ВОСТОЧНЫЙ СОЦИУМ

# INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY ON LEBANON'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

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*Abstract: The Lebanese experience of consociational democracy is considered by many scholars a successful transition from civil war propagated by religious conflict to a sustainable democracy. However, the country's political and socio-economic circumstances which have prompted a severe economic crisis, culminating in an uprising in October 2019 and the consequent collapse of the government, indicate that consociational democracy has been unsuccessful in promoting stability, prosperity and unity.*

*In this article, the authors argue that religion's heavy influence on people's identities in Lebanon has resulted in a fragmented society and a political process guided by clientelism and characterised by weak and corrupt governmental institutions. For decades, religious identity in Lebanon has been shaped and reshaped by local and foreign actors in pursuit of political or other goals. The country's history, from Ottoman rule to the French mandate to independence in 1943, serves as a witness to this process of utilising religious identities with the purpose of harnessing and monopolising more power within political, social and economic institutions.*

*After the Ottoman Empire fell, France gained control over Lebanon and during its mandate, it favoured the Christian communities over others, further deepening cleavages within a society already divided along confessional lines. These divisions persisted and grew deeper after the Sykes-Pikot agreement (1916) and under the French mandate and persisted after the country gained its independence. Today, religious identities and loyalties continue to play a significant role in shaping Lebanese politics, thus hindering political, economic and social development.*

*Keywords:* Lebanon, conflict, religion, religious identity, the Ta'if Agreement, civil war, consociational democracy, power distribution, religious conflict.

## INTRODUCTION

The Middle East, a region that has served as a home for the three most prominent monotheistic religions in the world – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, has throughout its centuries-old history suffered from foreign interventions and religious conflicts that, at times, turned into bloody civil wars. Although conflicts are often motivated by political rather than religious interests, religious communities have a significant influence on identity formation in this region. These religious communities are often politicised leading to outbreaks of violence or political competition between different religious communities and identities. In the 20th and 21st century, "confessional politics have become salient in countries with significant religious minorities"

as is evident in Palestine/Israel, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon [Lee, Shitrit, 2014, p. 210]. Among these countries, Lebanon is considered to have a unique experience in the region for establishing a political system that embraces all major religious groups within its borders and gives them proportional representation in governmental organizations. The Lebanese power-sharing system (otherwise known as a consociational democracy) has been hailed as a success for its ability to maintain stability and promote democracy. However, the political, social and economic realities in the country invite one to reconsider just how successful this consociational system is.

In October 2019, protests erupted demanding the government's resignation and a change from a consociational to a technocratic political system. The protests were primarily instigated by the country's deteriorating economic situation and newly proposed taxes. As a consequence of these protests, Prime Minister Sa'd al-Hariri resigned and the government subsequently collapsed. This event, among others to be discussed later, serve as indicators that the power-sharing system has failed in promoting internal stability, development and economic growth. This article argues that Lebanese consociationalism has fostered weak governmental economic and social institutions, corruption and a society heavily divided along sectarian lines. It further looks at how and why religious identity has become politically salient - on several occasions leading to conflicts including a 15-year long civil war. According to K.V. Dubrovskaia, "a characteristic feature of the Lebanese political system is political confessionalism due to the habitation of various Muslim groups in the territory of Lebanon in various as well as [various] Christians [groups]... These groups are separate religious communities that have different origins and their own socio - cultural characteristics" [Dubrovskaia, 2019, p. 101][1]. The history of the country's creation, as well as foreign and local powers that saw in the religious diversity within Lebanon a tool for maintaining power and control serve as a witness to the significant role played by religious identity in dictating Lebanese politics. As such, the authors will begin with highlighting politically significant moments in the country's history from the time of the weakening of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century up until current times, and analyse the role played by religious identities in shaping these moments. Furthermore, the characteristics and political, economic and social consequences of the existing power-sharing system will be assessed and analysed.

## HISTORICAL QUESTIONS OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN LEBANON

During the Ottoman Empire, the territory now known as Lebanon was an autonomous region named Mount Lebanon founded in 1861 by an international commission and included "less than half the territory of modern-day Lebanon" [Mokhov, Mokhova, 2012, p. 203]. The inhabitants of this territory were mostly Christians and Druzes and, due to recurring bloody conflicts between them, European countries saw their intervention in the situation as necessary. This intervention resulted in an agreement under which the region came to be governed by a Christian Maronite provincial governor subject to the Ottoman Empire, and a council made up of twelve representatives of the main confessional groups living in the territory (Maronites, Druzes, Sunnis, Shi'ites, Orthodox and Greek Catholics). Dubrovskaia points out that "the confessional approach to building a political system was adopted by the Lebanese Republic from the Ottoman Empire, which used it to govern the Arab provinces" [Dubrovskaia, 2019, p. 102].

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, France gained control over "Mount Lebanon". Worried by sentiments of Arab nationalism, France "used a semicolonial divide-and-rule strategy which promoted ethnic-sectarian minorities (Maronite Christians in Lebanon, Alawite and Druze Muslims in Syria) that helped them confront Arab nationalism dominated by Sunni Muslims" [Stephan, 2013, p. 14]. In order to give the pro-French Maronite Christian community on Mount Lebanon a stronger political and economic position and create a more viable state, France expanded the borders of Mount Lebanon and annexed "the city of Tripoli, a Sunni Muslim center, the southern Shi'i

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[1]    Here and further quotes from Russian-language sources are cited in English translation.

Muslim centers, Sidon and Tyre, and the Bekaa Valley, in the east" [Gurses, 2007, p. 475]. In September 1920, the official establishment of the state of Great Lebanon was announced by General Henri Gureau, representative of the French mandate in Lebanon. The newly constructed state encompassed regions populated by Muslim who, as a minority unfavorable to the French, became bitter and hostile to both the French themselves and Lebanese Christians: "They resented their forcible separation from [Greater Syria] and considered greater Lebanon an artificial entity, and repeatedly insisted on reunification with Syria, which they considered their Arab Homeland" [Maktabi, 1999, p. 232]. This, in turn, posed a threat to the Maronites' idea of a predominantly Christian Lebanon that has strong ties to the West.

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON POLITICS

In every ancient political unit in history of which there is a record, religion was closely connected to politics. Ancient Egypt, Greece, Babylonia, Mesopotamia, the Persian, Greek, and Roman empires are some historical examples of how religion and politics were intertwined. Rulers sought the approval of their god(s) before going to war, and often the religion of the victorious side was imposed on the vanquished. While in modern politics, the practice of enforcing religion on the vanquished can be considered non-existent, religion is still a very powerful motivator to start and end wars, and carries significant influence on the structure of political systems and institutions.

To understand the influence of religion on politics, it should be considered as a social phenomenon or institute influencing people's behaviour. Accordingly, the question is not whether religion is true or not, but rather how does it interact with and influence people's identities and their political activities and decisions. Religion's impacts on behaviour "manifest themselves through the influences of religious identity, religious institutions, religious legitimacy, religious beliefs, and the codification of these beliefs into authoritative dogma, among other avenues of influence" [Fox, 2013, p. 5]. Mark Tomass defines identity as a concept that "preconceives people who perceive themselves as both integrated into certain social environments and distinct from other ones" [Tomass, 2016, p. 1]. As such, one of the ways in which people cultivate their sense of self and give meaning and purpose to their lives is through identifying with or against certain groups. Religion, as well as political ideologies such as liberalism, fascism, socialism, and so on, serves as identity structures within which people identify themselves. However, religious beliefs are ubiquitous and, a survey conducted by P. Norris and R. Inglehart [Norris, Inglehart, 2004] reveals that the level of religious belief varies from person to person and region to region. The more prominent the role of religion on social and personal identities is, the more likely it is to propagate from the private into the public sphere.

When religious identities start interacting in the public sphere, they become both influenced by and influencers of social and political processes. As such, religious identities can be endlessly formulated and reformulated in correspondence with surrounding events and circumstances, including political ones. Three main theories explain how religious identity becomes politically significant: primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism.

Primordialism views religious questions as atavistic and culturally integrated in identity groups, where reasons for religion becoming relevant to the way of life are often forgotten. As such, primordialism asserts that religion is only relevant today because it was relevant in the past and has, therefore, became an integral fact of life; a tradition worth defending and fighting over. In fact, "primordial" conflicts are ones that have been going on for years due to hatred and grievances based on alleged mistreatments, and a history of violence and retaliation that can go back centuries. Instrumentalism, on the other hand, describes the path through which religious identity, not carrying any specific relationship to politics, is used as an instrument by political "entrepreneurs" who seek to trigger religious identity and utilise it for political gains. To some political opportunists, religion is an untapped source that can pave the way for harnessing influence and power. This usually occurs during periods of transition of power, when an

old regime is replaced by a new one, or during times of economic crises and post-conflict periods. The instrumentalist way does not imply that religious identity has never been dominant in politics, but rather it explains the way in which it is utilised for political purposes after having been dormant for some time. As such, it can be applied "to cases where old but dormant religious divisions are awakened as well as to cases where they are made politically relevant for the first time" [Fox, 2013, p. 38] due to a number of circumstances that allow or instigate these divisions to appear and serve a specific political purpose.

Constructivism is similar to instrumentalism in that it explains how religious elites and various groups of influence can capitalise on religious identities to gain power. However, unlike instrumentalism, a new religious identity is constructed or an existing one is altered by creating a new narrative. This process, otherwise known as "ethnogenesis", a term coined by T.R. Gurr [Gurr, 1993] and D.L. Horowitz [Horowitz, 1985], may occur as a result of shared experiences, such as suppression and discrimination by a more powerful or dominant group. Thus, constructivism can be understood as a method of shifting the boundaries of existing identities and modifying them to create new identities that can be activated to further political or other goals. Proponents of the constructivist theory of religious identity and politics appeal to Sigmund Freud[2], who believed that people "construct a mass neurosis consisting of religious fictions for their psychological self-protection" [Fox, 2013, p.39] and Karl Marx (1843, see: [Marx, 1970]), who believed that the ruling classes build religion as a tool for maintaining order among the masses.

The authors argue that Lebanon is a country in which all three theories can be applied to understand the influence of religious identity on politics. The residents of "Mount Lebanon" had their own primordial religious differences that were manipulated and instrumentalized by colonisers who sought to further exacerbate these differences in an effort to consolidate their power in a classic "divide-and-conquer" strategy. After the British and French powers divided the Levant region in accordance with the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916), they altered the identities of the region's residents by geographically dividing a religiously diverse region into separate independent states without taking into consideration confessional differences and existing conflicts. As a result, new identities were constructed by adding a new "national" factor, closely intertwined with, and at times in opposition to people's existing religious identities. New identities were constructed within the borders of the newly created nation-states. The consequences of the primordial conflict as well as the instrumentalization and construction in the colonial era of religious identities still play a significant role in shaping the socio-political conditions of the region.

## CIVIL WAR AND THE TA'IF AGREEMENT: REASONS AND CONSEQUENCES

In 1943, mostly due to the weakening of France's position during the Second World War, Lebanon announced its independence and was officially freed of the French mandate. At that time, there were differences about the country's national identity as well as how the Lebanese government should be organized. These differences were resolved in the "National Pact", an oral agreement between Beshara Al-Khouri (leader of the Maronites) and Riad Al-Solh (leader of the Sunnis). The role of each major religious sect in the government as well as Lebanon's relations with the West and Arab countries were identified in this pact, in which two main elements can be found. The first element is that, as was traditional, "presidents would be Maronites (the largest single section according to the 1932 census), prime ministers would be Sunnis (the second largest sect), [and] speakers of the Chamber of Deputies would be Shi'as (the third largest sect)" [Chamie, 1976, p. 173]. The second most important element of the National Pact is the agreement that Lebanon will be an independent Arab state with its own identity. The pact stipulated that Muslims

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[2]     See: [Freud, 1989].

will not try to make Lebanon part of a larger Arab state, and that Christians will not seek Western help and protection. Lebanon will maintain good relations with both Arab States and the West.

Here it is important to note that in 1932 "the only census in the history of Lebanon was conducted, which served as a statistical basis for determining the political "weight" of communities and, consequently, the distribution of power among their representatives" [Mokhov, Mokhova, 2012, p. 204]. To this day, no new census has been conducted to avoid the potential of a new conflict brought on by the results. Changes in the proportions of religious groups within the country would mean altering the power-distribution formula with some groups gaining, and others losing power. Maktabi argues that "the way the figures were obtained, presented and analysed indicates that the census findings were heavily politicized, and embodied contested issues regarding the identity of the Lebanese state with which the country is still grappling" [Maktabi, 1999, p. 220]. This indicates that tensions between Lebanon's major Muslim and Christian communities have been and continue to be a major source of tension in Lebanon since its creation.

After Lebanon became an independent state and its two major groups at the time found common ground in the National Pact, Lebanon witnessed a time of relative peace. However, that did not last. Both the Sunnis and the Maronites violated the National Pact at different points. Kamil Chamoun tried to run for a second term, which was a violation of the Constitution. The Lebanese government agreed to Western help in accordance with the Eisenhower doctrine, which, as mentioned above, was a violation of the National Pact. Furthermore, the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, which joined Syria and Egypt as one Arab state, contributed to the campaign for pan-Arabism in the region, which increased existing tensions between various Lebanese religious and political groups. Moreover, the creation of the state of Israel and the subsequent wave of Palestinian immigration in 1948 had a direct impact on the already fragile stability of the country's political system. The sudden presence of a large number of Palestinians "constituted a new, unanticipated, potential political force in Lebanese politics" [Chamie, 1976, p. 175]. Palestinians in Lebanon established close relations with Muslims and leftists (communists, socialists, etc.) and took guerrilla actions against Israel from Lebanese territory, which led to Israeli retaliatory actions against Lebanon. Moreover, "the gradual change in the demographic situation in favor of Muslims led to stricter demands by Muslim elites for the redistribution of powers in the political system" [Mokhov, Mokhova, 2012, p. 204]. The culmination of violations of the National Pact, regional tensions and political infighting aggravated the differences between different religious groups' interests and signaled the beginning of the civil war in 1975.

From 1975 to 1990, Lebanon was embroiled in a civil war that was considered one of the bloodiest wars of the twentieth century, with approximately 200,000 people killed and another 17,000 missing. The war ended in 1990 after the conclusion of the Ta'if Agreement (otherwise known as the National Reconciliation Accord) brokered by Saudi Arabia. According to this agreement, the branches of government were proportionally divided among representatives of religious groups living in the country. Although "under the so-called National Pact, seats were apportioned between Christians and Muslims in a 6:5 ratio in favor of the Christians" [Diss, Stephan, 2017, p. 2], the Ta'if Agreement evenly distributed power between the Christian and Muslim communities of Lebanon and distributed seats according to the 50:50 formula. This required internal and administrative reforms of the political system as defined in the National Pact. These reforms included the transfer of powers from the Executive branch (the President), which previously had broad powers, to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, as well as the strengthening of the post of speaker of Parliament.

POST-TA'IF LEBANON

Lebanon emerged from its 15-year civil war with the ratification of the Ta'if Agreement and creation of a new Lebanese government in which all officially recognized sects are represented in accordance with

the new terms set by the agreement. The Lebanese consociational system was hailed by many as one of the few successful examples of democratic stability in the Middle East. Supporters of the Lebanese power-sharing model include Patrice Paoli, former French Ambassador to Lebanon, who stated in Naharnet newspaper that "Lebanon's democracy, freedom and coexistence among its citizens became a model in the region" [Naharnet Newsdesk, 2012] for resolving sectarian conflicts. It is true that the proportional distribution of political power among different religious communities in Lebanon has been successful in terms of avoiding another civil war despite regional stresses in neighboring countries and the trend of political and social uprisings that started with the so-called "Arabic Spring" in 2011. J.G. Karam argues that this is partially due to the Lebanese political system's resilience in reaching elite-based compromises, for "the country's political elites have successfully learned to accommodate one another through the formation and re-formation of cross-sectarian alliances" [Karam, 2018, p. 2]. However, the system is not without critics who argue "that such distribution of power based on religious identities entrench sectarian identities, freeze power among traditional elites, and foster clientelism on religious grounds" [Assaf 2004; Makdisi, Marktanner 2009; Kingston 2013]. In a case study about the frailties of Lebanese democracy, Natalia Nahas Calfat concludes that "highly institutionalised consociational arrangements can lead to sectarianism, institutional instability, clientelism, and state frailty" [Calfat, 2018, p. 269]. To understand the consequences of the Ta'if Agreement created to manage the inter-sectarian conflict characterising Lebanese politics and society, and assess if it has truly promoted mutual existence, we consider the political and social environment in contemporary Lebanon.

The country suffers from high levels of corruption and unemployment, as well as mismanagement of resources leading to persistent issues regarding regulation of budget, energy, water, and waste disposal in the country. Moreover, according to Loulwa Murtada, "the deep ethnic antagonisms between Lebanon's different sects have played a significant role in obstructing the country's development and restricting economic advancements" [Murtada, 2018, pg. 2]. Looking at the country's unemployment rate and public debt-to-GDP ratio, we find that Lebanon's development has, in fact, been weak. In August 2019, former labor Minister Mohammad Kabbara maintained in a statement that the overall unemployment rate in Lebanon is 25% and among people younger than 25 years – 37%. Moreover, Lebanon's public debt-to-GDP ratio rose to 152.96% from 2000 to 2018, one of the highest rates in the world, and today Lebanon is facing its worst economic crisis since the civil war. Moreover, according to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions index which uses a scale of 0 to 100, in the four years between 2015 and 2018 (results for 2019 have not yet published), Lebanon has consistently received a score of 28/100, indicating high levels of corruption [Transparency International, 2018]. According to Calfat, "the institutional arrangements provide political benefits from maintaining sectarian practices and patronage mechanisms" [Calfat, 2018, p. 283]. Thus, political leaders benefit from religious cleavages in society which allow them to remain in rule and gain political and financial benefits. Even citizens' perceptions of their government indicate that corruption and clientelism within its institutions are high. According to data collected by the Arab Barometer (2019), 20 percent of Lebanese say that they trust the parliament, government or judiciary. For example, parliament members elected in 2009 for what was supposed to be a four-year term extended their mandate three times, in 2013, 2014 and 2017, thus remaining in power five additional years, further decreasing people's faith in the parliament and its politicians. One of the byproducts of corruption and political infighting is weak infrastructure. Many regions in the country suffer from daily electricity cuts that last up to 11 hours a day, and even Beirut, the capital, has gotten accustomed to three-hour daily cuts. In fact, Lebanon has resorted to buying electricity from neighboring war-torn Syria to support its own supply. In August 2018, an official from the Finance Ministry was quoted by the Lebanese Daily Star stating that "Finance Minister Ali Hasan Khalil signed an agreement with the Syrian government … to buy electricity from Syria" [Habib, 2018]. The Finance Ministry official also stated that Lebanon has boosted its demand from 90MW to 300 MW, as the government remains incapable of fulfilling the increasing demand locally.

An important factor of democracy and stability is the existence of political party plurality. With the existence of over a hundred parties in the country, the factor of political party plurality can be considered to be realized in Lebanon. The major parties constantly represented in the Lebanese parliament, however, define themselves based on the religious group they represent and often lack a real political agenda, their actions rather motivated by personal benefits. This further strengthens religious identity's role as the indicator of the direction of Lebanese politics and policies, as opposed to development of the country's economy or its national interests. Moreover, the parties are to this day divided between two political camps: the Sunni March 14 coalition supported mostly by the USA and Saudi Arabia, and the pro-Syrian, Shi'ite March 8th coalition supported by Iran. These two coalitions often diverge in opinions regarding how the country should be managed as well as in its foreign relations with other countries, which has on several occasions (in 2005, 2011, 2013) led to government collapse. For instance, after the last president's term ended in 2014, Lebanon remained without a head of state for 29 months in which political infighting resulted in lack of quorum in parliament during 45 sessions held with the goal of electing a new president. In 2016, the political crisis ended with the election of General Michel Aoun as president.

Being split into two camps supported by different external powers has also made the manipulation of internal politics by non-Lebanese players easier. For "sectarian identities, given how entrenched they are, can be manipulated and mobilised quite often, along with fear, in order to create a narrative for the regional interests at play" [Maktabi, 2018, p. 282]. This further leads to ineffective management of the country as not only do the local players need to achieve consensus despite their diverging interests, but they also need to receive approval and support from their foreign patrons. As such, while Lebanese power-sharing has succeeded in avoiding another civil war, it is inaccurate to say that it has led to stability when the government is unable to provide basic infrastructure, social services, cohesion and actual independence from foreign intervention. Rather, it has created and reinforced a system that "demands a high level of co-operation between different powers in order to maintain restraint and promote reconciliation in all matters that could provoke confessional discord or conflict" [Abdel- Kader 2010, p. 12]. It is important to note that the interconnectedness of local Lebanese religio-political groups' interests with Western interests carries not only political repercussions, but also plays a role in transforming religious identities to conform with evolving political interests. Therefore, the management of internal issues has often proved to be a lengthy process, sometimes leading to political vacuum, instability and ineffectiveness in the country's regulation.

Looking at the recent political environment in Lebanon, one may observe several indications that point to the fact that many Lebanese wish to see a diminishing role of religion in dividing political power. The 2015 public uprisings as a result of the ongoing garbage crisis[3], and the 2016 municipal election results, which saw large numbers of votes for grassroots anti-sectarian movements demonstrate the public's discontent with Lebanese leaders' inability to effectively manage the country. A vivid manifestation of the system's weakness appeared in October 2019 when thousands of Lebanese took to the streets demanding the government's resignation and an end to religion's role in allocating political power distribution. Many demanded a technocratic government in which appointments are made and candidates chosen based on merit and not their religio/political affiliation. The protests erupted after the government announced new taxes on some products, including gasoline and tobacco, as well as a $6 monthly fee for free messengers such as WhatsApp. Tamirace Fakhoury asserts that "in the wake of a proposed WhatsApp tax, people have been calling for the sacking of political leaders and the eradication of political sectarianism" [Fakhoury, 2020, pg. 1]. As such, the imposed taxes were only the "last straw", and the

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[3]   For more detailed information on the garbage crisis: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20180328-lebanon-is-drowning-in-its-own-waste (accessed: 29.09.2020).

main reason for their discontent is corruption and the mismanagement of the country's resources over the past 30 years, brought on by the sectarian nature of Lebanese politics.

The protests, however, faced internal problems which led to the emergence of grassroots divisions among their ranks, making the protests unorganized and their demands incoherent. A wide range of techniques was used by demonstrators, ranging from activities aimed at disrupting normal life such as roadblocks and graffiti deploring corruption and the country's economic situation, to sit-ins in front of political and financial institutions, as well as in front of homes of political leaders. This has led to internal divisions among the protesters, as well as disdain from some segments of the population who opposed the disrupting tactics on grounds that they harm their economic interests. A second contention between the protestors is related to whether to boycott or negotiate with the political class. As such, the Lebanese protest movement has remained largely leaderless, ununited in its strategies and demands, and faced opposition from members of society for its disruption of normal life and people's livelihoods.

Despite protesters' demands to decrease the role of religion in politics, the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer survey indicates that while religiosity is decreasing, there is a slight increase in the number of Lebanese those who wish to see religion's role in politics increase. According to findings of the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer (2019), "personal piety in Lebanon has declined dramatically in the past decade: only 24 percent describe themselves as religious compared with 44 percent in 2010" [Arab Barometer, 2019, p. 15]. The same report further states that attendance of religious rituals and reading and listening to religious texts has dropped. However, an interesting finding was that, despite the drop in people's religiosity, "intolerance toward members of other religions is also on the rise: two-in-ten state they would not like neighbors of a different religious group; an increase of 16 points since 2010" [Arab Barometer, 2019, p. 16]. Moreover, the study found that support for religion in the public sphere has increased with 20 percent of interviewees (an 11-point increase since 2012) saying that religious leaders should influence government decisions. 78 percent of interviewees (a 13-point decline from 2012) consider religion a private issue that should be separated from public life. As such, while the level of people's religiosity has decreased, support for a bigger role of religion in the public sphere is witnessing an increase. This was reflected in the fact that protesters faced resistance from some segments of society, mainly Hezbollah and Amal party members, who opposed their demand of eradication of political sectarianism. In an article titled "Lebanon is Broken. So are its Protests" published in Foreign Policy newspaper, Anchal Vohra states that "in addition to clashes between the police and the protesters, there is also regular street fighting between protesters and Hezbollah" [Vohra, 2020] supporters. This points to the fact that religious identity (even when not accompanied by religiosity) remains an important factor of political identity that people are still willing to fight over, despite it having led to poor living circumstances. One of the latest uprising's main chants is "kellon ya'ni kellon" which is translated as "all of them means all of them". The chant expresses the protestors' contempt with all politicians without exception, thus signifying that they believe the whole government is corrupt. However, several interviews by local TV channels with protestors revealed that to many, the more accurate chant would be "all of them means all of them, except...", the exception being the representative of the interviewees' religious group. This showcases that religious identity and loyalty to religious leaders remains an important driver of people's political behavior and beliefs.

Moreover, people's voting behavior continues to be dictated by religious affiliations. The Lebanese Parliament's 128 seats are divided equally-64 for Christians and 64 for Muslims, including Druze, with two halves divided into 11 more sects. Each electoral district has seats allocated according to its demographic composition. Lebanese continue to vote for the same leaders in what can be called a masochistic cycle, out of fear that one religious group will gain power and marginalize others. According to Calfat, "in confessional consociationalism, electoral stimuli are pre-established and calcify voters' identification as well as politicians' affiliation on a sectarian basis, which leads to electoral results that

are structured exclusively along denominational lines" [Calfat, 2018, p. 283]. As such, it can be argued that Lebanon's politicians today consider religious identity as an instrument that can be constructed and reconstructed in pursuit of political or other goals. Maintaining or strengthening conflicting religious identities translates into loyalty to religious leaders, which in turn, translates into votes.

According to A.C. Ivashchenko (2015) "despite some reservations in legal acts, in practice in Lebanon, the religious affiliation of the candidate for a particular post has always been taken into account first, and then-his professional and personal qualities" [Ivashchenko, 2015, p. 61].

Historically, the major religio/political parties have persistently received most votes despite the gradual emergence of independent candidates. For example, in the 2018 parliamentary elections, the "Civil Society Movement", a coalition of independents, nominated 105 candidates independent of any political party. Of the 105, only one candidate won a seat in parliament. This was the first instance in which a candidate wins a seat in parliament after running as part of an independent list. Other independent candidates are represented in parliament, but due to the structure of the Lebanese electoral system, they form coalitions with some of the major political parties and run as part of their list of candidates, as that gives them a significantly higher chance of getting into Parliament than if they run independently.

CONCLUSION

In January, almost three months after the protesters began and the Sa'ad Al-Hariri government resigned, what was promoted to be a technocratic government with more responsive and capable ministers took power. It can be presumed that the performance of this new government will be heavily scrutinized, with those supporting a bigger role of religion in politics being critical of any perceived mistakes, and those in favor of a technocratic government singing its praises. The performance of this government can serve as an indicator for the future path of Lebanon's political process. Whether we will see a continuation along the path away from sectarian politics or not remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that the influence of religious identities on politics is a perpetual cycle that can only be broken if people shed their religious identities, at least in the public sphere. However, Lebanon's history is thronged with both sectarian and intra-party conflicts that fostered the establishment and sustainment of clientelistic networks due to the fact that "sectarian leaders become not only the sole representatives of their communities, but also the main providers of services, jobs, and security, even as they pursue their personal interests" [Calfat, 2018, p. 283]. Even though the civil war ended, the country is still suffering from instability due to the inability of its various religious groups to coexist peacefully without clashing in the political and public space. A further indication that religious identity remains important in people's minds is the fact that the terms "West Beirut" and "East Beirut" which were used during the civil war to indicate the division of the regions across the main battle line that divided the city into a Western Muslim Sunni region and an Eastern Christian region are still occasionally used today in regular speech. The Lebanese case is an example of the primordial constructivist and instrumental theories on the influence of religious identity on politics. The conflict between different religious groups began long before the state of Lebanon existed and, given the circumstances of its existence which pit these different groups in a fight over resources and representation, the conflict between them deepened. What was once a conflict between Maronites and Druzes in an Ottoman Empire territory has been shaped and reshaped by both local and foreign political elites to create new volatile religio-political identities that have very deep and strong roots in the Lebanese community.

With changing circumstances and the involvement of external powers, identities started to shift to fit political goals or positions. For example, the Lebanese Maronites are not only Christians, but also supporters of stronger ties with Western countries and opposers of Syria's influence in Lebanon. The Shi'ites are not only a domination of Islam, but also pro-Syrian anti-Israel group as opposed to the Sunnis who are anti-Syria and pro-Saudi Arabia. Throughout the years, religious identities have

been strengthened and used as an instrument by local and foreign players alike to pursue financial or political interests. This suggests that even over 70 years after the creation of the Lebanese state, national identity has not yet been able to overshadow religious identity neither in politics nor society. Rather, religious identity has morphed into an identity structure that intertwines religious, political and national identities and goal.

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