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Killing the Consociational Goose with the Golden Eggs (1)

Lebanon's Pathway to Ungovernability and Change

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Ungovernability and Change

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“Lebanon’s consociational power-sharing never functioned smoothly but it was sustained as long as significant rents kept feeding it. Without such resources, it lapsed into a messy cage fight.”

The buzzword of ‘reform’ again captures the imagination and renews hope among numerous Lebanese longing for change. As the dust of war has barely settled, the election of the country’s new President, Joseph Aoun, has been a cause for celebration due to his reputation for integrity. Better still, the new Prime Minister, Nawaf Salam, embodies the quintessential democrat and champion of the rule of law. As commentator Nadim Shehade remarked, “miracles happen, sometimes with a lot of suspense and a unique alignment of the stars.” Yet these two saviours’ arrival resembles the Titanic getting a new captain long after it sank. With Lebanon’s financial, economic, and political meltdown entering its sixth year, the country’s system of governance has collapsed. Both Aoun and Salam may genuinely mean to pursue ‘reform’, but the single insurmountable barrier they will encounter is the country’s very political system, over which they preside. For more than three decades, and arguably dating back to Lebanon’s independence, that “consociational” system has proven itself unreformable just as it unfailingly heralded the demise of even the best intentions.

It is hardly novel to point out that there is “something rotten in the state of Lebanon.” Critics of “consociational democracy” – the non-majoritarian model for democracy thought to best serve “deeply divided societies” like that of Lebanon – have long cautioned against the “immobilist” nature of consociational power-sharing, which can become protracted and unwieldy, or simply fail to yield effective governance. Many commentators argued that consociationalism à-la-libanaise directly or indirectly undermined state institutions and their performance, exemplified by unbearable levels of corruption, poor governance, and wasteful expenditure. Seen this way, the toxic repercussions of consociational power-sharing among sectarian elites, though still recognized for keeping the country’s “segments” superficially intact, have returned to plague Lebanon while it grapples with insolvency, widespread poverty, and severe political paralysis.

Yet as dire and familiar it sounds, this assessment of the collateral damage caused by consociational power-sharing still proves to be too kind to Lebanon’s political settlement. More accurately, Lebanon’s deep crisis of governance showcases how the “allotment state” (dawlat al-muhasasa) was a necessary condition for consociational power-sharing to be sustained, and that without material resources to keep it going, consociationalism grinds to a halt. Accordingly, muhasasa and corruption did not inadvertently result from consociational power-sharing in some exogenous manner. Rather, their drain on the country’s resources constituted its bread and butter.

This report presents a reassessment of Lebanon’s consociational power-sharing system and how it became quasi-synonymous with resource distribution that virtually exhausted itself, to the point there was nothing left to share. Lebanon’s consociational power-sharing never functioned smoothly but it was sustained as long as significant rents kept feeding it. Without such resources, it lapsed into a messy cage fight wherein elites went at each other’s throats to seize the crumbs that remained or, failing this, to deny them to others, obliterating any semblance of governance in the process. In a companion piece to this report that will be released soon, the intricacies of this drama are illustrated by way of a case study of attempts to build a much-needed new electricity plant in Tripoli, displaying aggressive, complex politicking, but generating no power. While the Lebanese are left to grapple with the collapse of their livelihoods, political scientists and activists ought to

consider another “favourable” or even necessary condition for consociational power-sharing to flourish: resource abundance, and, lacking this, its unsustainability or eventual demise. Accordingly, any prospect for fundamental change is to be found not in the arrival of new and promising individual leaders but in the very overhaul of the entire system of consociational power-sharing which can only come about by the depletion of resources that kept it afloat.

Lebanon's consociationalism gone awry

In 1969, Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart famously introduced the notion of “consociational democracy”; a form of “government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy.”⁽¹⁾ In his assessment, for “deeply divided societies” power-sharing among elites was preferable to the “winner-takes-all” approach inherent to majoritarian democracy, as the latter risks segmental exclusion and, henceforth, instability or no democracy at all. This power-sharing formula was to comprise a set of methods of governance ranging from establishing a “grand coalition”, applying the principle of proportionality, honouring “segmental autonomy”, and ensuring mutual veto rights. Lijphart and his consociational disciples developed a long and ever-growing list of “favourable conditions” under which this system of governance was believed to emerge and thrive.⁽²⁾ While the classic cases of consociational democracy were small European countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, and Switzerland), it has been repeatedly observed, including by Lijphart, that Lebanon shared many of the imperatives and characteristics of consociational democracy, both under its power-sharing arrangement in line with the 1943 “National Pact” and the 1989 Ta’if Accord, a key agreement that led to an end of the country’s civil war. As the classic European cases of consociational democracy “de-consociationalised” and transformed into majoritarian democracies or adopted federal structures,⁽³⁾ Lebanon arguably became the longest serving consociational democracy in history. Not that this caused Lijphart and his acolytes much reason to celebrate, as the country’s track-record could hardly be viewed as an endorsement of consociational virtues. First of course, in the mid-1970s, there was the outbreak of Lebanon’s protracted civil war, and then came the *dawlat al-muhasasa* and corruption of the Second Republic of the 1990s and 2000s. And now, for more than five years, Lebanon has faced financial, economic, and political meltdown.

“The wide dispersal of power in the political settlement pressed elites to pursue institutional designs either to shield themselves from their rivals or to compensate for their weak popular support, but always turning state institutions and public services into bastions of privilege.”

In my 2012 monograph, I argued that Lebanon’s elaborate power-sharing mechanisms, whether formally adopted in Ta’if and in the amended 1990 Constitution or habitually pursued, created a political settlement so cumbersome that it often failed to allow for any governance at all. Either way, the result was extremely high levels of corruption.⁽⁴⁾ Virtually all public institutions fell prey to corruption and plunder as consociational power-sharing, by crippling institution-building, exposed the latter to greedy elites’ shady dealmaking. Effective veto powers held by Lebanon’s political elites undermined bureaucratic institutions as they aggressively fought over their *hisa* (share) of public resources and even trivial political differences caused persistent policy gridlock. The wide dispersal of power in the political settlement pressed elites to pursue institutional designs either to shield themselves from their rivals or to compensate for their weak popular support, but always turning state institutions and public services into bastions of privilege. While divvying up public resources and corruption were understood

¹ Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy,” *World Politics*, 21.2 (1969): 216.

² Rudy B. Andeweg, “Consociational Democracy,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3.1 (2000): table 2; Matthijs Boogaards, “The Favourable Factors For Consociational Democracy: A Review,” *European Journal of Political Research*, 33.4 3 - (1998): 475-496.

³ Lidger Helms, Marcelo Jenny, and David M. Willumsen, “Alpine Troubles: Trajectories of De-Consociationalisation in Austria and Switzerland Compared,” *Swiss Political Science Review* 25.4 (2019): 381-407; Rudy B. Andeweg, “Consociationalism in the Low Countries: Comparing the Dutch and Belgian Experience,” *Swiss Political Science Review* 25.4 (2019): 408-425; Kris Deschouwer, “From Consociation to Federation: How the Belgian Parties Won,” in: Kurt Richard Luther and Kris Deschouwer (eds), *Party Elites in Divided Societies: Political Parties in Consociational Democracy*, (Routledge: 1999), pp. 73-107.

⁴ Reinoud Leenders, *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-building in Postwar Lebanon* (Cornell University Press, 2012).

to be a consequence of consociational power-sharing, the analysis failed to view the latter as being intrinsically premised on its material underpinnings. As the resources for Lebanon's dawlat al-muhasasa have now largely dissipated and Lebanon's post-Ta'if political settlement has ground to a halt, consociational "power-sharing" has shown its real face. In essence, it constitutes feasting on public and private resources for elites' resource-sharing as if there is no tomorrow.

Consociational Power-sharing and Resource Depletion

Despite all the emphasis on the Middle East's and Lebanon's instability, the country's consociational power-sharing throughout the 1990s and at least part of the 2000s proved remarkably resilient. None of Lijphart's "favourable conditions" can explain this. Especially from the 1990s onward, Lebanon never scored well on them, whether it was the absence of a "majority segment" (Muslims now comprise such a majority), sectarian "segments" being of equal size (in fact, they do diverge significantly), a "small number of segments" (Lebanon recognizes 18 sects), "socioeconomic equality" (the top 1 and 10 percent of the adult population received almost 25 and 55 percent of national income, respectively),⁵ "geographical concentration of segments" (despite wartime ethnic cleansing, Greater Beirut alone houses nearly half of the Lebanese population in all its sectarian denominations)⁶, a "tradition of elite accommodation" (neither the civil war or post-Ta'if bickering exactly meet this requirement), or "overarching loyalties" (in fact, and notwithstanding instances of national unity and a shared identity at a banal or apolitical level, Lebanon has been and still is a "house of many mansions").⁷ The existence of an "external threat", another of Lijphart's favourable conditions, rather than closing elite ranks has been a constant source of contention dividing them,⁸ especially after 2000 when Israel withdrew from the south and removed much of the rationale for national resistance. Lebanese elites' responses to the Syrian war could not be more divided. That leaves Lijphart's favourable condition of a "small population"; hardly a sufficient basis on which to base an entire explanation for Lebanon's consociational resilience.

In contrast, the availability of resources can explain why consociational power-sharing proved to be so durable if its true nature as a resource distribution mechanism is fully acknowledged. Post-Ta'if Lebanon feasted on Gulf petrodollars, facilitated by the political ascendancy of its "contractor bourgeoisie."⁹ The latter built its fortunes thanks to its embrace of the ruling elites of the Arab Gulf countries. One of its biggest exponents, the late and former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, found a way to make it seem that the national cake was big enough to allow for perpetual resource sharing among elites, as the latter benefitted via their ownership or control of private banks from debt policies based on issuing high-yield treasury bills. The Central Bank was perceived to enjoy just enough autonomy to create a modicum of market trust, not least because it received a stamp of approval from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, international credit rating organisations, and Lebanon's private banks. For years, significant remittances sent by the Lebanese Diaspora, mostly residing in the Gulf, smothered any criticisms suggesting that Lebanon's fiscal policies were unsustainable.

In Lebanon's consociational universe, elite power-sharing and resource-sharing have been quasi-synonymous. Power provided access to resources, and resources yielded power, constantly sustaining Lebanon's

⁵ Lydia Assouad, "Rethinking the Lebanese Economic Miracle: The Extreme Concentration of Income and Wealth in Lebanon, 2005–2014," *Journal of Development Economics*, 161 (2022): 1–20.

⁶ More generally, demographic and spatial sectarian rifts generally run within cities and border areas. Other regions have no single sectarian majority: Mount Lebanon, North Lebanon and the Western Biqa'.

⁷ Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, (University of California Press, 1990).

⁸ On this point see: Elisabeta-Cristina Dinu, "Consociationalism in Lebanon after the Cedar Revolution: External Threats, Political Instability, and Macrosecuritizations," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 28.3 (2022): 290–312.

⁹ Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction*, (Oxford University Press, 2016); Hannes Baumann, "The Causes, Nature, and Effect of the Current Crisis of Lebanese Capitalism," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 25.1 (2019): 61–77.

political settlement and benefitting elites. As long as sufficient resources came in to keep the system afloat, few elites were bothered that the resultant concentration of wealth and power in their hands robbed Lebanon's consociational power-sharing system of the few democratic features it once may have had. In 2017, two years before state security forces and thugs associated with the elite's political parties clamped down on the "October Revolution", Lebanon had already fallen considerably on the Arab Democracy Index due to declining government accountability, the executive's hindrance of elected bodies and parliamentary activity, and the suppression of protests.⁽¹⁰⁾

Looking back at a decade wherein Lebanon's elites busily helped themselves to the country's resources, Lebanese economist Albert Dagher (already) in 2002 aptly characterised Lebanon as a "distributive state" sustained by external rents, wherein effective policymaking is surpassed by a game of fromagisme (the French equivalent to muhasasa) that impels decision-makers "to be content with simply spending public resources without paying attention to their origins."⁽¹¹⁾ In Dagher's reading, Lebanon resembled the Arab oil-producing "rentier-state" without having the steady oil revenues to afford it. At the time, I welcomed Dagher's analysis but objected to the economic reductionism implied in viewing Lebanese governance merely in terms of its economic or financial fundamentals, which appeared to ignore the political and institutional underpinnings of Lebanon's allotment state. Yet, when power-sharing and resource-sharing are viewed as interchangeable, or as integral parts of the same thing, the distinction becomes less clear and the focus on rent-seeking in facilitating and sustaining consociational power-sharing more pertinent. Neither was my objection necessarily relevant that in Lebanon, unlike the Gulf rentier-states, resources did not predominantly accrue to the state. All the same, Lebanese elites used the state and its prerogatives to capture private wealth. They expropriated it (for example in the case of Solidere), used public assets for private gain (like by turning them into lucrative beach resorts or quarries), manipulated private markets and drove up prices (such as for medicines and hospitalization), and denied the Lebanese public goods and services so elites could charge them for private service delivery (like electricity). While perhaps not the main recipient of rents, the state remained indispensable to capturing them.

"As a distributive quasi-rentier state without natural resources, the unfettered supply of rents became Lebanon's Achilles' heel."

As a distributive quasi-rentier state without natural resources, the unfettered supply of rents became Lebanon's Achilles' heel. The muhasasa that facilitated elites' rent-seeking did not enlarge "the cake" of the national economy; it merely divided it up. In fact, rent seeking made the cake shrink as corruption and poor governance resulting from muhasasa incurred high opportunity costs that were offloaded onto ordinary Lebanese and crippled the economy's productive sectors. For instance, the perpetual failure to provide the country with public and affordable electricity may have generated handsome profits for private electricity providers and fuel importers – with their estimated market size of \$3 billion annually⁽¹²⁾ – but it drained the Lebanese economy. Conservative estimates in 2009 put the total annual costs to the Lebanese economy from deficiencies in electricity supply at up to \$1.5 billion, just as it was found to have cost industry nearly \$400 million in lost revenues.⁽¹³⁾ As the unholy trinity of power-sharing, muhasasa, and unfettered rent-seeking caused a decline in resources, Lebanon's political elites were killing the consociational goose with the golden eggs. By the late 1990s, when Lebanon's economy started its long and painful process of contraction, GDP growth became negative and only marginally improved until going into free fall in

¹⁰ Arab Reform Initiative, Arab Democracy Index, June 2017,

https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/storage.arab-reform.net/ari/2017/06/10180116/arab_reform_initiative_20170615_Arab_Democracy_Index_5_summary_english.pdf

¹¹ Albert Dagher, "L'administration libanaise après 1990." Contribution to the conference "Le Modèle de l'Etat développemental et les défis pour le Liban," 15-16 February 2002.

¹² Human Rights Watch, "Cut Off From Life Itself" Lebanon's Failure on the Right to Electricity," 9 March 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/03/09/cut-life-itself/lebanons-failure-right-electricity>

¹³ Raymond Ghajar and Hassan Hamdan, "Evaluation of the Energy Policy for Lebanon," Energy Market, 8th International Conference, 25-27 May 2011, <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/5953095>

2017.⁽¹⁴⁾ Meanwhile, external rents dwindled to the extent they no longer compensated for the slump in the Lebanese national economy. Thus, while still constituting 26 percent of GDP in 2004, remittances from abroad declined steadily until reaching a mere 13 percent in 2018.⁽¹⁵⁾ Foreign Direct Investment, mostly from the Gulf, took a nosedive, from 15 percent of GDP in 2009 to 4 percent in 2019.⁽¹⁶⁾

This all left consociational power-sharing with fewer and fewer resources to keep it going. While overall economic contraction reduced the opportunity for elites' rent-seeking, the country's public finances show this even more dramatically. State capital expenditures, or investments to acquire or upgrade fixed assets, lend themselves best to muhasasa and rent-seeking drawing on public resources. As recent research by the Policy Initiative shows, 60 percent of spending on such contracts by the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) between 2008 and 2017 went to only 10 companies, most with intimate links to political elites.⁽¹⁷⁾ However, as debt servicing, public sector salaries,⁽¹⁸⁾ and transfers to Electricité du Liban (EDL) began to swallow up much of the national budget during the 2000s and 2010s, less than 5 percent of total expenditure remained for capital investments.⁽¹⁹⁾ This meagre ratio dropped to 3 percent in 2020.⁽²⁰⁾ Consociational power-sharing was exhausting the resources on which it had thrived in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Blind spots to political economy

Reflecting on his model, Lijphart admitted that consociational democracy is "an expensive type of government" as it "inevitably [involves] a certain amount of inefficiency, slowness, and lack of decisiveness."⁽²¹⁾ He considered these side-effects deplorable but a price worth paying for the stability and democracy offered by consociationalism. He did not foresee, and never acknowledged, how consociational power-sharing, when sustained and taken to its extremes, could be reduced to relentless divvying up of resources until nothing is left to share; no power, no resources, and no price worth paying. All Lijphart was concerned about were the "deep divisions" or "cleavages" in countries assumed to be unfit for majoritarian democracy; he and his acolytes assumed that the prime mortal danger came from primordial identities set in stone. Consociational theory failed to pay attention to the political economy of power-sharing, conveniently separating politics from economics.⁽²²⁾ Lijphart shared this paradigmatic blind spot to the innate connection between politics and economics with American political scientists of the 1960s, including Gabriel Almond, whom he tried to persuade of his argument that democracy was possible, and indeed sometimes necessary, without majoritarianism.

While consociational theorists mostly ignore economics, neoliberal economists are largely blind to politics. The World Bank in July 2022 published a report wherein it, in unprecedented harsh terms, held Lebanon's political class responsible for the country's financial and economic meltdown.⁽²³⁾ Yet it failed to demonstrate which political system or sustained mechanisms of governance prompted and allowed elites to plunder the country's resources. All the World Bank offered in this respect was elites' personal greed and the lack of political will to reform the economy causing the country's "deliberate depression". It this way expressed a mere moral denunciation – as opposed to presenting an analysis – of political elites' behaviour. At the same time the bank ignored its own role in having reinforced these same elites for decades.

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¹⁴ World Bank GDP growth data for Lebanon, <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

¹⁵ World Bank personal remittances data for Lebanon, *Ibid*.

¹⁶ World Bank FDI data for Lebanon, *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*; Mounir Mahmalat, Sami Atallah, and Wassim Maktabi, "Resource Allocation in Power-sharing Arrangements—Evidence from Lebanon," *Third World Quarterly*, (2022): 1-20.

¹⁸ Public sector appointments and -salaries also follow the logic of muhasasa. Yet next to serving clientelist practices, their main benefits to political elites accrue mainly indirectly to them. Key dependents in high public office facilitate state contracting and -tendering, or pave the way for state (in-)action when required. Bassel F. Salloukh, "Taif and the Lebanese state: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 25.1 (2019): 43-60.

¹⁹ IMF Article IV Consultation Staff Reports (2006, 2009, 2019), <https://www.imf.org/en/countries/lbn?selectedfilters=Article%20IV%20Staff%20Reports#whatsnew>

²⁰ Sami Atallah, Ishac Diwan, Jamal I. Haidar and Wassim Maktabi, "Public Resource Allocation in Lebanon: How Uncompetitive is CDR's Procurement Process?," 23 July 2020, <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/en/articles/details/2454/public-resource-allocation-in-lebanon-how-uncompetitive-is-cdr-s-procurement-process>

²¹ Arend Lijphart, "Cultural Diversity and Theories of Political Integration," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique*, 4.1 (1971): 14.

²² On this point see: Ronald A. Kieve, "Pillars of Sand: A Marxist Critique of Consociational Democracy in the Netherlands," *Comparative Politics*, 13.3 (1981): 313-337.

²³ World Bank Group, Lebanon Public Finance Review: Ponzi Finance?, (The World Bank, 2022).

<https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099105008022213843/p1733450f741540870a9040d2b545b62921>

“Consociational power-sharing inherently and systematically preyed on resources, both public and private, to the extent that power- and resource-sharing became quasi-synonymous.”

This omission of a political economy of consociational power-sharing is not just of academic relevance. Where the World Bank identifies numerous economic reform measures, consociational power-sharing simply does not and cannot generate the governance required for the reforms it deems so necessary.

The economic costs of and financial drain posed by Lebanon's consociationalism are not just an unfortunate collateral of consociational power-sharing or something to be understood or addressed exogenously from it.⁽²⁴⁾ Consociational power-sharing inherently and systematically preyed on resources, both public and private, to the extent that power- and resource-sharing became quasi-synonymous. It triggered a race to the bottom as it “ate the cake” until only crumbs were left, prompting elites to capture resources even more aggressively and/or deny them to others. This exacerbated conflict among and within the country's supposedly main sectarian cleavages, locking in these conflicts as they undermined state institutions and governance, and sabotaging any attempt to spur economic recovery.

A way out of the consociational hole?

Asking Lebanon's elites to stop their relentless pursuit of resource capture through consociational power-sharing is like asking them to orchestrate their own undoing. This is why they keep presenting Lebanon's consociationalism as a provisional and transitional system of governance that, despite certain flaws, deserves to be kept in place and even celebrated. The preamble of the Lebanese Constitution, amended in 1990, famously stipulates that “[t]he abolition of political confessionality shall be a basic national goal and shall be achieved according to a staged plan.”⁽²⁵⁾ Yet, more than three decades after the Ta'if Accord, which informed the consociational rules laid down in the constitution, Lebanese political elites gathered for a Saudi-sponsored conference at the UNESCO Palace in Beirut to renew their commitment to Ta'if. After all, as caretaker Prime Minister Najib Miqati noted at the time, the Ta'if Accord “is still best suited for Lebanon.”⁽²⁶⁾ Little or no mention was made of the financial and economic crisis outside the building, ranked by the World Bank as one of the most severe globally since the mid-1800s. Nor could Lebanon's renewed political gridlock and the failure for more than two years to elect a new president and form a new government, spoil the celebrations.

Despite their impressive personal credentials, President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam remain stuck in the consociational trap that the Ta'if Accord poses for even the most genuine reformers. At his inauguration Aoun pledged that “a new phase in Lebanon's history” would begin. Yet at the same time he promised to “preserve the National Pact and [the Ta'if] National Accord Document.”⁽²⁷⁾ Salam likewise stressed his resolve for substantive change but also declared he would “endeavour to form a [new] government in accordance with constitutional stipulations and the Ta'if Accord.”⁽²⁸⁾ Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri was quick to remind everyone what that means in practice as he immediately presented his demand that the position of Minister of Finance ought to be a Shiite, consistent with that formula even before the new government is formed.

As resources to keep it going have shrunk drastically, Lebanon's consociational power- and resource-sharing formula has entered a crisis wherein the old is dying and the new cannot be born. As Antonio Gramsci, who coined this

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²⁴ Abel Polese (ed), *Informality, Labour Mobility and Precariousness*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022): 277-300.”

²⁵ The Lebanese Constitution, Preamble (H), <https://www.presidency.gov.lb/English/LebaneseSystem/Documents/Lebanese%20Constitution.pdf>

²⁶ Asharq Al-Awsat, 6 November 2022, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3972021/lebanese-officials-renew-commitment-taif-accord-33rd-anniversary-its-signing>

²⁷ Cited in: BBC Arabic, 9 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/c0474yx6n41o>

²⁸ Cited in L'Orient - Le Jour, 24 January 2025, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1444966/ministere-des-finances-ce-quen-disent-taef-et-la-constitution.html>

“As resources to keep it going have shrunk drastically, Lebanon’s consociational power- and resource-sharing formula has entered a crisis wherein the old is dying and the new cannot be born.”

much-cited phrase, warned: “In this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” Indeed, Lebanon is proving assessments of consociational institutions being “sticky” right, as “[t]he wish for a possibility away from them has often been expressed, but no one has yet specified the location of the exit.”⁽²⁹⁾ Pending someone finding this exit, consociational power-sharing will grind to a halt as resources dwindle further and ordinary Lebanese suffer from the morbid symptoms that appeared. They continue to be denied access to their own bank savings, are thrown into poverty, and – if they can – opt for migration. It is not that there are no alternatives for this “zombie power-sharing”.⁽³⁰⁾ In their remarkable act of collective action and mobilization, thousands of young Lebanese who participated in the 2019 “October Revolution” have imagined and enacted plenty such alternatives or “real utopias”,⁽³¹⁾ perhaps imperfectly, naively, not radically enough, or lacking coherence – but still more promisingly than the old broken record on consociational imperatives and virtues. The 2022 elections resulted in a quarter of members of Parliament considering themselves independents. They defeated candidates backed by established political parties and blocs. Thirteen of the new independent MPs have firm roots in the October Revolution and tried hard to use their seats in Parliament to promote reforms, largely in vain.⁽³²⁾ Lebanese academics, thinktanks, and activists have developed numerous blueprints to reform or overhaul their country’s power-sharing system, sometimes explicitly engaging with and questioning consociational doctrine.⁽³³⁾

When consociational power- and resource-sharing are to be viewed as quasi-synonymous, opportunities for alternative forms of governance will ultimately need to come from resource depletion. As argued earlier, Lebanon fails to meet nearly all of Lijphart’s “favourable conditions”. Yet consociational power-sharing proved resilient if resources were available to keep it going. Lebanon has gone a long way toward the near-total depletion and destruction of such resources, first causing power-sharing to turn into a cage fight, and then – with Lebanon defaulting on its international debt in March 2020 – to turn it into a farce of squabbling political elites incapable of agreeing on and carrying out a comprehensive economic reform plan, and with little power or resources to share. Resource depletion caused intra-elite competition and backstabbing to turn inwards as members of the same sect and sometimes the same political alliance turned on one another, weakening all. From this perspective, the prospect for Lebanon turning its back to consociational power-sharing seems brighter than that of Iraq which, despite its own consociational problems, can draw on large oil revenues to keep it afloat.⁽³⁴⁾ One reason why in Lebanon the old did not yet die may be found in the country’s extraordinary ability to keep attracting handsome if insecure flows of foreign income: through remittances,⁽³⁵⁾ foreign aid,⁽³⁶⁾ and earnings from tourism.⁽³⁷⁾ Illicit income, derived from Lebanon’s significant role in the Captagon trade from Syria, presented and may still present another buffer, at least to some and at the cost of further criminalising Lebanon’s economy and,

²⁹ Donald L. Horowitz, “Ethnic Power Sharing: Three Big Problems,” *Journal of Democracy*, 25:2 (2014): 12.

³⁰ John Nagle, “Consociationalism is Dead! Long Live Zombie Power-Sharing!,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 20.2. (2020): 137-144.

³¹ Mona Harb, “How Urban Space Shapes Collective Action: The Lebanese Uprising of 2019,” in: Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed (eds), *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019, Voices from the Revolution*, (London, I.B. Tauris: 2023), pp. 110, 115.

³² Nadim El Kak, “Entering the Lion’s Den: Lebanon’s ‘Change MPs’ in Parliament,” *The Policy Initiative*, 1 March 2024, <https://www.thepolicyinitiative.org/article/details/361/entering-the-lion-s-den--lebanon-s-“change-mps”-in-parliament>

³³ See for example: Bassel F. Salloukh and Renko A. Verheij, “Transforming Power Sharing: From Corporate to Hybrid Consociation in Postwar Lebanon,” *Middle East Law and Governance*, 9:2 (2017): 147-173; Imad Salamey, “Failing Consociationalism in Lebanon and Integrative options,” *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 14.2 (2009): 83-105; Saleh El Machnouk, “Electoral System Reform in Lebanon: Dilemmas of a Consociational State,” *Ethnopolitics*, 17.1. (2018): 1-20.

³⁴ Toby Dodge, “Iraq’s Informal Consociationalism and Its Problems,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 20.2 (2020): 145-152.

³⁵ Remittances in 2022 amounted to nearly 32 percent of GDP in 2022; at US\$ 6.8 billion a nominal 20 percent increase between 2021 and 2022. *Lebanon Economic Monitor*, The World Bank, Spring 2023, 36 - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/lebanon-economic-monitor-spring-2023-the-normalization-of-crisis-is-no-road-for-stabilization> Real amounts are probably much higher as many Lebanese abroad are avoiding banks and informally bring in cash to help out their relatives.

³⁶ Foreign aid continued to increase since 2013 and in 2020 stood at US\$ 1.21 billion. World Bank data on Official Development Assistance, <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

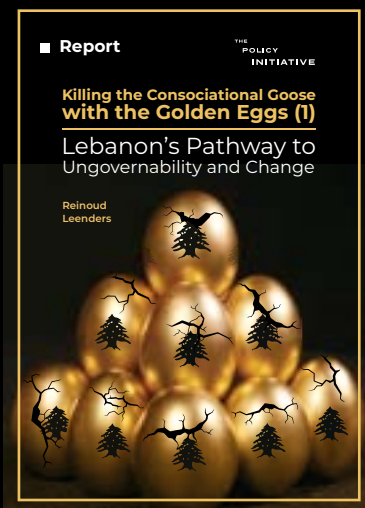
³⁷ Tourist arrivals in 2022 increased by 57 percent on top of a 140 percent increase in 2021. *Lebanon Economic Monitor*, The World Bank, Spring 2023. Next to a sharp decline in imports, these earnings combined help explain that the country’s current account deficit in 2023 narrowed significantly. However, Israeli military action against Lebanon since October 2023 caused Lebanon to lose an estimated US\$ 1 billion of income from tourism. The World Bank, “Lebanon Interim Damage and Loss Assessment,” November 2024, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/0991122412085259/pdf/P5063801c62fbc0c21beff1d0a436d07e02.pdf>

as likely, the country's political elites.^[38] The latter, as Mounir Mahmalat put it succinctly, settled on a "grand waiting game",^[39] drawing on these resources and banking on anticipated future proceeds, from gas exploration or, less distantly, from the \$1 billion aid package extended by the European Union in May to keep Syrian migrants in Lebanon from reaching Europe or from additional funds that the EU may offer for reconstruction after Israel's onslaught. While all these resources provide or will provide some instant relief primarily to the privileged few, they are also likely to keep the old from dying, for now.

From the same author, to be released soon: Killing the Consociational Goose with the Golden Eggs (2): Losing Power in Deir Aamar

³⁸ "The Hidden World of Captagon in Lebanon," L'Orient Today, Special Portfolio, 17 November 2022, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/portfolio/877-hidden-world-of-captagon-in-lebanon>

³⁹ Mounir Mahmalat, "The Grand Waiting Game: Why Lebanon's Elites Postpone Compromise," Economic Research Forum, 14 February 2023, <https://theforum.erf.org/2023/02/14/the-grand-waiting-game-why-lebanons-elites-postpone-compromise/>



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