

The Communitarian Nation-State Paradox in Lebanon, edited by

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The Communitarian Nation-State Paradox in Lebanon presents itself as a comprehensive critical anthology of the Lebanese consociational model. Edited by political scientist Imad Salamey, who has made major contributions to the field of Middle East politics, this book comprises twelve high profile Lebanese scholars – from diverse political, social and academic backgrounds – providing heterogeneous, but coherent, perspectives on Lebanon’s power-sharing and its related tensions that brought the country towards periodical stalemates and conflicts.

Structured roughly around four thematic sections, chapters 1-5 discuss the pluralist and unitarianist debate over the Lebanese nationhood. Salamey’s chapter analyses the aforementioned debate through the lenses of the October 17 Protest Movement; indeed, after a review of the opposing positions held by the “critics” (power-sharing responsible for state failure and foreign interference) and “loyalists” (power-sharing not stranger worldwide such as in the US, Canada and Switzerland), the author argues that the October Uprisings have exposed the informal economy that has nourished confessional clientelism. Once the fragile balance between the post-Taef Syrian and Iranian-brokered politics and Western liberal economy collapsed, Lebanese communities resorted to self-help to overcome the decline of state power. Ghais’ contribution, instead, focuses on the role played by identity in all Lebanese conflicts (1943, 1958, 1975-1990 and 2005). For instance, as captured by the King-Crane Commission of 1920, the Christian communities wanted a separate Lebanese state – Michel Chiha’s *Grand Liban* – opposed to Muslims’ aspirations for a Lebanon well-integrated in the Arab world. Riad Sohl’s “great compromise” bridged the gap between Christian and Muslim communities and posed the foundation for the 1943 National Pact; however, such divisions arouse again during the Suez Crisis (1958) when Maronites feared a pro-Arab foreign policy, the Arab-Israeli War (1967) with the identity disputes around the presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – prelude to the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) – and, finally, the post-Taef Agreement when country assumed a “full Arab face” under Syrian and Hezbollah hegemony. Conversely, El-Husseini recurs to the “marriage of convenience” between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) to claim that reducing conflicts to confessional antagonism between Christians and Muslims or Sunni and Shi’a is too simplistic because personal interests often determine political reality and coalition building. In chapter 4, Abouaoun reprises the main debate but she states that, although several scholars consider the Lebanese consociational model as the root cause of systemic dysfunctions, the fact that non-consociational MENA countries such as Syria, Egypt and Algeria have experienced similar unrests proves that power-sharing alone does not explain the weaknesses of the Lebanese case study; therefore, she suggests a shift from identity-based to cause-based politics (e.g. poverty, inequality, corruption) in order to guarantee the existence of peaceful coexistence within plural and divided societies. Finally, this section ends up with Sarkis’ overview of communal politics within the framework of the Lebanese electoral

systems. Whereas the country has adopted several electoral laws since the Constitution (1926) was signed, the sectarian distribution of power has remained at the cornerstone; not surprisingly, the author notes that alongside two constant pillars – namely sectarian quota and unified electorate – only one dynamic variable, such as electoral districts, has changed over the years.

The second section evaluates the ramification of the economic crisis and Taher opens up with an ethnographic investigation of weekly local markets in the Governorate of Nabatieh, one of the biggest and oldest Lebanese markets alongside Bint Jbeil and Hasbaya in South Lebanon. Most importantly, she observes how these historical spaces of socialisation are shaped by what Polanyi (1944) had defined a “double movement” made of laissez-faire policies and protectionism; similarly, Taher outlines how current Lebanese markets have favoured pluralism and integration due to the influence of the Central Bank’s neoliberalism, on one side, and state sectarianism, on the other. According to the author, the double movement has thus had a positive impact by acting as a substitute for failing state economy. On the contrary, Helou stresses the role of political elite in manipulating the current financial crisis by favouring their own communal groups through informal economic networks. More specifically, he explores how sovereign debt crisis is exploited by a patron-client system that emerged from the post- civil war period, and promotes power-sharing practices (inter-elite cooperation) instead of policy and economic reforms.

Chapters 8 and 9 address the October 17 Protest Movement in detail. Tabar and Akel provide an optimistic analysis of the October Revolution and invite to a careful examination that goes beyond Western stereotypes such as the so-called “WhatsApp Revolution” similar to the Twitter and Facebook revolutions in North Africa during the Arab Spring. Indeed, although the protests ignited after the introduction of the WhatsApp tax by Rafik Hariri’s cabinet, the October 17 Movement did not emerge out of a vacuum, and the civil society pushed for a new “imagined community” across classes and sects. However, Bayeh’s contribution seems to contradict the inclusivity and de-sectarianisation attempt led by the movement; indeed, despite the genuine efforts to shake the foundations of the communitarian state and the status quo, the author utilises Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to highlight how the main protest groups – Lebanese Communist Party, the National Bloc, Beirut Madinati, Sabaa Party and Citizens in a State to name a few – failed to create a true revolutionary momentum due to their diverse political and economic goals and manifestos.

Finally, the last section looks at some of the challenges that jeopardise the very essence of the Lebanese nationhood and community. In chapter 10, through the lessons learned from the experience of the Ministry of Information under the Diab government, Najd discusses how sectarian power-sharing causes a fragmentation of the media sector and threatens freedom of expression. Similarly to other sectors, confessionalism engulfs also Lebanese media since each political party owns its media outlet (e.g. Future TV, Al Manar TV, Orange TV etc.) and, for instance, they give low priority to promoting reform issues. Also, journalists operate within the outdated 1962 Press Law and their activities are regulated under the penal and not civil code thus drastically narrowing freedom of expression. Another pressing aspect is debated in Haddad’s chapter about the perception and inclusion of Syrian refugees. Drawing from immigrant and refugee research, Haddad exposes the vulnerabilities of the confessional system facing Syrian refugees’ influx because, after an initial “open door” policy

at the outbreak of the civil war, Syrians in Lebanon have been subject to harsh measures (e.g. deportations) in order to guarantee national and economic security. This fourth section ends up with Noujaim applying the concept of human security to the current situation in Lebanon. Unlike the majority of Western contributions focusing solely on Hezbollah and the Syrian-Iranian sponsorship, she overcomes state-centric and orthodox security approaches in order to favour an individual-based understanding of what security means for Lebanese citizens. For example, Noujaim provides an interesting analysis of the major threats across the country, namely economic (e.g. unemployment and poverty), food (e.g. increased prices and malnutrition), health (e.g. COVID and medicine shortage), environmental (e.g. water shortage, chemicals, garbage crisis and wildfires), personal (e.g. discrimination and domestic violence) and community (e.g. disarmament, corruption, weak state institutions) security concerns.

Written in a clear and accessible language, this is a thoroughly researched volume and suitable for academia but also non-experts interested in Lebanon and, more broadly, MENA politics. Overall, Imad Salamey, and the other scholars, provide a timely debate through Lebanese lenses that makes the book a distinguished and much-needed contribution in a field often dominated by Western scholarship.