

Exploring Ethnocracy and the Possibilities of Coexistence in Beirut

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Abstract

In response to James Anderson's article "Ethnocracy: Exploring and extending the concept", this article revisits some of the extensive discussions of Lebanon's political sectarianism through the prism of ethnocracy to the extent that it contributes to an analysis of the socio-political structure of the Lebanese capital, and vice-versa. After a discussion of the relevance of the notion of ethnocracy to the Lebanese context and Anderson's "extensions" of the concept, the paper will briefly introduce recent developments in the country that point to growing and organised contestation of the political system and what it reveals about the Lebanese model's "resilience".

Introduction

It was an early spring day of 2015, and I was listening to the car radio while travelling across Lebanon's capital, Beirut. The snow of the mountain range that makes up Lebanon's border with Syria was melting and there was speculation that this would facilitate the movement of fighters engaged in Syria and flare up the war front with the Lebanese Army. As is often the case, the press both local and international laid out yet more scenarios for Lebanon's imminent implosion. I asked Marwan, who was driving, what he made of all this, as he has been alarmed by the situation for a few years now. But he said 'the more they talk about war, the less it is likely to happen'. I took this to mean that when politicians and the press beat the drums of all-out war, they effectively delay it.

Since the signing of the Ta'if Agreement in 1989 that ended the 15-year long civil war, Lebanon has been said to be 'on the brink of war' numerous times. At the same time, the 'Lebanese model' has proven more resilient to substantial shocks, both internal and external,

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at least to the extent that it manages to perpetuate itself – at the cost of the public good. This model of political sectarianism or confessionalism that at times has given way to discussions about ethnocracy or consociationalism is said to be at the root of the state's dysfunction while at the same time it is defended as a viable – if temporary – system for the safeguarding of Lebanon's diverse communities.

In response to James Anderson's article in this issue 'Ethnocracy: Exploring and extending the concept', this article revisits some of the extensive discussions of Lebanon's political sectarianism through the prism of ethnocracy to the extent that it contributes to an analysis of the socio-political structure of the Lebanese capital, and vice-versa. After a discussion of the relevance of the notion of ethnocracy to the Lebanese context and Anderson's 'extensions' of the concept, the paper will briefly introduce recent developments in the country that point to growing and organised contestation of the political system and what it reveals about the Lebanese model's 'resilience'.

Ethnicity in the Lebanese context

Anderson defines ethnocracy as 'government or rule by an ethnic group or *ethnos*' specified by religion, language, 'race' or other criteria, contrasted to democracy which is rule by the *demos* or people. The concept has only recently received widespread attention, mainly following the work of the Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel on Israeli ethnocratic practices. He applied the concept from national to urban contexts, and Anderson extends it further to apply to 'imperial', 'post-conflict' and 'post-national' regimes.

In trying to assess the extent to which a broader understanding of ethnocracy applies to the case of Lebanon, this paper will discuss national ethnocracy, the imperial roots of ethno-nationalism, and post-conflict and post-national ethnocracies, considering the implications of each for the Lebanese capital. At different levels, the case for an extended concept of ethnocracy in the Lebanese context is at once revealing and concealing with respect to a complex series of political and urban arrangements that have undergone numerous iterations and are still openly contested. But first, one of the difficulties when writing about ethnocracy is the definition of ethnicity, particularly in the Lebanese context.

Ethnicity or ethnic group is related to the classification of people and group relationships (Eriksen 2002) and, as such is also the subject of continuous debate over the nature of those relations and boundaries. As Abner Cohen writes, however, ‘the question is not which definition is the most valid but which is most helpful in the analysis of certain theoretical problems’ (2001 p. ix and in the case of Lebanon, the use of the notion of ethnicity has been limited. The Lebanese constitution speaks of sects or denominations (*al-tawa’if*) that are distinguished on the basis of religion of which 18 are officially recognised in Lebanon. Ethnicity is sometimes used to signify the difference between Arabs, Armenian and Kurds who are also linguistically differentiated, but even here, the category of ethnicity is seldom used to describe political sectarianism or confessionalism.

In the cases where ethnicity is used to describe the confessional groups that make up Lebanon, it is either defined fairly broadly (Nagle 2015) to incorporate colour, language and religion, or to signify the politicisation of confessional identities as Samir Khalaf (2012) argues, explaining that the ethnic group then also becomes ‘for itself’, self-conscious’. In a similar vein, As’ad AbuKhalil ‘claims that the subjective stress on distinctions, however concocted and artificial, is so strong as to warrant the designation of “sectarian ethnicities”’ (1988 in Farha 2016).

While it is clear from Anderson’s treatment of ethnicity that he takes a broad approach to the term to include religion, it is important to note that in the case of Lebanon sectarian distinctions do not immediately translate into ethnic ones, whether the assumption is that these categories are constructed or not. Ussama Makdisi (2000) argues that it is precisely the conflation of religion and ethnicity by colonial powers and Ottoman administrative reform that led to the development of a ‘culture of sectarianism’. This approach to sectarianism, however, is contested by Mark Farha (2016) who argues that while sectarianism may be less about religious doctrine than about communal memory, it precedes early 19th century colonialism and is inherent to the politico-religious relations of the Levant.

Moreover, alongside the sect, there is also the political group, which in many cases is an assemblage of overlapping sensitivities and loyalties that do not immediately overlap with sectarian identities, and sometimes even contradict them. This is particularly significant when analysing the implications of an ethocratic approach to Lebanese government, as sectarian categories are constantly contested and fragmented by shifting alliances and oppositions that

respond to changing imperatives (Kastrissianakis 2012; Kastrissianakis 2015). As Max Weiss convincingly explains in his book *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, the negative connotations and characterisations of sectarianism – after all, no one positively calls themselves sectarian – are preventing an understanding of the processes of production and reproduction of sectarian boundaries (Weiss 2010).

While a comprehensive discussion of sectarianism is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to emphasise that ethno-sectarian categories are fluid and permeable, though they can also harden through institutionalisation and in the face of acute tensions. The confessional group, cannot be essentialised but ought to be seen as an instrument in a context that makes it a conducive vehicle for political organisation (Weiss 2010). As such, the notion of ethnocracy may sit somewhat uncomfortably in the Lebanese context where ethnicity as a category is seldom used and a multiplicity of shifting religious, sectarian, clan or political solidarities articulates a complex set of alliances and enmities. At the same time, as constructed and socially contingent as sectarian identities may be, they play a powerful role in the formation of political subjectivities and organising the social, economic and political spheres. In an urban context, such as Beirut, the ebb and flow of those relations organises the socio-spatial geography of the city, and conversely, the city redraws political relations.

National Ethnocracy: From fragile to negotiated majority

The modern iteration of Lebanon's system of political sectarianism (communalism or confessionalism) is commonly situated in the mid-19th century, when the Ottoman Empire granted the Maronite Christians in the Mount Lebanon area the *mutasarrifiya*, designating it as a semi-autonomous region which became an independent Christian state mainly under French protection. The Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate was the expression of a Libanist approach to the nascent nation-state to which, the Muslims, and particularly Beirut's and Tripoli's Sunni elite, opposed an Arabist perspective that saw the area of modern day Lebanon firmly part of the Syrian provinces¹. Under French Mandate (1920-1943) and with its support, the *mutasarrifiya* became the state of Grand Liban, 'a nation-state for the Christian Lebanese people', and a *terre d'asile* for the persecuted Christians of the Orient who had suffered violent attacks between 1840 and 1860, culminating in the massacres of 1860 in Mount Lebanon, Damascus and Aleppo (Makdisi 2000, Kassir 2010 & Ziadeh 2006).

¹ For a detailed discussion of the different Arabist views on Lebanese state formation, see Sulh 2004.

By the mid-1930s, backed by Arab and British influence, the Muslims recovered some of the political initiative which was met with the will to compromise within the growing 'pragmatist' Christian camp led by Bechara el Khoury. The old Maronite-Druze formula that had dominated this Ottoman province until then, defended by the Maronite nationalist Lebanese elite represented by Emile Eddé and the Free French, would be replaced by a Maronite-Sunni duumvirate led by an Arab-oriented, pro-British, intercommunal elite (Ziadeh 2006).

The National Pact of 1943 would cement the new arrangement, based on a double negation, in which the Christians renounced French tutelage and protection, while the Muslims renounced their struggle for a union with Syria. This oral pact sanctioned and extended the confessional allocation of political, judicial and administrative positions that was presented as temporary in the Constitution of 1926. It also gave the Presidency to the Maronites, the post of Prime Minister to the Sunnis and of Speaker of Parliament to the Shi'a and introduced the six Christians to five Muslims ratio for parliamentary seats and throughout the state administration. This ratio was based on the 1932 census – also the latest – which showed that Christians represented a slim majority within the then Grand Liban with Maronites constituting the largest Christian denomination.

This majority would not only be reversed later, Rania Maktabi (2007) argues it was already uncertain in 1932. As Maktabi and Hanna Ziadeh (2006) explain, the then Maronite leadership – with French support – sought to maintain Christian supremacy while annexing to the new state areas populated by Muslim majorities. By expanding the contours of the new state, however, they also diluted Christian claims to a hegemonic position². The conduct of the 1932 census would therefore be a complex exercise in citizenship formation, as Maktabi argues somewhat controversially:

'Neither territorial amputations nor population displacements were effected as a result of unequal ethnic demographic distribution, as seen by some Christian political leaders. The carrying out of the 1932 census and the application of citizenship policies in the aftermath of the census should, however, be seen within a perspective where certain steps were undertaken in order to preserve and buttress

² The population of the sanjak in 1911 totalled 414,800 of whom approximately 80% were Christians, with the Maronites comprising 58%. In the areas annexed to the sanjak, the Christians comprised 35% of the population after 1920, with the Maronites comprising a mere 14% (Maktabi 2007, p. 230).

Christian hegemony over the state. What were perceived as unfavourable demographic realities were sought to be controlled through citizenship policies that differentiated between desirable and undesirable members of the Lebanese state' (Maktabi 2007, p.232).

Concurring with Anderson's description of imperial ethnocracy, European powers and Christian Ottomans deployed ethno-sectarian identities to carve out the Lebanese state, as well as secure a dominant position for Christians, and particularly the Maronites, in the nascent state. In the process they also reversed the order of privilege from Sunni Muslims to Maronite Christians, and embraced missionaries as mediating agents of the state's social services (Thompson 2013, p.77)³. Furthermore, the definition of national ethnocracy as a set of prerogatives that favour the dominant *ethnos* is relevant to the Lebanese system of political sectarianism as established by the 1926 Constitution which gave Christians, and Maronites in particular, an advantage at all levels of state institutions, be they civilian or military. In fact, Rania Maktabi borrows the term from Nils A. Butenschøn who defines the notion of ethnocracy in 1993 as:

'a political regime which, in contrast to democracy, is instituted on the basis of qualified rights to citizenship and with ethnic affiliation (defined in terms of race, descent, religion, or language) as the distinguishing principle. The *raison d'être* of the ethnocracy is to secure that the most important instruments of state power are controlled by a specific ethnic collectivity' (1993, pp. 5-6 in Maktabi 2000, p. 153).

The National Pact offered what was then deemed an acceptable formula for a Christian dominated independent state, but this pact among elites would also regularly be destabilised and was the object of regular negotiation and at times the cause of violent confrontation. In fact, whereas the Constitution and the National Pact favoured Christians, and Maronites in particular, Christian hegemony was moderated by constant negotiation among the *zu'ama* - the communal political elites - that sought to maintain a public order from which they mutually benefitted. As will be discussed below, the system of consociational democracy that was taking shape hinged – and still does – on the client system that the *zu'ama* maintained and the political patronage they could distribute.

³ At the same time, Sunni opposition to the creation of an independent Lebanese state, which translated into the boycotts of the 1921 census and limited participation in the administration despite French efforts to appease them by offering Sunni elites key positions, accentuated the marginalisation of Muslims. Between 1920 and the mid-1930s, Sunni leadership vacillated between acquiescence, collaboration and resistance to the Mandate authorities and their Maronite counterparts. However, they participated fully in the 1932 census in the hope that they may constitute a majority and accede to the Presidency. For a detailed discussion of those shifting relations during the French Mandate, see (Atiyah 1973; Thompson 2013).

Post 1943 Beirut: A socio-spatial order reproducing and challenging strict ethnocratic order

In the years that followed Lebanon's independence in 1943, the economic boom fuelled by the flow of capital and skills from other Arab countries, the agricultural crisis in South Lebanon, and the laissez-faire policy of public authorities, prepared the ground for the extremely rapid expansion of Beirut's agglomeration along main arteries, swallowing up the beaches and crawling up the mountains. Beirut metamorphosed into a relatively outsized capital city that accounted for 45% of the country's population by 1975, but this growth did not bring about a reduction or dismantling of sectarian spaces that had organised the city's immediate periphery. 'On the contrary, migrants moved in along social, economic and topographic mechanisms that reproduced or reconstructed relatively homogenous confessional spaces' (Nasr 1979). As Michael Johnson explains, the psychological and societal difficulties associated with rapid urbanisation even intensified 'a sense of ethnic nationalism' and territorialisation processes along confessional lines, particularly for the more disenfranchised sections of the population: 'Shi'a migrants to Beirut in the 1960s became far more conscious of their confessional identity in response to the social and psychological pressures of urban life' (2001, p.18).

While the inter-communal elite shared an interest in maintaining public order, developing a horizontal cross-confessional consociationalism, this was not always the case among the poorer sections of the population. Since the late 19th century, the *menu peuple*, who gathered in more homogenous clusters that were animated by communally shared grievances did not always share the enthusiasm of the new mercantile elites for inter-communal relations. To the *pudeur des communautés*, ('the decency of the communities' (Beydoun 1984)) the less privileged had opposed the communal cold war (Kassir 2010, p.232). Horizontal conviviality among elites and vertical communalism organised urban and national political life into a relatively stable consociational model, despite regular challenges to its ethnocratic tenets. For Arend Lijphart (1969), the National Pact actually had established a relatively successful consociational democracy, but one that could be destabilised by internal socio-economic inequalities and external pressures, as was the case in the second half of the 1950s.

This consociationalism hinged on a client system organised around the *zu'ama*, a new type of political leadership that emerged in the mid 19th century. The *za'im* (pl. *zu'ama*) was a socially prominent patron who could grant political protection if necessary. As political relationships between the *zu'ama* became more heated, they would have recourse to the vertical support they could muster through their street bosses (*qabadayat*), whether just as a show of force, or to actually secure elected seats. Competition for communal seats of power was fierce among *za'ims*, and was at times the source of intra-communal fighting orchestrated by the *za'ims* and their *qabadayat*. While, over time, the client system became more institutionalised, via institutions of a confessional character providing health services and education, *qabadayat* were still mobilised to secure votes for national and municipal elections. In fact, this system outlasted both the Ottoman period and the French Mandate, and is still a key feature of urban life in Beirut (Johnson 1978; Johnson 1986).

In 1958, the country saw the first sustained violent confrontations since its independence, opposing, on the one hand, the pro-Western, pro Baghdad Pact President Camille Chamoun supported by armed militias (Phalangists), and, on the other hand, Nasserists and Arab nationalist movements in support of the United Arab Republic. The more destitute sections of the Sunni population in Beirut, facing mounting unemployment and rising inflation, but also the petty bourgeoisie that could not effectively reap the larger benefits of the clientelistic system in the new republic, had turned against Christian hegemony finding a voice for their grievances in Nasserist policies and Arab nationalism:

By imparting a sense of dignity to people of low social status, he [Gamal Abdel Nasser] provided a focus for a broadly based movement of the Muslim urban poor which, stimulated by political and economic grievances, played an active role in 1958. [...] the guts of the revolution were taxi drivers, young butchers, bakers and welders. In Tripoli something that approached the Paris commune was achieved: a revolutionary city controlled by itself. The same was true of the Basta quarter of Beirut (Johnson 1986, p.131).

During this period, the city centre that had once been dominated by the institutions of imperial and colonial powers started to take on the symbols of an independent republic permeated by the attempt to reconcile distinct attachments to Libanist and Arabist views of the role of Lebanon. In 1957, a bronze statue of pan-Arab leader Riad el-Solh assassinated in 1951 for having bought into communal compromise was erected on the former al Sour Square, renamed Riad el-Solh Square. In 1960, President Fuad Shehab inaugurated the

Martyrs' Statue commemorating the martyrs killed in the fight for independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1915-1916. It replaced Yussef Hoayek's limestone sculpture which depicted a Muslim and a Christian woman facing each other, their arms outstretched towards each other, gazing and mourning over an urn sitting between them, a symbolic container of the martyrs' ashes (Volk 2010, p. 55).

The new statue in bronze stood at the centre of the square, with an allegorical couple on an elevated square platform, the woman representing Liberty and a man a step behind her representing the Nation. Underneath them, two fallen men with European features struggling against an invisible enemy represent the martyrs, 'the actual struggle, and the standing figures represented the values that made their struggles worthwhile' (Volk 2010, p. 99). The victory memorial that had replaced a mournful one, was also an attempt to look forward to a heroic future as opposed to a tragic past:

'In the case of Lebanon, the allegory of liberty replaced two other female statues, which had represented balance between ethno-religious communities. By losing the local reference point, Lebanon's national symbol had become more modern and more European. The message was that a modern nation moved beyond attachments to ethno-religious differences' (Volk 2010, p. 102).

The main thrust of the period between 1950 and 1975 in Beirut was one of redefinition of urban space to represent the newly independent state, the city's 'third period of urban modernisation' as it were (Verdeil 2010). Echoing Mohammad Naciri's statement that with every social upheaval affecting rural or urban space, the State has reacted by a greater investment in spatial planning this wave of modernisation followed the 1958 clashes (1987, p. 53 in Cattedra 2002). The 1960s were thus marked by the presidencies of statist Fouad Shehab (1958-1964) and Charles Helou (1964-1970) and their challenge to the clientelistic system that dominated Lebanese politics. Fuad Chehab initiated a number of interventions on urban infrastructure, including highways and ring roads, official street names, traffic lights, public institutions in buildings of internationalist architecture and a public University, all in the name of state-building.⁴

⁴ However, a number of related projects did not materialise due to the high cost of expropriation and the start of the war in 1975. These include the Cité gouvernementale projected in Bir Hassan, or the Ghalghoul-Saifi project of urban renewal in pericentral Beirut. For a more detailed discussion see (Verdeil 2010).

The Ecochard 1964 Masterplan, would seek to organise the rapid and haphazard sprawl of the city that was accommodating waves of refugees and rural-urban migration, primarily composed of Palestinians and Shi'as from the South and the Bekaa, within what journalists and planners liked to call a 'misery belt' in dire need of modernisation. The rapid transformation of this area was, in a large sense, the indirect product of the formation of the state of Israel, and the modern state of Turkey before it. The Armenian genocide in 1915, the *Naqba* of 1948 and the *Naqsa* of 1967 pushed large numbers of Armenian and Palestinian refugees into Lebanon, and due to the cutting of economic relations with historical Palestine, pushed many Shi'a families from the Jabal Amil towards Beirut's eastern and southern suburbs. This belt of tin-roof sheds wrapped around the city from the Qarantina in the East down to the southern suburbs of Beirut was extending the concentric growth of the city beyond its municipal boundaries and with it road traffic and congestion without the infrastructure to support it.

However, Fuad Chehab's and Ecochard's plans were obstructed by Beirut's landowning elite pushing for a more flexible building code and the privatisation of public land. They agreed on highways connecting the centre with the suburbs that favoured their economic and commercial interests. The purpose of these roads was not only to facilitate the bypassing of the centre but also to cut through the urban fabric and weaken the internal cohesion of neighbourhoods with a strong confessional identity and putting them in relation with each other. Instead, they provided these neighbourhoods with stronger delimitations and sharper edges, turning the neighbourhoods inwards (Kassir 2010).

The wide boulevards that were built by the late 1970s would be the sites of regular mass demonstrations mobilised by Kamal Jumblatt's Front of National and Progressive Parties and Forces at different stages of the build up to the civil war against the Maronite-dominated sectarian order. In the poverty-stricken suburbs and the Palestinian camps that the growth of the tourist and banking sectors did not reach, mounting tensions translated into sporadic fighting until April 13 1975, when in Ain al-Remmaneh, a Maronite working-class Phalangist stronghold of Beirut, the Phalangists shot at a bus carrying Palestinians returning from a political rally. This shooting, which had followed the attempted murder of the Phalangist leader Pierre Gemayel, is generally said to signal the start of the 15 year long civil war.

Post Ta'if and Doha Agreements: Shared ethnocracy and political gridlock

By the time the Ta'if Agreement was signed to end the war in 1989, Beirut had suffered great destruction, particularly in the city centre and along the Green Line which demarcated the city into what became a majority Christian East Beirut and majority Muslim West Beirut, but also in every other part of the city, where fighting followed the different cycles of shifting alliances and enmities. By 1984, the Lebanese army had been disbanded, the PLO had been pushed out and the Israeli army had withdrawn south of the Litani River, the Syrian military occupied the Beqaa, and the international peacekeeping mission had left the country. Militias fought over streets in Beirut, rural territories, and the country's resources, fighting yesterday's ally alongside tomorrow's foe. A new brand of leadership dominated the Lebanese political landscape, with warlords supported by a myriad of foreign powers fighting their own proxy wars.

The second half of the 1980s was a period of fighting for the control of sectarian groups, pitting Hezbollah against Amal, and Lebanese forces against the Phalangists. The Communist Party, which had been aligned with the mostly Muslim Lebanese National Movement coalition and the Palestinians, was now fighting against Islamists in Tripoli and against Amal in Beirut. The overarching ideologies that had momentarily articulated the two sides that initially polarised the country had broken down to reveal the power struggles of ever smaller spheres and their hold over an ever more fragmented city⁵.

The Ta'if Agreement and the 1991 Amnesty Law did not challenge the gains made by militias, but rather would allow their leaders to enter into formal politics, legitimising and consolidating their hold over their respective communities. This agreement legitimated Syrian military presence and hegemony for a period of two years, demanded the disarmament of all militias – except Hezbollah, which was fighting against Israel's occupation of Southern Lebanon – and introduced amendments to the National Pact of 1943 with regards to the confessional distribution of public office posts and parliament seats. Ta'if formulated a collective intercommunal government that reflected a shift in the balance of power, the result of new demographic, social and regional realities. It also 'aimed to transform the political system from a hierarchical communal partnership among the major communities into a

⁵ For comprehensive analyses of the civil wars between 1975-1990, see in particular (Hanf 1994) and (Picard 2002). On the fragmentation of Lebanese sovereignty and economy, see (Hannoyer 1999; Traboulsi 2012; Harik 1994). On the premises for the breakdown of the Lebanese state, see (El-Khazen 2000).

consociational, intercommunal collective partnership' (Ziadeh 2006, p. 140). The Ta'if system shifted executive power from the Maronite president to the council of ministers and changed the ratio for parliamentary seats and positions in public administration from 6 Christians to 5 Muslims to 5:5. The agreement did not challenge the paradox 'of claiming an absolute citizen-based equality at the same time as an all-encompassing communal system of rights and privileges was rebuilt' (Ziadeh 2006, p. 145).

Instead of the hierarchy of communal rights, the President of the Republic (Maronite), the President of the Council of Ministers (Sunni) and the Speaker of the Parliament (Shi'a) formed a Troika that decided on the basis of consensus. However, that consensus was subservient to Syrian hegemony that was indefinitely extended and often consensus within the troika led to stalemate, creating a geopolitics of separate territories governed, most prominently, by the (Maronite) Lebanese Forces, headed by Elie Hobeika; the (Shi'a) Amal Movement of Nabih Berri and Hezbollah; and Walid Jumblatt's (Druze) Progressive Socialist Party⁶. But as Fawaz Traboulsi argues, the end of the war had also seen the marginalisation of a Sunni community left without a strong leadership (Traboulsi 1993), which opened a vacuum for Rafiq Hariri to fill⁷. For much of his tenure as Prime Minister between 1992-1998 and between 2000 and 2004, Hariri did not confront the post-Ta'if elites, but circumvented them, using Beirut's urban reconstruction as his main political instrument to dominate the Lebanese, and particularly the Sunni, political landscape (Gervais 2012).

As proposed by James Anderson, the post-conflict or shared ethnocracy of consociationalism succeeds in ending lethal conflict but brings about rigidities that typically perpetuate or accentuate ethno-national divisions. It is, as he writes, 'shared dysfunctional ethnocracy as the war continuing by other means'. It is a sobering approach to the indeed often mis-named post-conflict periods, where as we see in Lebanon, sectarianism has only become further entrenched and territorialised, although rather subdued under Syrian tutelage. After Hariri's assassination on 14 February 2005 and the Syrian military pull-out, those divisions came to the fore and were rearranged along pro-Syria (March 8 coalition) and anti-Syria (March 14 coalition) camps, respectively led by Hezbollah and Saad Hariri (Rafiq's son). What had been

⁶ Alongside these larger factions, the political leadership also incorporated representatives of the Alawite militia of Tripoli and a leader of the *Ahbash* (the radical Sunnis of Beirut) (Picard 2005).

⁷ The same can be said of the Christian community whose leadership was either killed during the war, in exile or imprisoned. Moreover, the 1992 electoral law divided the Mount Lebanon governorate in six electoral districts, thereby weakening the Christian vote. For more details on the place of the Maronite leadership post-Ta'if and the controversies surrounding the electoral law, see (Baroudi & Tabar 2009; Knudsen 2005; Nagle 2015).

dormant lines of division rapidly became animated, turning the city into a stage for the demonstration and exhibition of political and confessional affiliation, and the sites where they meet into spaces of sectarian and political confrontation. In Beirut, this would translate into the 'new demarcation lines' but this time between Sunnis and Shi'as. These two coalitions polarised Lebanon over the coming years, their boundaries cutting across traditional religious lines:

'No more is the classic Christian-Muslim divide relevant; nor the narrow Sunni-Maronite divide, which dominated the squabbles of the Lebanese political elite in pre-war Lebanon. The two new camps have crystallised along lines that are rather new to the history of the Lebanese conflict' (As'ad AbuKhalil in Haddad 2009).

A new urban order was now being drawn up, no longer defined by the East-West demarcation of the war, nor based on a centre-periphery hierarchy. Instead, the city had become a metropolitan region within which historical and new centralities were redrawing the urban structure, within which territorialities became bastions of competition between March 8 and March 14, pro and anti-Assad coalitions respectively. The regional context of rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and the US, on the one hand, and Iran and Syria, on the other, amplified the sectarian undertones of the political polarisation in Lebanon, and sharpened divisions between Sunnis and Shi'as in Beirut.

After 2006, the Maronites split between, on one hand, the Phalangists and the Lebanese Forces with March 14 and, on the other, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) led by former General Michel Aoun, who in early 2006 signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Hezbollah to bolster his chances of becoming President of the Republic. Reminiscent of the disagreements between nationalists and pragmatists that divided the Maronites on the eve of the Lebanese state's independence, the split between the Phalangists/Lebanese Forces and FPM is however no longer about whether Maronites should share power more equally, but with whom they stood a better chance of securing what remained of the Maronite hold on the state and the extent to which this would involve the Syrian regime.

The war between Hezbollah and Israel in July 2006 only accentuated divisions. In December 2006, the March 8 opposition demanded the resignation of the March 14 government by staging a peaceful protest under the Prime Minister's office in the old city centre that eventually turned into a 'tent city' that occupied Riad el Solh Square and the southern part of

Martyrs' Square for nineteen months. Escalating tensions between Sunni and Shi'a, as well as between Shi'a and Maronite areas of Beirut burst into armed confrontations in January 2007⁸, and peaked with the clashes of May 2008, the worst fighting since the civil war, when militias led by Hezbollah took over West Beirut and confronted a weak to non-existent resistance, from Saad Hariri's Future Movement⁹.

The instability that has characterised the post-2005 period has been also accompanied by a more pervasive marking of urban territory. Neighbourhoods became more clearly demarcated as being under the control of the different political factions, with flags, banners, posters, and symbols saturating the urban environment and marking public space. This 'territorialisation' of Beirut was not new, but the intensification of confrontations since 2005 has turned the city, and particularly West Beirut, into a site of open and constant contestation. More than the temporary signs of political animosities, the marking of territory is the most explicit emanation of a more continual process of territorialisation that has become the most dominant feature of Beirut's urban order, organising the socio-spatial structure of the city.

The 2008 Doha Accords, that suspended the escalation of violence between the opposing camps, stipulated that the next president would be a consensual one (General Michel Suleiman); and that an interim national unity cabinet would serve until the June 2009 parliamentary elections held on the basis of the 1960s electoral law, whereby smaller voting constituencies – the *Qada* – were institutionalized in electoral redistricting. These seemingly rather harmless decisions in fact reinforced the grip of sectarian leaders and the sectarian logic. While the Lebanese electoral system allows for cross-voting and, in fact, candidates often have to rely on cross-confessional support to be elected, the redistricting into smaller voting constituencies has diminished the extent to which candidates needed to reach outside their confession. In Imad Salamey's words:

'The Doha Agreement delegated significant power to sectarian elites, charging them with the task of agreeing over vital national issues. The role of the elected parliament was significantly marginalized. It turned into a superficial

⁸ A scuffle between students in the cafeteria of the Beirut Arab University escalated into an armed confrontation, leaving 4 dead and 35 injured. The university is in the Sunni neighbourhood of Tariq el-Jdideh (Bakri & Fattah 2007).

⁹ Hezbollah's show of force followed the government's decision to expel the airport's Commander of Security, accused of working under the orders of Hezbollah, and to disable Hezbollah's communication network. These decisions, the government led by the Future Movement had argued, were taken following suspicions that Hezbollah was planning the assassination of a pro-government figure who would use the airport. For more details on the May 2008 events, see (Shehadi 2008; Fregonese 2012).

rubberstamping institution dedicated to approving elite arranged agreements over almost every aspect of its political jurisdictions: drafting electoral laws, electing the president, and approving the formation of the Council of Ministers' (Salamey 2013, p. 175).

In January 2011, the then government led by Saad Hariri was brought down when the eleven March 8 and the President's four Ministers resigned as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon was preparing to indict five Hezbollah members for Rafiq Hariri's assassination. An interim government was then established with Najib Mikati nominated by March 8 at its helm. In 2013, as the conflict in Syria was in its second year, Mikati submitted his resignation in the context of intensifying tension between the pro- and anti-Assad camps and was succeeded by Tammam Salam. The 'caretaker' government led by Salam has remained in place since February 2014, amid a renewal of the parliament's mandate and the postponing of elections. In effect, the current parliament has rarely met and has enjoyed limited legitimacy, reinforcing the political role of communal leaders and "the street". Moreover, while the country had been without a president since May 2014, as this paper goes to print, General Michel Aoun was elected president by the parliament at its 46th electoral session on 31 October 2016. The President is elected with a two-thirds majority vote in the parliament. However, the two coalitions had consistently refrained from supporting each other's candidate, repeatedly postponing the President's election.

Beirut Madinati: Challenging the ethnocratic system

Regional developments and the war in Syria in particular have had a significant impact on Lebanon, which has always been porous to external influence and interventions. The already dysfunctional and weakened state has therefore been further paralysed, and this was only made more obvious by the garbage collection crisis that started in the summer of 2015. The Naameh landfill, which had been Beirut's main landfill since the mid-1990s, had been active for seventeen years instead of the initially planned six. This landfill was to be a temporary solution before a comprehensive garbage-processing plan could be devised. Instead, it came to represent the country's corrupt and fractured leadership and administration.

When in July 2015 Naameh's inhabitants demanded the landfill's closure by blocking the road to the garbage trucks once more, Beirut filled with the city's uncollected garbage causing an environmental and health crisis. The mobilisations around the garbage crisis brought rarely seen numbers of protesters to the streets, particularly youth, and spawned a

series of mobilisations demanding a solution to the crisis. The garbage crisis and the government's inability to resolve it highlighted the government's severe shortcomings and corruption, which propelled the movement towards more far-reaching demands, including the end of the sectarian system and the removal of the entire political class.

While the movements had limited success as far as the garbage issue was concerned, they brought about another response, this time at the level of municipal government. Beirut Madinati (Beirut My City) emerged in March 2016 as a political campaign led by a list of 24 independent candidates stemming from civil society, academia, marketing, architecture, medicine, the arts or the fishers' association. It had an equal number of Christians and Muslims, men and women. A rare sight in Lebanese elections, BM also put forward a 10-point programme, which included measures on public transportation and spaces, affordable housing, pollution, poverty alleviation or municipal governance. After two months of public debates, awareness raising and campaigning with very limited means, BM got around 40% of the vote in the municipal elections of May 2016 – the first elections since the parliamentary ones of 2009 –, but no seats on the municipal council because of a winner-takes-all election system. The list that won the municipal elections is a collection of candidates from the two, otherwise opposing, political coalitions, March 8 and March 14.

With national level institutions largely under the control of political parties and in continuous gridlock, the municipal and city levels are seen as key scales of government where a more technocratic governance can be exercised to address immediate needs and gain legitimacy. It is also, pragmatically speaking, a scale at which a group with limited resources can effectively dent the hold of entrenched party politics. While the response to the campaign was largely positive, even if sometimes met with cynicism, and did a lot to open room for a challenge to the client-based sectarian system, this very system showed how when faced with an existential threat, otherwise belligerent partisans closed ranks to preserve their prerogatives. As the head of the Democratic Gathering, Walid Jumblatt, allegedly said to Saad Hariri about the need to elect a president: 'go ahead and elect any president, even Aoun because the important part is to *save the system*' (Saleh 2016).

Post national or religious ethnocracy

In the case of Lebanon, transnational solidarities and political relations that challenge a self-contained, centralised idea of the state have been part of its very foundation. As we saw above, the territory of Lebanon was expanded during the French Mandate to include Muslim majority areas into the Grand Liban. At different times before and since 1943, Christians and Muslims have relied on foreign patrons to weigh in to support their political projects. Often identified as a destabilising factor, regional and international actors have been part of a complex web of relations, but here too, it is not possible to isolate sectarian identity or religion as the only defining criterion guiding local and international political activity. Even the decline of Arab Nationalism and the rise of Islamism cannot be said to describe a post-national order since both share the same disdain for national borders.

One could say that Lebanon has to some extent always been ‘post-national’, but also that Islam and Christianity have been ‘Lebanonised’, i.e. religion has been more about religious identity essentialised and instrumentalised by political sectarianism, than it has been about religion per se. Waddah Charara even speaks of sectarianism ‘as nothing less than the organising principle of Lebanese society, the “real religion” of the Lebanese in the words of late Maxime Rodinson (Farha 2016). Moreover, as Salamey and Tabar argue, Lijphart’s consociational model, has always been challenged by ‘the phenomena of “deterritorialization” and “denationalization” amid globalization and, consequently, the overwhelming interconnectedness of ethno-politics reaching out beyond the nation-state’ (Salamey 2008, pp. 239-240). In other words, Lebanon’s process of state building was always tied to a complex and changing set of regional political axes and its neighbours’ regular upheavals, while at the same time transnational religious identities never neatly guided internal political relations. Transnational sectarian solidarities are confronted and renegotiated, amplified or moderated, according to the local, national and regional power struggles.

In this regard, my position would be that what we see is not so much the return of the religious, which Anderson describes, but as Peter Sloterdijk describes it, the ‘recognition of the immunitary constitution of human beings’:

‘Something is indeed returning today – but the conventional wisdom that this is religion making its reappearance is insufficient to satisfy critical inquiries. Nor is it the return of a factor that had vanished, but rather a shift of emphasis in a

continuum that was never interrupted. The genuinely recurring element that would merit our full intellectual attention is more anthropological than ‘religious’ in its implications – it is, in a nutshell, the recognition of the immunitary constitution of human beings. After centuries of experiments with new forms of life, the realization has dawned that humans, whatever ethnic, economic and political situation might govern their lives, exist not only in ‘material conditions’, but also in symbolic immune systems and ritual shells’ (Sloterdijk 2013).

The ‘symbolic immune systems and ritual shells’ that Sloterdijk mentions are not only the political, legal or military tools that people mobilise in order to inhabit the world, but the way they constitute meaningful interiors. In his “Spheres” trilogy, Peter Sloterdijk (2011, 2014, 2016) presents what he terms “spherology”, the study of morphological and cosmological interiors that humans produce to inhabit the world. In the Lebanese context, this is not only articulated around sectarian, political or familial spheres, but around a whole array of practices and spaces that make life in the context of instability and uncertainty possible. The boundaries drawn in Beirut, both physical and metaphysical, articulate a “political habitat” within the city, building on everyday habits and practices, but also arising from the built structures of the city. This is not to say that the contours of urban worlds and territories do not change. Rather, they are constantly drawn and re-drawn, and utilize the city, its infrastructure, and architecture, the roads, the overpasses, the walls and spaces to delimit those worlds (Kastrissianakis, 2015). Urban or national divisions, enmities and alliances are not based on persistent primordial attachments, but a complex web of meaning and relations that one can inhabit. In this sense, post-national ethnocracy in Lebanon may be less about religion, and more about the constant re-articulation of habitable interiors¹⁰.

Conclusion

By bring Peter Sloterdijk’s comment to the Lebanese situation, this article seeks to underline that identities and the constructions of sects or political groups are not only contingent on a multiplicity of factors, but also that their relevance and power rests on the extent to which they are seen to secure one’s place in the country or region. Political sectarianism and ethnocracy have been deployed in the case of Lebanon at various stages in different ways, but as more recent scholarship on Lebanese sectarianism has shown, it is a modern political phenomenon as much as it is a socio-political reality that is not only perpetuated by a self-

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of Peter Sloterdijk’s immunological spheres and its relevance to the Lebanese context, see (Kastrissianakis 2015).

serving leadership, but also a population that draws meaning and security from a system reinforced by patronage and clientelism.

Ethnic or sectarian demarcations have been mobilised by the Lebanese, by imperial powers and regional actors, in various ways to serve different purposes. This is not to say that those demarcations while being constructed are not also social realities. Rather they are moved around, foregrounded or pushed to the background to include and exclude, bring closer or push further apart. In the tired context of Lebanese sectarianism, they are indeed overshadowing pressing issues such as class, gender and ecological issues, as Anderson argues. Nevertheless, the sectarian system and the political leadership that sustain it still hold sway despite growing inequalities, ecological disasters, poor infrastructure and public services. By brandishing the spectre of all-out-war made all the more immediate with developments in the region, the political class manages to still render itself relevant despite its continuous disregard towards economic sustainability, social justice, youth employment or liveable cities.

While we have seen how ethnocracy may offer a relevant framework in the Lebanese context, I would also say that the Lebanese could contribute a few points to the extension of ethnocracy and urban ethnocracy in particular. Whereas cities are said to either facilitate coexistence or heighten conflict between diverse communities, the way the consociational system is articulated in Beirut presents a more nuanced situation. As we have seen, political leaders have for the most part shared an interest in maintaining public order, developing a horizontal cross-confessional consociationalism while maintaining strong ties with their co-religionists through patronage, clientelism and sectarian patriotism. As Michael Johnson, a Marxist in search for class consciousness and working class struggles, had to concede, the more destitute layers of society were more vertically integrated with their patrons than they could ever be with a proletariat, horizontally cutting across religious denominations and client networks (Johnson 2001). This political system not only facilitates victories – however hollow – at the ballot box. It also in many ways organises conflict and coexistence in the city.

This remains the main challenge that the likes of Beirut Madinati face, for beyond the immediate gains (and heavy cost) of clientelism and patronage, this vertical relation is constantly renegotiated and redefined ‘to save the system’. An ethnocratic understanding of government could gain from a deeper engagement with what constitutes the architecture of

those vertical relations for their significance is what makes them so resilient to horizontal challenges.

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