The findings call for the devising of alternative power structures that can contain sectarian populism's splintering momentum.

## Sectarian populism in Lebanon

Since its inception in 1943 as an independent country recognized formally by the international community, Lebanon has witnessed the emergence of populist movements in times of deep political crises that presented serious challenges to the communal power-sharing formula prevalent at the time. The populist movements that emerged were directed either at protecting the existing communal power structure or at challenging it by burgeoning an opposing movement (Salamey 2009).

Given this context of Lebanese politics, populist movements in Lebanon acquired a unique character: they could never be elevated to become an inclusive nationalist movement because the nationalism of each one has typically been subsumed under an overriding sectarian identity, be it Christian Maronite, Sunni Muslim or Shiite Muslim. More importantly, populist movements in Lebanon have always emerged around

communal claims condensing a plurality of demands raised by the populist movement itself and constituting the ultimate goal for 'hegemonic' politics (Salamey and Tabar 2008). Moreover, the Lebanese communal/sectarian character of populism produced a peculiar relationship between the populist groups and the state. Sectarian populists attitudes towards the state have typically been contradictory, depending on their capacity to control its resources. Hence, when they secure the capacity to position state resources under their control, they stood positively toward the state, which contrasts with populist classical anti-statist views. Yet, if they lacked such control or satisfactory benefit, they would undermine the state legitimacy to the extent of engaging it and oftentimes bringing about its total demise. In both cases, however, the state has been perceived and dealt with ultimately as an institution subordinate to the overriding legitimacy of the populist leaders (Salamey and Tabar 2008). The communal basis upon which the state in Lebanon was built impeded its development and prevented it from becoming strongly institutionalized and relatively autonomous from the fragmented social and economic fabric of the Lebanese society.

Contemporary populist movements have a precedent in the history of post-independence Lebanon. It could be argued that the first populist movement emerged in the 1950s and was represented by Chamounism, in reference to popular Christian Maronite President Camille Chamoun (1900–1987). It was followed in the late 1960s by the emergence of a Shiite movement, called the Movement of the Dispossessed (*Harakat al-Mahroumeen*), founded by Imam Moussa Sadr. Chamounism developed in the context of defending the Christians' (mainly Maronite) upper hand in the running of the state and economy in the face of a growing challenge by local and regional Nasserist forces. The Movement of the Dispossessed, on the other hand, represented an attempt by the Shiite community to increase its share of the state resources. Subsequently, in the 1970s, particularly after the outbreak of the civil war in April 1975, the Christian populist movement regrouped itself and resurfaced, initially as the Phalange Party, then, towards the end of the 1970s, as the Lebanese Forces, led by the populist and short-lived president Bashir Jmail (Traboulsi 2007). After the signing of the Ta'ef Accord and the end of the civil war in 1989, new developments spurred the burgeoning of a new Shiite populist movement led by Hezbollah. In 2005, after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, two other populist movements emerged, one Christian led by Michel Aoun, the other Sunni, led by Sa'ad Al-Din Al-Hariri.

Lebanese sectarian populism has served as a vehicle that transcends groups' grievances. It has strengthened individual communities in the sectarian power struggle, and has established a strong communal check and balance against the emergence of an overwhelmingly dominant state authority. The result is a 'radical pluralism' in the country's political dynamics (Plattner 2010). Yet this Middle Eastern 'democratic' exceptionalism has prevented the foundation of an effective state that would be capable of carrying out political reform or instating transparent institutions. Perhaps the most evident manifestation of sectarian populism impeding state-building and nationhood is a deeply fragmented society, something very apparent in the emergence of a strongly mobilized sectarian public, loyal to its own populist leader and ready to answer his calls. Sectarian followers have been charged by deep pessimism toward the state and its institutions, are suspicious about the intention of other sectarian groups, exhibit an exclusionist attitude in their vision of the nation and its surroundings, and display an isolationist posture in their communal orientations. A fragmented Lebanese sectarian attitude towards the state and nationhood demonstrates that sectarian

populism under consociationalism has grown anti-statist with a diverged sense of belonging and nationhood, with many populist groups deeming the transition towards democracy as an impossible mission (Hanf and Salam 2003, Fakhoury Muhlbacher 2009, Salamey and Tabar 2008).

## Survey at the Lebanese American University (LAU), Beirut

In order to examine closely the relationship between sectarian populism and democratic transition in Lebanon, an assessment of the impact of populism on national division and integration was conducted by the LAU using a public opinion telephone survey. The survey random sample of 586 respondents was drawn from the 2008 official Lebanese national household landline telephone directory, which contains over 1 million landline telephone numbers. One advantage associated with surveying by telephone is the potential to collect a large amount of data within a short period of time, thus limiting the effects of time-laden spurious variables. The telephone survey also provides greater confidentiality and privacy for respondents. More so than in most Western societies, where response rates to telephone surveys average well below 10%, telephone surveys in Lebanon have proven to be much more effective, with response rates to medium-length surveys averaging as high as 50–60%. The sample was weighted in order to reflect closely the regional demographic distribution as established by statistics from the National Survey of Household Living Conditions, which was undertaken by the Lebanese Central Bureau of Statistics (2008).

The survey was carried out by students from the Political Science and International Affairs Program at LAU during January 2011. The students received comprehensive training in telephone interviewing techniques. Trainers instructed the interviewers on ways to approach possible sectarian, religious and political sensitivities of the participants. All interviews were conducted in Arabic via the telephone. The survey took approximately 15–18 minutes to complete, and was comprised of a variety of questions designed to assess various aspects of populism and public attitudes towards state institutions.

The following sections present the survey's general findings and assess the prospect of Lebanese consociationalism under divisive sectarian populist attitudes. They shed light on the particular dynamic of sectarian populism in Lebanese politics, and on the prospect of transition towards democracy. Three major sectarian groups were analysed to demonstrate sectarian populist tendencies: Muslim Shiites, Muslim Sunnis and Christian Maronites. The paper concludes by providing recommendations for the reconstruction of power sharing in deeply divided societies that may mitigate the splintering impacts of sectarian populism.[2]

## Sectarian communalism

One major impact of modernization on the Lebanese state and society is the phenomenal growth of its urban population. Over the course of the twentieth century, city populations have witnessed various waves of migrants, sometimes in search of jobs and services, other times fleeing wars and conflicts. By the end of the twentieth century, urban centres have attracted over half of the population (Lebanese Central Bureau of Statistics 2008). The consequence is the convergence of various socio-economic groups toward the urban centres, such as the city of Beirut and its suburbs (Collelo 1987, Khalaf 2006). The LAU survey estimates that nearly 68% of the population

now lives in urban or suburban centres. The survey reveals that the Lebanese population has dramatically changed over the past 40 years, with more than 50% composed of new residencies. This dynamism is also reflected in the population urban composition, with a significant portion still closely attached to rural areas of origin rather than the urban place of residence.

Some 44% of survey respondents reported that their residence is located in a place other than their original town or region inscribed in the administrative records as the place where they typically are registered to vote. Interestingly, Shiites (53%), compared with Sunnis (31%) and Christian Maronites (50%), constituted the largest group to reside in places other than of that registered in the administrative records. Comparatively newly urbanized Shiites suffer economic and educational disadvantages. Many Shiites (47%) reported that they live in places where residential property values are worth less than US$75,000 compared with Sunnis (26%) and Maronites (20%). Shiites also fared worse on educational level. Only 43% held post-secondary or college degrees compared with Sunnis (52%) and Maronites (70%). This has created an environment in which disparate socio-economic groups are, at the same time, pitted against one another in a struggle for political power. Such an environment seems conductive to the rise of communal politics and sectarian populism. After all, when one's own sect faces problems, one typically blames the attitudes and inequalities in the larger society, and holds society responsible for these problems. This attitude is clearly expressed among Shiites (55%), compared with Sunnis (44%) and Maronites (35%). Only 27% of Shiites, compared with 37% of Sunnis and 49% of Maronites, hold their own sect responsible for their problems.

Consequently, it is not surprising to find national communal outlooks developing differently among the various groups undergoing unequal levels of national development and/or integration. Communal sectarian populism expressed as strong nationalism, anti-Western isolationism, and group homogeneity are trends and attitudes more likely to be found among disadvantaged groups seeking a greater share of modern nationhood (Roberts 2000, Panizza 2005).

The LAU survey found that strong aspects of communal solidarity based on nationhood characterize the attitude of Shiite respondents. 'Defending the nation' was ranked the highest among the most important priorities for Shiites (42%), compared with Sunnis (28%) and Maronites (26%). Both Maronites (59%) and Sunnis (43%) ranked the family or clan as the first priority to be defended, compared with Shiites (38%). Shiites (63%) were more likely, compared with Sunnis (57%) and Maronites (56%), to identify themselves as Lebanese only, rather than as Muslim, Christian or Arab. In their attitude toward Western values and modernism, and in relation to their impact on nationhood, Shiites expressed suspicions, in sharp contrast to Maronites, who expressed receptive attitudes.

This sense of stronger nationhood among Shiites is constructed by a tight communal rank and homogeneity. A majority of Shiite respondents considered their political views to be similar or very similar to people of their village or neighbourhood. Yet, significant difference was evident among the various sects. Some 66% of Shiite respondents said that they held political views similar to their communities, compared with 58% of Sunnis and 47% of Maronites.

## Sectarian populism

As has been discussed, populists can be distinguished by various political attributes defined by their attitude toward citizenship rights, political inclusion, political

representation, institutionalism and degree of support towards their populist leader. This orientation is clearly found among Lebanese where a large segment of the public perceives itself as lacking rights, excluded and underrepresented, and is suspicious of the state institution. It vests great trust in the person of the populist leader and his decisions. This support for the leader stands out as one of the most evident indicators of Lebanese populism.

The LAU survey revealed clear sectarian political mobilization and leadership support (Table 2). Respondents were clearly divided along sectarian lines in their support for sectarian populist leadership. Most Shiites split their support between Hezbollah's General Secretary Hassan Nassrallah (48%) and the President of the AMAL movement and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berry (29%). The majority of Sunnis supported the Future Movement leader and former Prime Minister Saad Al-Din Al-Hariri (52%), followed by current Prime Minister Najib Mekati (13%). A slight majority of Maronites, on the other hand, divided their support between Free Patriotic Movement leader Michael Aoun (28%) and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Jaja'a (23%). Yet, it is worth noting that Shiites were among the most mobilized behind the sectarian leadership, casting support for two leaders (77%), compared with Sunnis (65%) and Maronites (51%).

As Table 2 shows, respondents give strong support to major sectarian populist leaders, which also reflects respondents' support to sectarian political parties. For example, Shia respondents gave Nabih Berry, a Shiite who heads the AMAL Movement, a generous 29.2% of their support. Again, Shiites divided their support between Hezbollah (50%) and the AMAL movement (18%). Sunnis gave the most support to the Future Movement (60%), and Maronites divided their support evenly between Lebanese Forces (28%) and the Free Patriotic Movement (27%). The LAU

Table 2.  Which of the following leaders most represent you?

|  | Main sect (%) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Maronite | Shi'a | Sunni | Total |
| President Nabih Berry | 1.7 | 29.2 | 3.4 | 12.5 |
| Dr Samir Jaja'a | 23.3 |  | 2.7 | 7.5 |
| President Najib Mekati | 1.7 | 1.3 | 13.0 | 5.5 |
| President Amin Jemayel | 7.8 |  | 0.7 | 2.4 |
| Mohamad Al-Safadi | 0.9 |  | 2.7 | 1.2 |
| President Michael Aoun | 28.4 | 8.4 | 4.1 | 12.5 |
| President Saad Al-Din Al-Hariri | 4.3 | 2.6 | 52.1 | 20.4 |
| Al-Sayyed Hassan Nassrallah | 5.2 | 48.1 | 7.5 | 21.9 |
| Al-Meer Talal Arslan |  | 1.3 | 0.7 | 0.7 |
| Souleiman Franjeyah | 6.0 | 1.3 | 0.7 | 2.4 |
| Houghik Mkhayteryan | 1.7 |  |  | 0.5 |
| President Michel Sleiman | 8.6 | 3.9 | 4.8 | 5.5 |
| Minister Ziad Baroud | 2.6 | 0.6 | 0.7 | 1.2 |
| None | 4.3 | 2.6 | 4.1 | 3.6 |
| Another leader | 3.4 | 0.6 | 2.7 | 2.2 |
| Total (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

survey points to strong populist sentiments among Lebanese respondents who expressed strong faith in the sectarian leadership. Among 586 respondents only 3.6% did not find a leader whom they felt represented them. Each leader's support was very clearly sectarian based.[3] The country's President, Michel Sleiman, and the non-sectarian former Interior Minister Ziad Baroud received negligible public support.

Most significant to this support is the degree of mobilization and following behind the person of the sectarian leader. Sectarian populism is manifested most clearly in respondents' declaration of allegiance to the person of the leader and his performance. Followers' populism is revealed by the extent to which respondents believed in their leaders' infallibility. Evidently, the LAU survey showed strong sectarian populist sentiments in this regard. Over half the respondents considered that their respective sectarian leader has rarely or never committed a mistake over the past five years of political conduct (Table 3). Yet, mostly Shiites (70%), compared with Sunnis (53%) and Maronites (41%), believed that their leader has rarely or never committed a mistake over the past five years. In fact, 38% of Shiite respondents considered that their leader never committed a mistake at all, compared with 19% of Sunnis and 14% of Maronites. Such an intimate leader–follower relationship is further expressed in the majority of respondents' willingness to answer their leader's call to political action and even to arms (Table 4). Again, Shiite respondents expressed the most readiness to answer such a request.

## Comparative sectarian populism

Compared with the Lebanese Sunnis and Shiite Muslims, Christian Maronites are more divided over the question of their political representation and leadership. While Sunnis and Shiites are respectively united behind an exclusivist leader (Saad ad-Din al-Hariri for Sunnis, Hassan Nasrallah for Shiites), Maronites are almost equally divided between two main populist and sectarian leaders, Michel Aoun and Samir Jaja'a. This difference can be attributed partly to the comparative degree and complexity of the civil society that has developed within each community. Christian Maronite areas have historically enjoyed a more vibrant civil society due to their early engagement in commercial enterprises and their exposition to European culture (since the early nineteenth century). In fact, the only area in Lebanon that witnessed a peasant revolt against the *Muqataaji* (feudal) system in present-day Lebanon is Kisirwan, an area predominantly inhabited by Maronites. This revolt against the Lebanese version of feudalism

Table 3.  In general, what is the proportion of mistakes committed by the leader you support over the past five years?

|  | Main sect (%) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Maronite | Shi'a | Sunni | Total (%) |
| Too many | 8.7 | 4.0 | 8.2 | 6.8 |
| Many | 5.2 | 4.0 | 8.2 | 5.8 |
| Relatively few | 45.2 | 22.5 | 30.6 | 31.7 |
| Very few | 27.0 | 31.1 | 34.0 | 31.0 |
| Never committed a mistake | 13.9 | 38.4 | 19.0 | 24.7 |
| Total (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Table 4.   How readily are you willing to answer the leader's call for arms?

|  | Main sect (%) | | | |
|  | Maronite | Shi'a | Sunni | Total |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Very readily | 13.6 | 25.3 | 15.0 | 18.4 |
| Readily | 5.1 | 16.2 | 8.5 | 10.4 |
| Maybe | 20.3 | 11.7 | 12.4 | 14.4 |
| Not readily | 61.0 | 46.8 | 64.1 | 56.9 |
| Total (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

has never occurred in other parts of modern Lebanon which were annexed to Mount Lebanon in 1920. Also, one should not ignore the enormous cultural influence that European countries have had over the Christian community through Maronite Catholic Church institutions.

On the other hand, Sunnis, Shiites and Druze Muslims were latecomers to the commercial sectors that developed in Lebanon, and were much more shielded from the influence of European culture for political and religious reasons. These factors combined to impede the emergence of a civil society among these communities as vibrant and diverse as the one experienced among the Christians. The lengthy immersion of the Christian community in commercial activities, their long-standing exposure to European culture and their political affiliation with the 'West' are bound to contribute to the diversity in their economic regional interests, and, therefore, the structure of their political leadership. However, the sectarian constraints of political representation in Lebanon and the concomitant sectarian tensions and conflicts would prevent the prevalence of purely liberal politics within the Christian community, let alone its diffusion into the others. The fear of being overwhelmed by a more unified and numerous 'other' makes the sectarian populist mode of political representation prevalent among the Christian Maronites.

The sectarian populist mode of political representation has much stronger roots among Shiites due to its articulation in the religious ideology of Hezbollah. The party's religious ideology is based on a long theological tradition which delegates political (and spiritual) leadership of the community to 'Ahl el-Beit', lineal dissenters of the Prophet Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib, last represented by the Twelfth Imam, Mehdi el-Muntazar (Salamey and Othman 2011). However, while Shiites are waiting for the return of their hidden Imam to restore 'justice' and to establish a true Islamic rule, they are supposed to seek guidance in their daily affairs from a *Marjaa*, a religious scholar. With the emergence of the principle of the *Welayat al-Faqih*, Supreme Jurists, this guidance was broadened to include all political affairs of the community. The interesting point about this principle in the context of this discussion, however, is that it bestows exclusive right of rule to the *al-Faqih* and his representatives.[4] Accordingly, the *Faqih* has an exclusive right to guide the Shiite community politically, and the latter is religiously obliged to follow his orders. These two fundamental characteristics of the *Faqih* and his representatives give the populist mode of political representation among Shiites a stronger grounding derived from their theological teaching.

The belated engagement in commercial enterprises and the relatively short history of urban migration have created ripe conditions for making Shiites very susceptible to

the doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih*; thus further consolidating their sectarian populism in comparison with their Maronite and Sunni counterparts.

### State consociationalism and sectarian populism

Sectarian populism serves as a major obstacle against the foundation of a cross-sectarian agenda or national vision. In fact, sectarian leaders utilize their populism in order to prevent the emergence of a cross-confessional political agenda, instigating constant fear against other sects and their potential rise to power. The politics of sectarian division is most evident in the sectarian segmentation of the population along divergent and exclusive national agendas. These differences run across every political issue whether it be the public appointment of minor military officers or their reassignment to issues regarding the country's foreign relations and political reform agenda (Salamey and Tabar 2008).

The sectarian division over electoral reform is only one aspect that symbolizes the deep sectarian polarization over the country's political future and power sharing. When asked about the best electoral system for Lebanon, respondents' replies showed that sectarian division was evident. Most Shiites (61%) were very enthusiastic to select a proportional electoral system that suits their perceived numeric majority or at least plurality. Most Sunnis, on the other hand, were in favour of a small (42%) or large (20%) majority electoral district (Table 5). Maronites were divided between the small majority and the proportional system.

State consociationalism is not only undemocratic in the sense that it privileges the representation of collective over individual rights, but also it proves unable to foster a stable and peaceful political environment. More often than not, sectarian populism has been the vehicle of this political instability associated with communal violence. The latest episodes of this violent breakdown of the system under the mounting pressure of populist movements were the bloody clashes that occurred in May 2008 that led to the Doha Agreement that aimed to end the sporadic armed street fighting in Beirut. The protagonists were Shiite, Sunni and Druze communities mobilized by their respective populist leaders. Shiites were most readily willing to respond to their sectarian leaders and to engage in crowd and militant actions, willingness that was also demonstrated throughout the 2006–2009 Lebanese political crises. Economic deprivation, a strong sense of communal based nationhood, and an anti-Western attitude were among the major drivers of their militant sectarian action (Salamey 2009).

Despite socio-economic injustices that may be the reason behind populist movements, in terms of consociational state-building in a divided society, Lebanese sectarian populism demonstrates exclusionary and undemocratic trends that are conducive to

Table 5.   Which electoral system is best for Lebanon?

|  | Main sect (%) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Maronite | Shi'a | Sunni | Total (%) |
| Small majority electoral district | 37.1 | 19.4 | 42.4 | 32.5 |
| Large majority electoral district | 6.2 | 15.5 | 20.0 | 14.5 |
| Proportional representation | 48.5 | 61.2 | 29.6 | 46.4 |
| Other electoral system | 8.2 | 3.9 | 8.0 | 6.6 |
| Total (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

recurrent violent clashes between the sectarian political forces which represent it. In other words, despite the different claims that are entertained by the populist sectarian movements in Lebanon, which are, in principle, essential to the process of building a strong and democratic state (e.g., such as equality, abolition of sectarian discrimination, the building of truly representative state institutions, sovereignty, rule of law, independence, unity of the nation, etc.), the sectarian character of these populist movements makes it inherently impossible to achieve such objectives. The cliental orientation of populism ensures that state institutions are not only mistrusted, but also replaced with a blind loyalty to individual leaders, while sectarianism divides the society along denominational lines by privileging exclusionary (sectarian) politics over inclusionary (national) politics. Through the absence of transparent politics, populist leaders have been able to establish what can be described as 'authoritarian enclaves in a democratic regime' (Gilley 2010).[5]

These enclaves have guaranteed that the different Lebanese sectarian communities remain isolated and suspicious of one another, while sectarian leaders emerge as undisputable saviours. There is, therefore, an inherent contradiction between consociational state-building and democratization, on one hand, and sectarian populist politics, on the other hand.

## Moving beyond sectarian populism

In early 2011, thousands of young demonstrators and intellectuals took to the streets to protest against the sectarian establishment. These mass demonstrations, marching under the banner of 'Secular Pride', can in some ways be interpreted as a rejection of an antiquated system whereby sectarian populism can dictate which football team to support, which newspapers to read and even which cafes to attend. Unarguably, sectarian populism has accentuated the vertical segmentation of Lebanese society. On the political front, many intellectuals have come to view the confessional system as an accessory to political gridlock. Yet most sectarian communalists have argued that a confessional system is necessary to avert domestic chaos and protect numeric minorities, particularly the Christians.

To be sure, the issue of political sectarianism and the prospects of its reform have divided Lebanese society since the country's independence. In fact, for much of the Republic's modern history, religion has been the maidservant of political expression, yielding a system wherein sectarian primacy subsumes democratic procedures. But how have public attitudes toward this issue emerged? More importantly, what variations, if any, can be drawn between Lebanon's various sects on this particular issue?

When asked whether today was the right time to eliminate political sectarianism in Lebanon, respondents were divided: 49.1% found the time to be somewhat or very suitable; 40.7% disagreed; and 10.1% were somewhat indifferent. Upon closer analysis, these divisions proved to be anything but arbitrary. Not surprisingly, this divergence among the respondents was found to be driven primarily by sectarian affiliation. Sensing their numeric growth and eagerness to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the other groups in the process of modernization and state-building, Shiites are the most enthusiastic to alter the very foundation of the sectarian system. Compared with other sects, the survey showed that Shiites were most supportive for deconfessionalization, whereas Christian confessional groups, and, to some extent, Sunnis, were much more hesitant to abolish the current system (Table 6).

Shiites' enthusiasm to deconfessionalize might be spurred not by their opposition to sectarianism, but by their conviction that the current confessional power distribution undermines the measure of influence due to them because of their numerical size. This is similar to the position taken by both Shiites and Sunnis in 1975 when they championed secularism against political confessionalism in their drives to have their demographic growth reflected in the confessional balance of power. Likewise, Shiites today might believe that deconfessionalization will actually strengthen their confessional power position, a formula that has implied the exact opposite of what it actually claims (Mitri 2011).

If Lebanon's current demography is any indication, this polarization clearly reflects the deep-seated concerns of the Christian community of being relegated into a political minority, should a proportional representation electoral system emerge in place of the current one.[6] Muslims, on the other hand, and particularly Shiites, are much more eager to translate their demographic advantages into political gains. Christian fears and Sunni hesitancy may have further been consolidated as a result of the contemporary rise of Shiite populism. Whatever the specific reason may be, the common denominator underlying this apprehension seems to stem from fear of political marginalization. As a result, many sectarian partisans cannot bring themselves to deal forthrightly with a system that may potentially undermine their political power.

In the absence of a unified social contract, many Lebanese have come to view various policy initiatives through a sectarian prism. The atmosphere of mutual distrust amongst Lebanon's sects has been nothing short of palpable, creating a stalemate ultimately defined by political paralysis and social discord. In turn, this stalemate itself has nurtured an environment of suspicion and mistrust, perpetuating the wheels of a vicious cycle and further roiling the political waters.

Another consideration lies well outside of Lebanon, on the international horizon. Domestic balance of power is often tipped in favour of one sectarian group whenever a shift in the regional balance of power occurs. This has been manifested in the changes and extent of external aid in the form of financial, military, political and diplomatic support for both the Lebanese state and its sub-state actors by different regional powers. And, of course, one cannot discuss the regional implications without accounting for major regional players (United States, France, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, Turkey, etc.). For instance, after the shifting regional balance in favour of Shiite Iran and on the account of Sunni Arab states, many Lebanese – particularly among Christians and Sunnis – fear that the political outcome will ultimately contribute to growth of Shiite political power in the country.

Table 6.  In general, do you think that today is the right time to eliminate political sectarianism?

|  | Main sect | | | |
|  | Maronite | Shi'a | Sunni | Total (%) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Very suitable | 18.9 | 48.4 | 34.2 | 35.1 |
| Suitable somewhat | 13.1 | 17.0 | 14.8 | 15.1 |
| Makes no difference | 7.4 | 9.4 | 11.6 | 9.6 |
| Not suitable | 36.9 | 17.0 | 26.5 | 25.9 |
| Not suitable at all | 23.8 | 8.2 | 12.9 | 14.2 |
| Total (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

## Prospect of a national democratic state

Nation-state-building and democratization are possible only if sectarian and populist politics are gradually replaced with a politics which is both inclusive (i.e., based on the nation and the individual) and democratic (i.e., based on free and regular one-person-one-vote elections) politics (Plattner 2010). Rudimentary aspects of these politics are found in the vibrant civil society and in some of its activities in Lebanon. Former Minister for Interior and Municipalities, Ziad Baroud, is a key example of a politician who emerged from the womb of a non-sectarian and democratic civil society. In 2010 he received the United Nations' Public Service Award for his distinguished ministerial achievements. Still, neither he nor the President of Lebanon, who is also a non-to-soft sectarian aligned leader, received any substantial public support in comparison with hard sectarian populist leaders in the country. In fact, sectarian populist leaders initiated various campaigns whose purpose was to marginalize both the president and his non-aligned ministers. These campaigns led to the ministers' political demise, culminating in either their resignations or removal from office all together.

Various studies have pointed to important openings within the Lebanese state and society which bear the potential to moderate the impacts of populism in favour of nation-state-building. Strengthening the role of civil society remains among the primary paths to democratization. Other reforms (e.g., such as electoral and institutional reforms) that may provide for integrating the voters and establishing national partisanship have also been proposed (Salamey 2009). Secularizing the legal system and civilizing personal status laws have been viciously opposed by the religious establishment. Many reformists, however, think that this is a prerequisite to liberate the individual from dictation by the religious establishment over personal affairs. Privatization that may strengthen the emergence of a secular entrepreneurship and undermine the public sectarian patronage by the state has also been advanced. All these factors, if implemented properly, may favour the transition toward a democratic nation-state and undermine the splintering and the authoritarian exclusionism of sectarian populism.

In sum, the experience of Lebanon with sectarian populism raises doubts as to whether consociationalism can serve as a power-sharing formula for democratic transition. In fact, by inflaming sectarian populist tendencies, consociationalism may provide the ingredients for greater national fragmentation, and, at best, establish authoritarian enclaves whose populist leaders take the state and sectarian constituencies hostage for their opportunistic interests (Hudson 1988). This is evidently the case of Iraq, whose political groups under sectarian populist leadership have polarized and fragmented the population by supporting sectarian loyalties. The consosicational state arrangement in Lebanon or Iraq has obstructed the ability of a parliamentary majority from forming a majority government smoothly, naming a prime minister and electing a parliament speaker and a president. The consequence has been periods of power vacuum and weak centralized authority. The absence of a functional and unified state has, in turn, forced Iraqis as well as Lebanese to seek communal sectarian protectionism rather than national unity, and to mobilize behind the populist sectarian leadership instead of seeking inclusionary democratic institutionalism.

It is difficult to imagine the transition toward democracy in a divided society being achieved within a consociational political framework and under the banner of a populist leadership. In fact, the contrary seems to be a prerequisite to transition. Future study in divided societies must examine the means by which alternative and nationally inclusive transitional political arrangements, such as a secular plural democracy, can be instated

in order to mitigate the splintering dynamic of populism. For example, research is required to explore ways in which to liberalize communities that would achieve intra-communal diversity and foster cross-communal alliances and political affiliations. The need for such research is most pressing, in light of the current democratic revolutions sweeping contemporary Middle Eastern states and societies. Avoiding the shortfalls of Lebanese sectarian populism and a protracted period of transition must be carefully taken into consideration in future Middle Eastern political formulations so as to make transition and state-building there a successful democratic experience.

## Notes

1. See the examination of democratic transition and ethnic challenges in Iraq by James Kurth (Kurth 2005).
2. All Chi$^2$ reported survey results are significant at $p < 0.05$.
3. By protocol, the Maronite President, the Sunni Prime Minister and the Shiite Speaker of Parliament are referred to as 'President'.
4. The Supreme Jurist is Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his representative in Lebanon is Hezbollah General Secretary Sayyed Hassan Nassrallah.
5. B. Gilley titled his article 'Democratic enclaves in authoritarian regimes' (2010). A suitable description of Lebanese politics would have reversed Gilley's title as 'Authoritarian enclaves in a democratic regime'.
6. According to the CIA (2011), Muslims are about 60% of the population compared with 40% of Christians.

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