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Lebanon's Perilous Balancing Act

TAMIRACE FAKHOURY

Comprised of eighteen officially recognized ethno-sectarian communities, Lebanon is a striking example of a state that is deeply divided yet has a consensus-oriented government. Its political system, which allocates decision-making powers along ethno-religious lines, has a checkered record in resolving conflicts. The mass protests that erupted in the Arab world in 2011 and the ensuing turmoil have put Lebanon to the test: Can its power-sharing system stand as an alternative in a region torn by sectarian conflict?

While the ripple effects of the Arab Spring have spread throughout the region, Lebanon has remained relatively calm. In contrast with neighboring countries, the level of state repression has remained low. Lebanon has not seen a recurrence of its own civil war in 25 years. Instead, the small polity has endured in the face of major challenges, including the influx of more than 1.2 million Syrian refugees, divisions over the involvement of the Shia militant movement Hezbollah in the Syrian war, and the threat posed by Islamist networks on the northern border. Since the outbreak of Syria's war, the politics of sectarian power sharing has been a curse and a blessing. Some see the Lebanese power-sharing model as a possible blueprint for ending the Syrian war.

Yet Lebanon's resilience may be overrated. Economic, geostrategic, and kinship ties make Syria the most influential player in Lebanon, which consequently has incurred heavy spillover from the Syrian war. On November 12, 2015, two suicide bombings killed at least 43 people and wounded more than 200 in Burj al-Barajneh, a mostly Shia area in Beirut's southern periphery, closely associated with Hezbollah. The Islamic State (ISIS) claimed responsibility. Seen as a warning to Hezbollah over its involvement in Syria, the attack may foreshadow deeper Lebanese entanglement in the Syrian conflict.

Divisions have brought the political system in Lebanon to a standstill as competitive politics has taken a backseat to an illiberal form of power sharing. The presidency has been vacant for more than 500 days, and national elections have been deferred since 2013, as politicians have eschewed constitutional and electoral deadlines, focusing instead on security-related politics and a tedious process of acting by consensus.

The Lebanese postconflict state has done a poor job of managing public goods and providing services. This sparked a new popular uprising in the summer of 2015, long after the protests in other Arab nations had subsided. It was triggered by an unprecedented crisis that left mounds of garbage accumulating in the streets of Beirut amid scorching heat. In what came to be known through Twitter as the #YouStink movement, thousands took to the streets in disgust. Though their initial demands were for sustainable waste-management solutions, the protesters soon began demanding that the government resign over corruption.

Conflicting interests and struggles over the spoils of power have weakened governance structures, enabling outside conflict to seep into Lebanon. Still, built-in methods of conflict resolution such as dialogue and consensus building have kept disputes in check. The strategic advantages that the system grants its sectarian gatekeepers have made open conflict an unattractive alternative. Lebanon has so far withstood the temptation to follow Syria down the road to war, but a grassroots politics of dissent is gaining momentum. These challenges from outside and below are subjecting the sectarian power-sharing model to increasing contestation.

TAMIRACE FAKHOURY *is an assistant professor of political science and international affairs at the Lebanese American University in Beirut.*

Sectarian saga

Since it gained independence from French rule in 1943, Lebanon has enshrined into law the practice of allocating power among constituent groups. Back then, the unwritten National Pact, or *Al Mithaq Al Watani*, laid the pillars for a power-sharing system in which key executive posts in coalition governments are allocated among Lebanon's larger Muslim and Christian groups. Under that agreement, the president is selected from the Maronite Christian community, the prime minister is a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament is Shia. Seats in the legislature and civil service jobs are also proportionally allocated based on sectarian quotas.

With this system in place, Lebanon enjoyed relative peace for the first three decades after independence. But in 1975, a civil war broke out and state institutions collapsed. By 1989, the warring factions had reached the point of exhaustion and the internationally brokered Taif Accords put an end to hostilities and revised some of the power-sharing provisions. Parity in the legislature between Christians and Muslims replaced the prewar six-to-five ratio that favored Christians. The Maronite president's powers were reduced, while the council of ministers gained prominence as a multi-sectarian decision-making body.

Since the war, Lebanon's domestic agenda has focused on reconstruction and reestablishment of state authority. The Taif Accords recognized Syria as the political and military guardian of Lebanon's postconflict recovery, a "trusteeship" arrangement facilitated by international powers in recompense for the Assad regime's support of the US-led alliance in the Persian Gulf War. Lebanon's political elites, who deemed the state too weak to address postwar challenges, acquiesced in the republic's protectorate status. All militias in Lebanon were supposed to demilitarize, but Hezbollah, the Shia "Party of God," retained its arsenal, ostensibly for resistance against Israel.

For 15 years, the arrangement held and peace prevailed. But by the end of 2004, after the Syrian regime pushed to extend the mandate of its staunch ally President Emile Lahoud, bitter debates about Lebanon's subordinate statehood broke into the open. Two rival coalitions emerged: the anti-Syrian Bristol and the pro-Syrian Ain el Tineh gatherings, which later came to be known as the March 14 and March 8 coalitions, respectively. The Sunni Future Current and several Christian parties, namely the Kataeb (Phalanges) party and the Lebanese Forces, formed the March 14 coalition. The rival coalition brought other key players together, including two Shia parties—Hezbollah and Amal—along with the Christian-based Free Patriotic and Marada movements.

The relative calm that prevailed after the civil war was shattered by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005, when a bomb was detonated as his motorcade drove past in Beirut. The killing sparked massive protests, which came to be known as the Cedar Revolution. That movement forced the withdrawal of Syrian troops in April 2005, ending the so-called era of Syrian hegemony, but it also brought a prolonged period of polarization between Lebanon's two rival coalitions.

Transborder loyalties

Although both blocs cut across sectarian lines, they are divided over the distribution of power and how Lebanon should run its affairs. The March 14 alliance insists on honoring commitments to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), an international body investigating the Hariri assassination. Conversely, the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance accuses the STL, which has identified Hezbollah members as key suspects, of stirring up strife. While the March 14 alliance criticizes Hezbollah as a power possessing the attributes of a state within a state, the March 8 coalition regards Hezbollah's military wing as a key part of the "People, Army, and Resistance" triad that it promotes as an antidote to Lebanon's fragility.

Both coalitions have forged alliances with regional powers on opposing sides of the Sunni-Shia rift. The March 14 coalition, led by the Sunni Future Current, has ties to Saudi Arabia. The March 8 coalition maintains strategic relationships with the Syrian regime and Iran.

Since 2005, these divisions among elites have hampered political processes, including electoral timetables, and incited communal violence. In 2008, a longstanding presidential vacuum was filled after an agreement negotiated in Doha, Qatar's capital. The parliament elected President Michel Suleiman, a Maronite Christian, as a consensus candidate. In the same year, former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora issued an order shutting down Hezbollah's telecommunications network, but the order was reversed after it triggered Sunni-Shia street clashes.

In 2011, as authoritarian regimes crumbled around the region, Lebanese activists staged pro-

secular protests, dubbed "Laique Pride," which aimed to topple the sectarian system. Those protests quickly lost momentum, as the activists disagreed not only about how to end sectarianism but also over the effects of the Arab Spring on Lebanon. A core question that has divided the public sphere is whether regime change in Arab societies carries benefits or dangers for Lebanon's pluralistic society. One camp found it lamentable that Lebanon failed to join in the regional wave of uprisings, but another warned that anti-regime activism would only polarize the polity.

While the Arab protest wave stirred polarizing discourses in Lebanon, the war in Syria has had far more severe effects on its small neighbor. At the outset of Syria's uprising in the spring of 2011, key members of the March 14 alliance sympathized with Syrian dissenters, while the Hezbollah-led bloc warned that the revolt threatened minorities and served foreign agendas. These arguments led to interlocking conflicts over power and identity politics. In Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city, fighting has pitted the Alawites of the Jabal Mohsen neighborhood, who support the Syrian regime, against the Sunnis of Bab al-Tabbaneh, who favor its demise. Such clashes exemplify the intersection of local interests and transborder loyalties.

The politics of sectarianism is the glue holding all interest and identity groups together.

Fanning the flames

In the hope of insulating Lebanon from Syria's conflict, the Lebanese government in 2012 adopted a policy of dissociation in a document known as the Baabda declaration. Two years later, the Maronite patriarchy issued a memorandum reiterating the necessity of noninvolvement and emphasizing that Lebanon is "neither Orient nor Occident." These declarations have not gained much political purchase. Some members of the March 8 alliance have criticized the Baabda declaration and the broader politics of nonalignment as unrealistic given Lebanon's proximity and ties to Syria.

Fanning the flames, Hezbollah officially declared in April 2013 that it would provide military support to the Assad regime inside Syria. So far, it has led two major offensives in Qusayr and Qalamoun. The stakes are high: A collapse of the Assad regime would not only jeopardize Hezbollah's alliance with Syria, but would also threaten its military power, since Syria is a key conduit for the weapons it receives from Iran.

Amid the fallout from the conflict in Syria, divisions over Lebanon's security and sovereignty have widened. Hezbollah has portrayed its involvement in Syria as defending Lebanon's national security. The weakness of the Lebanese state lies at the core of this narrative, which stresses the imperative of warding off threats posed by Syria-based jihadists, namely Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. In contrast, factions such as the Lebanese Forces and Future Current assert that Hezbollah's involvement undermines state sovereignty and increases Lebanon's vulnerability to the jihadist menace.

The inflow of more than 1.2 million Syrian refugees has exacerbated societal cleavages and overloaded Lebanon's rudimentary administrative capabilities for handling immigration. The small nation, which has a population of less than 6 million, now hosts more Syrian refugees per capita than Jordan and Turkey. The international community praised Lebanon's open-door policy in the early years of Syria's conflict. It has also commended the government for its policy of dispersing refugees among existing communities rather than housing them in camps, which allows refugees access to Lebanon's urban social fabric. Traditions of circular migration between Lebanon and Syria, and Syrian workers' active participation in Lebanon's labor market since the end of the civil war, have facilitated refugee settlement patterns.

This policy has not lacked for critics in Lebanon. Concerned about Syrians' precarious living conditions and growing tensions between Lebanese and Syrian communities, some politicians have pleaded for building camps that would be monitored by the United Nations refugee agency. But the state has categorically opposed that idea. There is a widespread fear that refugee camps could become havens for terrorist activities or turn Lebanon into a proxy battleground for outsiders.

In this context of dissension and concerns over perceived threats to national security, the ruling class has come to favor soft authoritarianism. In May 2013, a majority of the legislature voted to renew its own term. Seven months later, it extended its mandate until the summer of 2017, sparking small-scale protests known as the Tomato

Revolution, in which demonstrators denounced what they portrayed as an illegitimate parliament and pelted lawmakers' cars with tomatoes.

One stated rationale for deferring elections is that the Syrian crisis might trigger violence at a time when the nation needs to focus on managing security threats and sectarian tensions. The main reason, however, lies in political feuding over proposals to reform Lebanon's electoral laws. For instance, in 2012 the government proposed introducing proportional representation with fewer and larger electoral districts. Since this change would bolster the March 8 allies, namely Hezbollah and Amal, it was blocked by the March 14 coalition.

CHRONIC GRIDLOCK

Although its dysfunctional governance patterns predate the recent wave of turmoil in the region, the war in Syria has unsettled Lebanon's precarious equilibrium. A case in point is the paralysis in the executive. After two years of political squabbling, the cabinet of Prime Minister Saad Hariri collapsed in January 2011 due to a dispute over the tribunal investigating the assassination of his father, Rafik Hariri.

The STL had found preliminary evidence implicating Hezbollah officials in Hariri's murder. In protest of the government's support for the tribunal, pro-Hezbollah ministers in the cabinet exercised their right to block a quorum by walking out. This so-called "blocking third" formula was introduced as part of the 2008 Doha agreement to safeguard the veto power of each of the main political factions, enabling ministers to bring cabinet proceedings to a halt. The provision has been a recipe for gridlock.

Later in 2011 the Sunni politician Najib Mikati established an interim government tasked with reforming the electoral law. However, the March 14 alliance refused to join the Mikati government in protest of Hezbollah's boycott of the tribunal. Amid disputes over appointments to the security forces, the cabinet resigned in March 2013. Bickering over ministerial posts and their allotment to certain sects also helped derail elections in 2013. Following a 10-month vacuum, a new government led by Tammam Salam, another Sunni politician, was formed in February 2014. Although his cabinet has endured for more than a year now, it has been deeply divided, most recently over the appointment of new security chiefs.

A concurrent stalemate over the presidency has lasted since May 2014. The parliament has so far met more than two dozen times to elect a president but has failed to achieve quorum each time, as the two contending camps have persisted in blocking each other's nominee. The March 8 coalition has boycotted all sessions to block Samir Gagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces. The coalition regards him as a hard-liner who would challenge Hezbollah's right to maintain an arsenal. The March 14 coalition, in turn, rejects the candidacy of Michel Aoun, the leader of the Free Patriotic Current, who joined the March 8 alliance in 2006 and has maintained strategic ties with Hezbollah ever since.

The Lebanese state can juggle political risks if it opens channels for participative power sharing.

CLASHING NARRATIVES

Lebanon's political crises and poor governance reflect both competing views of the state and a system that encourages power struggles. Broadly speaking, the March 14 alliance stresses the priority of a sovereign state disentangled from regional conflicts and asserts that Hezbollah's arsenal gets in the way of building a strong state. Conversely, the March 8 alliance argues that since the Lebanese state lacks law-enforcement and defense capabilities, the Hezbollah-led "resistance" is a necessity. Such viewpoints reiterate, albeit in a new guise, old competing narratives about Lebanon's place in a volatile region.

For decades, political factions such as the Kataeb and the Lebanese Forces have clung to the ideal of a nonaligned "democratic" Lebanon. In contrast, parties such as Hezbollah, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, and the Arab Democratic Party have highlighted Lebanon's geostrategic ties to other Arab states. They have called for stronger regional links and solidarity with neighbors, in particular Syria and the Palestinians.

Since Lebanon's power sharing is structured around fixed rules and predetermined quotas, actors are tempted to acquire more influence indirectly by controlling the political agenda, frequently exercising their veto power, mobilizing their respective sectarian communities, or aligning with an external force to gain domestic leverage. In recent years, parties have perceived issues

such as the dispute over the STL or Hezbollah's involvement in Syria's conflict as challenges to their leverage in the power-sharing system. Such issues take on new life in a sectarian context. In times of threat, identities harden and feed on external allegiances.

One key reason for Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria is fear of Shia disempowerment if the Assad regime falls. The Sunni community, meanwhile, fears that its influence will decline because of the disproportionate power that Hezbollah wields with the Lebanese state's acquiescence. Consequently, Hezbollah's role in Syria has sharpened Sunni-Shia tensions in Lebanon. Some Salafi clerics have exhorted Lebanon's Sunnis to fight Hezbollah in Syria, criticizing what they see as a weakened mainstream Sunni leadership.

The stalemate over the presidency, which is supposed to be filled by a Maronite, has been another source of conflict. Since the end of the civil war, the Maronite community has decried its waning veto powers. In postwar Lebanon, Maronite presidents have been consensus figures; their election was facilitated by external brokers, such as Syria in the 1990s and Qatar in 2008. But the current impasse raises the question of whether the president will be reduced to cautiously balancing between the Sunni and Shia factions, or whether the Maronite community will be able to reassert its leverage through the executive.

Sidelined citizens

In this highly polarized climate, with a power-sharing political system dominated by elites, ordinary citizens have found themselves on the losing end. Labor and civil movements have raised three main sets of grievances in the past several years. First, activists point out that the power-sharing arrangement mostly benefits the ruling class by enabling elites to divide governmental positions among themselves and apportion privileges to their political and economic clients. Second, political squabbles eclipse policy making and legislative activity related to the delivery of public services, economic development, and the extension of civil rights. (For example, in 2011 civil society groups submitted a draft law for legalizing civil marriage, to no avail.) Third, activists have deplored the decay of democratic representation, especially since the legislature renewed its own term in 2013.

The crisis that erupted over municipal garbage collection in Beirut brought all these grievances to the surface in the summer of 2015. After the main landfill closed and the private contracting company Sukleen stopped collecting trash, gigantic piles of garbage accumulated in the streets. Protesters pointed to corruption as a root cause of the situation and a reason the Lebanese pay one of the world's highest rates for waste processing.

While the garbage crisis provided the initial impetus, the #YouStink movement has broadened its focus to call for reforming dysfunctional state institutions, rooting out corruption, and holding elections. Meanwhile, it has forced the government to halt proposed international bidding for waste management contracts, insisting instead on a municipal solution.

Throughout Lebanon's history, sectarian-based politics has proved to be a hostile environment for mass mobilization. Nevertheless, the wave of grassroots dissent is indicative of growing popular dissatisfaction with the regime, a challenge that could imperil peace if not properly met.

Informal channels

Although the Lebanese state has struggled with political cleavages, dysfunctional institutions, and mounting grievances since the outbreak of the Syrian war, it has survived. The interesting question is why. Most answers stress Lebanon's power-sharing culture. During the Syrian crisis, political and religious leaders have stressed the need for coalition building, dialogue, and avoiding conflict.

Forums for dialogue have provided opportunities for flexible political solutions. Recent initiatives include inter-party talks between the Lebanese Forces and the Free Patriotic Movement, and between Hezbollah and the Future Current. These talks have sought to bridge sectarian divisions and circumvent paralyzed institutions. In 2015, Prime Minister Salam launched consultative discussions with political elites to find a way around gridlock in the cabinet. In response to the #YouStink protests, the speaker of parliament, Nabih Berri, has called for reconvening the National Dialogue, a non-institutional framework established in 2006 that brings sectarian leaders together to deal with contentious political issues.

Lebanon's civil society has criticized such methods because they take place behind closed doors and bypass official institutions. Indeed, their proliferation has served as a reminder that the system has failed to come up with an institutionalized track for conflict resolution. Moreover, such initiatives have not had visible results. Some, such

as the National Dialogue, have brought conflicts to the surface, making power sharing even more difficult. The Lebanese Forces assert that the talks are useless since Hezbollah refuses to allow any discussion of its weapons stockpile. Amid protests over the garbage crisis, participants in the National Dialogue have also clashed over electoral timetables. While some argue that a presidential election should have priority, the Christian leader Michel Aoun has called for deciding on military promotions and holding parliamentary elections first.

Nonetheless, these informal channels for dialogue have given the competing factions a way to address disputes. They have also served as arenas for forging a unified response to security threats. For instance, they facilitated cooperation among the Lebanese Army, Hezbollah, and the Internal Security Forces in defusing armed clashes in Tripoli and confronting the Islamist threat in Arsal and Ras Baalbek.

Along with the tradition of political dialogue, the tradition of shared benefits also accounts for Lebanon's surprising viability. The politics of power sharing ensures that all benefit from a system that grants some autonomy to each constituent community. Since its formation in 1982, Hezbollah has gradually built regional and domestic leverage, and thus has come to see the preservation of Lebanon as key to the preservation of its own power. Similarly, Lebanon's factions have developed a sense of political realism in a post–2011, deeply restructured Middle East: They understand that the power-sharing system carves out an existential niche for them.

PARTICIPATIVE POSSIBILITIES

The Lebanese state is embodied in the governing politics of sectarianism, which is the glue holding all interest and identity groups together. Lebanon's political system has evolved into a self-reinforcing mechanism that ensures the reign of the sectarian elites, who have no interest in dismantling it—doing so would mean that they would have to forsake their hold on power. Thus, despite all their divisions, elites collude in maintaining the sectarian state.

Sectarian power sharing has shaped state capacity to process conflict and respond to outside challenges that have arisen with the Syrian crisis. However, to the extent that it manifests itself in deal making and power struggles, it undermines good governance and amplifies outside shocks. Elite cartels, overloaded with divisions and external strains, fail to generate policies to deliver resources and uphold rights for the public. But when power sharing is associated with coalition building and shared interests, it contributes to political resilience.

Is it possible to imagine a more virtuous form of power sharing in Lebanon, one that resolves conflicts, responds to grievances, and accepts the uncertainty of democratic processes? While its future is unclear, the #YouStink protest movement offers practical insights into imagining politics differently. Through its methods and slogans, the movement has shifted attention from sectarian politics to the state. Participants have primarily articulated issue-based claims focused on delivery of government services, environmental quality and health, and electoral rights.

Amid the surging protests, municipalities, universities, and civic associations have started debating the issues raised by the movement. The National Dialogue has already responded. Previously, it had been held sporadically to discuss issues such as national defense strategy. Now it has convened to address public discontent over more mundane issues of governance. Policy outcomes remain disputed and uncertain, but the crisis has created an opportunity for learning.

The Lebanese state can improve its capacity to juggle political risks and divisions if it opens channels for participative power sharing. This would not require engaging with the contentious issue of revising the power relations established by the Taif pact. Rather, it would entail reconfiguring politics by partnering with the citizenry as the key stakeholder in the power-sharing formula. Doing so would require policies that are responsive to citizens' interests and creating channels that guarantee the public a participatory and oversight role in politics. Transitional steps should include mechanisms that ensure transparent management and distribution of public goods, elections that lead to the rotation of political elites, and policies that empower the public sphere's role in legislative and consultative processes.

The aims of this approach would be to loosen the elite's grip on economic and political power, strengthen governing institutions, and bolster social cohesion. In a region shaken by state erosion and sectarian violence, the fragile Lebanese polity must rise to the task of effective governance. It can do so only if its gatekeepers implement the politics of power sharing in a more inclusive way. ■

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