AN (IN)ESCAPABLE FATE? How Lebanon’s Sectarian Power-Sharing System entrenches Recurring Dilemmas that undermine Reform and Citizen Well-Being

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 1.

### INTRODUCTION

1.1. Outline                                                               | 6    |
1.2. Context and historical background                                    | 8    |
1.3. Methodology and research design                                      | 9    |
   1.3.1. Research method                                                 | 14   |
   1.3.2. Research design                                                | 14   |
   1.3.3. Limitations of chosen research design                           | 16   |
   1.3.4. Positionality                                                  | 19   |

## CHAPTER 2.

### APPLYING THEORY AND LITERATURE

2.1. Theoretical literature Review: Power-sharing theory and the consociational-integrative debate | 23   |
   2.1.1. Consociational democracy theory                                 | 24   |
   2.1.2. The integrative approach                                       | 27   |
   2.1.3. Power-sharing: The central limitations of the current theoretical debate | 28   |
2.2. Theoretical framework: The appropriation of power-sharing in the Lebanese case | 30   |
   2.2.1. Conceptualizing political sectarianism                         | 31   |

## CHAPTER 3.

### ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: RECURRING DILEMMAS ENTRANCED IN LEBANON’S POWER-SHARING SYSTEM

3.1. Dilemma One: An Immobile system? Lebanon’s tapestry of political deadlock | 38   |
3.2. Dilemma Two: An invincible shield? Lebanese power-sharing and its institutionalization of impunity | 41   |
3.3. Dilemma Three: An exclusionary system: An elite-led system divorced from grassroots demands | 46   |

## CHAPTER 4.

### THE TRAGIC TALE OF CONVERGENCE: THE MANIFESTATION OF LEBANON’S RECURRING DILEMMAS IN THE BEIRUT BLAST

4.1. The Beirut blast: A tragedy rooted in negligence and consociational failure | 57   |
4.2. The cost of impunity in the aftermath of the Beirut blast             | 58   |
4.3. Mission impossible? The battle for reform after the Beirut blast      | 60   |
4.4. The future of Lebanon: Lessons from the Beirut blast                 | 63   |
CHAPTER 5.

ASSESSING AND HUMANIZING THE IMPACTS: HOW LEBANON’S RECURRING DILEMMAS UNDERMINE CITIZEN WELL-BEING

5.1. A country in free-fall: Lebanon’s compounding crises ................................................................. 66
5.2. Failing public services .................................................................................................................... 66
5.3. ‘Humanizing’ the impacts: Personal accounts by Lebanese citizens ............................................. 71
5.4. ‘De-sectarianizing’ Lebanon: An alternative for sectarian power-sharing? ............................... 75

CONCLUSION.

LEBANON’S MOMENT OF TRUTH........................................................................................................ 79

6.1. Summary of key findings ................................................................................................................ 79
6.2. Finding opportunity in tragedy: Policy lessons from the Beirut blast ......................................... 82
6.3. Conclusions and further avenues for research .............................................................................. 83

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

B.1. Books and Journals ...................................................................................................................... 86
B.2. Online articles ............................................................................................................................... 88
B.3. Reports ......................................................................................................................................... 94
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ABSTRACT

The central focus of this study is to explore and analyze how Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system entrenches recurring dilemmas that perpetually deter meaningful reform and undermine citizen well-being. In doing so, this study develops a theoretical framework through which to understand the appropriation of power-sharing in the Lebanese case, including how its post-war power-sharing system deviates from the central theoretical approaches of power-sharing theory. In particular, this study attracts attention to the important role political sectarianism has played in shaping Lebanon’s post-war political system. Based on this analysis, it highlights three dilemmas that have recurred in Lebanon’s post-war political trajectory: its proneness to political deadlock, its institutionalization of impunity, as well as its veritable disconnect from grassroots demands. While the entirety of Lebanon’s modern history could serve as a backdrop for exploring these, this study focuses on Lebanon’s post-war era (1990 onward), particularly on how deeper institutionalization of its politics of sectarianism through the 1989 Ta’if Agreement has entrenched recurring dilemmas that perpetually undermine both meaningful reform and citizen well-being. Specifically, this thesis focuses on how these dilemmas have manifested in a tragedy that has and will continue to shape the country for decades to come, namely the 2020 Beirut port explosion.

This study’s analysis brings into sharp focus the limitations of sectarian power-sharing. It suggests that, as long as Lebanon’s current sectarian power-sharing system remains in place, the system’s core dilemmas will continue to manifest and backfire on meaningful reform, as well as significantly undermine citizen well-being. A move towards transformative change in Lebanon will thus only be possible if and when the power-sharing system is dismantled and replaced, through grassroots movements, by a system where democracy, justice and accountability dominate.
CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

On 4 August 2020, a massive explosion tore through the port of Beirut, leaving more than 200 people dead, 6,000 injured and a quarter of a million homeless (Bazzi 2021). For a brief moment, it seemed that the disaster – now labeled the third worst non-nuclear explosion in history (Amos and Rincon 2020) – would force a moment of reckoning in the country. Yet, over a year later, the country is even worse off than it was on 4 August 2020. Today, Lebanon is in free-fall, propelled by a series of cascading crises that have fueled debates about whether the country is on the brink of becoming a failed state (Robinson 2020).

The small Mediterranean country is suffering an economic crisis that the World Bank said could rank among the world’s three worst since the mid-1800s (World Bank Group 2021). In just under two years, the Lebanese pound has lost more than 90% of its value (Ibid). The currency collapse, along with triple-digit inflation, has led to soaring food prices and shortages of imported goods, with prices for fuel and some food items up by more than 600% since 2019 (Abouzeid 2021). The crippling economic crisis has been further exacerbated by the “twin shocks” (Bourhrous 2021: 3) of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion. COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns have led to increased unemployment and significant losses of income for many Lebanese households (Ibid). Worse yet, the Beirut port explosion caused immense damage to public infrastructure, dealing a further blow to the country’s already crippling economy (Ibid).

The humanitarian impacts of the crisis have been equally dire: More than 70% of the population of a once middle-income country now lives in poverty (Abouzeid 2021). The UN estimates that 75% of Lebanese families are struggling to feed themselves, with 1.2 million requiring immediate food assistance (UNICEF 2021). Essential services including electricity, fuel and water are failing, with frequent power outages that last up to 23 hours a day. Currently, more than 4 million people, including one million refugees, are at immediate risk
of losing access to safe water (Hope 2021). The health sector is also collapsing, plagued by chronic shortages of medicine and equipment that have made the majority of the Lebanese population – rich and poor - reliant on care packages from abroad (Crisis Group 2021). The minimum monthly wage, once $450, is now about $34 (Abouzeid 2021).

While Lebanon’s concurrent crises have brought the country to the verge of state failure, its ruling establishment has shown no signs of implementing overdue reforms, including ensuring accountability for the tragic port explosion. To the contrary, they have made it painstakingly clear that they prefer to stay the course toward total collapse rather than carry out reforms that could undermine their grip on power (Crisis Group 2021). Indeed, the World Bank Group (2021) has described Lebanon’s current crisis as a ‘deliberate depression’, borne of government inaction rooted in the country’s political system. Tellingly, even in light of recurring calls by Lebanese citizens – and the international community – for change and reform, Lebanon’s government has yet to declare any concrete plan to address the country’s escalating collapse.

Lebanon’s multifaceted crises – combined with the inability or, rather, the unwillingness of its leaders to confront them – has fueled speculation about whether Lebanon is on the brink of becoming a failed state (Robinson 2020). Yet, Lebanon’s collapse has also raised the question of whether its entrenched consociational power-sharing formula – considered to be at the root of the country’s social, economic and political malaise (Arnold 2019) - is inescapable. As Mohamad Bazzi (2020) writes: “Though the [Beirut] blast may not, technically, have been deliberate, its deeper causes have everything to do with Lebanon’s history of conflict, particularly its dysfunctional clientelist political system.” In other words, Lebanon’s multifaceted crises were largely avoidable: they are the result of decades of government mismanagement and corruption, enabled and perpetuated by the country’s very own power-sharing system.

It is for all these reasons, and more, that an analysis of Lebanon’s power-sharing system - particularly the roots of its resistance to political change and meaningful reform - is so necessary. This thesis intends to show how Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system entrenches recurring dilemmas that perpetually act as ‘deterrents’ to political change and
meaningful reform, and how the manifestation of these dilemmas has worked to undermine citizen well-being. The three dilemmas uncovered in this study include: the proneness of its power-sharing formula to political deadlock, its institutionalization of impunity, as well as its veritable disconnect from grassroots demands.

While the entirety of Lebanon’s modern history could serve as a backdrop for exploring these, this study focuses on Lebanon’s post-war era (1990 onward), particularly on how deeper institutionalization of its politics of sectarianism through the 1989 Ta’if Agreement has perpetuated recurring dilemmas that systematically undermine meaningful reform and citizen well-being. Specifically, this thesis focuses on how these dilemmas have manifested in a tragedy that has and will continue to shape the country for decades to come, namely the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Nevertheless, an analysis of the lead-up to, and particularly aftermath, of the disaster reveals that the manifestation of these dilemmas in the Beirut blast did not occur in a vacuum: these dilemmas have perpetually manifested throughout Lebanon’s post-war political trajectory, particularly in crisis situations.

It is against this backdrop that this thesis seeks to explore and analyze the following research question: How does Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system entrench recurring dilemmas that perpetually undermine reform and citizen well-being? In order to effectively answer this question, this study also seeks to analyze the following sub-questions:

- How have Lebanon’s recurring dilemmas manifested in the country’s post-war political trajectory, including in the lead-up to, and aftermath of, the Beirut blast?
- How has the manifestation of Lebanon’s recurring dilemmas undermined reform and citizen well-being?

1.1. OUTLINE

Having outlined my research focus, I will clarify the structure this thesis will follow. Given that the focus of this study is an analysis of the recurring dilemmas entrenched in Lebanon’s power-sharing system, the following section of this chapter briefly explores the history of Lebanese power-sharing, with a view to understanding its evolution and particularly the institutional features that shape the country’s current post-war power-sharing system.
Thereafter, this chapter concludes with a reflection on the research design and methods that will be applied to effectively answer the outlined research questions.

Chapter 2 explores and analyzes - on the basis of an extensive review of secondary theoretical, empirical and grey literature - power-sharing theory, particularly its two central theoretical approaches: the consociational democracy model and the integrative approach. Based on this literature review, the theoretical framework that will inform this study’s empirical analysis is developed. The theoretical framework explores the ways in which power-sharing has been appropriated in the Lebanese case by analyzing the important role political sectarianism has played in shaping Lebanon’s post-war political system.

Building on the literature review and theoretical framework, Chapter 3 develops the analytical framework upon which this studies’ analysis is built, namely the notion of ‘recurring dilemmas’ entrenched in Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system. The Chapter identifies three main dilemmas - entrenched in Lebanon’s sectarian political system - and analyzes the different ways in which these have manifested in Lebanon’s post-war political trajectory to the detriment of political change and meaningful reform. Thereafter, Chapter 4 - “The tragic tale of convergence” - traces the ways in which Lebanon’s recurring dilemmas manifested in the lead-up to, and particularly aftermath of, the Beirut port explosion. To conclude, Chapter 5 analyzes, on the basis of personal accounts by Lebanese citizens, the ways in which the manifestation of Lebanon’s recurring dilemmas has undermined citizen well-being, focusing particularly on failing public service delivery.

1.2. CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Given that this thesis constitutes an in-depth study and analysis of Lebanon’s power-sharing system, an understanding of the history and evolution of power-sharing in the country is essential. Constitutional power-sharing in Lebanon can be traced all the way back to Ottoman rule and the formation of the Lebanese Republic by the French in 1926. Power-sharing was introduced on the basis that, in Lebanon, “membership of, and loyalty to, an ethno-sectarian group is a strong determinant of political identity that needs to be politically and legally reconciled with, and integrated into, the membership of the state” (Bourhous,
Given that Lebanon is made up of 18 officially recognized religious groups, power-sharing was established to ensure that “a delicate balance of power between the different sectarian groups that make up Lebanese society” (Geha 2019: 5) is preserved. The first attempt to establish such a balance of power was undertaken during Ottoman rule. Communal fighting between Druze and Christians in 1861 prompted the Ottoman Empire to issue the *reglement organique*, which established Mount Lebanon as an autonomous district known as *Mutassarifiya*, and was governed by institutions based on power-sharing among Christians, Druze and Muslims (Ibid: 13). The political leaders of each community – known as *zu’ama* – were responsible for the administration of their respective communities, and used their status to provide both protection and patronage (Calfat 2018: 274-5). In fact, the majority of these *zu’ama* are part of the same dynasties that constitute Lebanon’s elite ruling coalition of today (Ibid: 275).

This system of power-sharing was further consolidated during the French Mandate, particularly through the 1926 Constitution, in which power was divided between the countries’ main Christian, Sunni and Shiite communities (Bahout 2016). As observed by Calfat (2019: 274): “From then onwards, confessional identity continued to be built and incorporated into the judicial and administrative structures of the Lebanese state.”

The National Pact of 1943, which formally declared Lebanon’s independence, institutionalized constitutional power-sharing at all levels of polity and society (Geha 2019: 13). Although formalized on a fragile basis, Lebanon’s new power-sharing governing mechanism ensured relative stability and peace. In fact, for the next three decades, “sectarianism was not a live issue in Lebanese politics” (Hudson 1976: 114). This, however, took a drastic turn at the beginning of the 1970s, when civil war broke out between the country’s sectarian groups. While scholars have identified a range of complex reasons for why the war broke out, both sectarian tensions and ethnic violence have been identified as underlying - and catalyzing - factors. Salloukh (et al. 2015: 20) argue that the outbreak of the civil war is rooted in the “failure of the National Pact to manage the inherent contradictions of Lebanon’s confessional politics.”

Yet, still, fifteen years of civil war ended in 1990 with the revival of a new power-sharing formula through the signing of the Ta’if Agreement. The Agreement – signed in 1989 under
the slogan ‘no victor and no vanquished’ – essayed a fresh management of Lebanon’s domestic and foreign politics, with a long-term view to engendering political stability and sustainable peace in the country - as well as, undoubtedly, avoiding another civil war between the country’s sectarian communities (Picard and Ramsbotham 2012: 37; Salloukh et al. 2015: 21). On the basis of this objective, the Ta’if Agreement introduced a number of constitutional amendments that set out a legal framework for power-sharing. Executive power was shifted from the Maronite President to the Council of Ministers (Lebanese Constitution, Article 17; Salloukh et al. 2015: 21). The Council, made up of a grand coalition of sects, thereby became the “real custodian of executive authority (Salloukh et al. 2015: 21). Moreover, the new power-sharing formula modified the 55:45 Christian-Muslim pre-war ratio of parliamentary seats to an even 50:50; and changed the 6:5 ratio of Christian-Muslim’s in high-ranking posts to 5:5 (Lebanon Constitution, Article 24). The powers of the three highest offices were also redefined and came to form a “a kind of Triumvirate,” (Calfat 2018: 276) with a Maronite President, Sunni Prime Minister, and Shiite Speaker of Parliament (Najem 2012: 49-50). Moreover, the Ta’if Accord introduced new decision-making mechanisms that constrained presidential prerogatives. As decision-making was shifted from the Maronite President to the Council of Ministers, any decisions made by the Council were expected to be taken in a ‘consociational manner’ (Ibid). Failing that, all important decisions, including on international treaties, war and peace, required a two-thirds majority in the cabinet (Calfat 2018: 276). This gave implicit veto power to all three major political communities through the three ‘presidencies’ - the Maronite President, Sunni Prime Minister and Shi’a Speaker of Parliament.

However, in the years following the signing of the Ta’if Agreement, many important provisions aimed at reforming the country’s political system were not implemented (Geha 2019: 14). These included the gradual abolition of sectarian representation, laid out in Article 95 of the Constitution, as well as the decentralization of public administration and the reform of the electoral system (Calfat 2018: 276). As a result of this failed implementation of Ta’if’s provisions, many issues that had dominated the pre-war era, such as entrenched sectarian divisions and crippling political deadlocks, quickly came to characterize the years following the end of the war. Instead of moving away from sectarian representation, sectarian-power-sharing was entrenched in practice. This was reflected
most significantly in the 18-month political crisis that paralyzed Lebanon between 2006 and 2008. The crisis started in 2006, when six Shia ministers resigned from Lebanon’s cabinet after their demands for an effective veto over government decisions in cabinet - a so-called “blocking third” of cabinet seats - was rejected by the March 14th alliance, a central political coalition in Lebanon’s government (The Economist 2008). The resignation of the six Shi’a ministers elicited a political stalemate which lasted for more than 18 months, with devastating consequences for both peace and stability in the country. These consequences came to a head in early May 2008, when a Hezbollah organized protest descended into deadly clashes that left at least 81 people dead (The Economist 2008). The crisis brought the country to the verge of another civil war, just fifteen years after the signing of the Ta’if Agreement. It also starkly underlined the urgency for further reform of Lebanon’s power-sharing political system.

In an urgent attempt to overcome the crippling political stalemate and put an end to the threatening sectarian violence, Lebanon’s Hezbollah-led Shiite opposition and the Lebanese government backed by Saudi Arabia and the West came together in May 2008 in Doha. Several days of negotiation culminated in the Doha Agreement, which represented the second attempt, after Ta’if, to reform Lebanon’s consociational power-sharing system. The Agreement constituted three main provisions: The first was that the Lebanese parliament must convene without delay to elect General Michel Suleiman, chief of staff of Lebanon’s army, as the country’s president - with a view to ending the then-ensuing six-month presidential vacuum (Bakri and Cowell 2008). The next step to ending Lebanon’s political stalemate would be the formation of a national unity cabinet, in which the opposition - in this case, the Hezbollah - would be awarded the veto power it had long-sought (Ibid). In the unity cabinet, 16 seats would be distributed to the government in power; 11 to Hezbollah and allies; and 3 seats would be appointed by the Lebanese president (Refworld Research Directorate 2008). The passage of a new electoral law was the opposition’s second principal demand. The Doha Agreement thus included a provision for a return to an older electoral law that would provide for better representation by making it harder for the ruling coalition to retain a strong majority. This would, ultimately, benefit Hezbollah’s Christian allies (The Economist 2008).
Although the Doha Agreement succeeded in correcting major sectarian imbalances and readjusting disproportionalities in representation, the deal “once again ratified [Lebanon’s power-sharing] system and institutionalized political representation based exclusively on a religious-sectarian basis” (Calfat 2018: 274). In other words, instead of curtailing sectarian rivalry, the provisions laid out in the Doha Agreement simply reinforced divisions - and represented another lost chance for real and meaningful reforms of Lebanon’s unstable political system. Sectarian division, coupled with political stalemates and other crises, continued to dominate in the post-Doha era.

The historical overview demonstrates that repeatedly - through national pacts and agreements - power sharing was institutionalized and appropriated in Lebanon. And even despite efforts - through the Ta’if and the Doha Agreements - to reform Lebanon’s political system, power-sharing ultimately continued to feed political instability, sectarian division, and ineffective governance. While power-sharing in Lebanon intended to incentivize rival groups to cooperate and engage in peaceful relations, it has instead exacerbated the very tensions it sought to resolve. This has, in turn, obstructed the development of strong institutions and accountability mechanisms that are essential for a strong functioning of the state. It has also hindered the ability of the state to respond to citizen’s demands for reform or provide basic public services.

In response to these developments, the Lebanese population has repeatedly taken to the streets over the past three decades to denounce and demand an end to Lebanon’s power-sharing system - a system which they claim, “facilitates corruption and allows self-serving political and sectarian elites to capture public resources and escape accountability” (Bourhrous 2021: 1). In 2011, Lebanese citizens - inspired by the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia and Egypt - came together in what is now labeled the ‘Intifada of Dignity’ to call for the dismantling of their dysfunctional political system (Wood 2011). In light of a crippling garbage crisis in 2015, protesters came together once again to demand an end to their country’s sectarian regime and the removal of its corrupt leaders (Geha 2019: 11). On 17 October 2019, the Lebanese population took to the streets in an unparalleled coalition across sectarian and class divides to demand an end to Lebanon’s power-sharing system and denounce the political leaders that have proved incapable of implementing overdue reforms.
to alleviate the country’s compounding crises. Chanting the slogan “all of them means all of them,” protesters called for the removal of Lebanon’s ruling establishment. Most recently, in light of the massive explosion that tore through the port of Beirut in August 2020, Lebanese citizens across the country united again under the slogan “all of them means all of them” to demand justice for the tragic explosion and an overthrow of the country’s political leaders who they believe caused it (Bourhrous 2021: 3).

What unites these different - and numerous - protests that took place over more than a decade is not only the demand for an end to Lebanon’s destructive politics of sectarianism and an overthrow of the leaders that perpetuate it. Every single one of these protests also reflect a deep dissatisfaction among Lebanon’s population with the political system’s performance in responding to repeated calls for reform, as well as in delivering essential public services to citizens. In analyzing the repeated protests, it becomes evident that protesters were establishing a direct link between the country’s sectarian power-sharing system on the one hand and their worsening quality of life, on the other.

Nevertheless, despite these systematic calls - by Lebanese citizens and the international community - for the adoption and implementation of a credible, comprehensive and equitable reform plan, the country’s political system has shown no signs of willingness to enact change. The roots of why Lebanon’s power-sharing has perpetuated division over unity, as well as immobility over change, constitute the primary questions that will drive the following Chapters of this study.

1.3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

1.3.1. Research method

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 162) stated that, “Research without theory is blind, and theory without research is empty.” It is for this reason, among others, that this study utilizes a qualitative research method based on a ‘theory-case interaction approach’ (Rule and John 2015: 4). This approach views the relation between theory and case as dialogical, whereby theory is used to select, define and problematize a chosen case study, but the case study is also used to develop new theoretical approaches. In the words of Rule and John (2015: 8),
“theory informs the case study, but it is in turn informed by the case or cases that can further develop the theory.” This study adopts this approach in drawing - and building on - power-sharing theory to analyze Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system. This is achieved through an extensive analysis of existing secondary empirical, theoretical and grey literature, which encompasses the collection and analysis of scholarly articles, journals and books on power-sharing theory, as well as Lebanon’s political trajectory and particularly its post-war sectarian power-sharing system. This study also gathers empirical evidence from analyses and reports published by Lebanese (and international) NGOs, think tanks, and journalists working at the grassroots level. Speeches and press-briefings by policy-makers and Lebanese politicians are also included in the analysis.

Thus, the case study that the entirety of this thesis centers upon is that of Lebanon, specifically Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system. Lebanon was chosen as the in-depth case study for this thesis due, in large part, to the country’s long history and experience with power-sharing. This makes it both a valuable and unique case to analyze the impacts of power-sharing systems, particularly how they affect and shape state-society relations, including reform and citizen well-being. Although there are a number of countries that have also adopted power-sharing as a constitutional formula, such as Iraq, a single-case study design was chosen on the basis that it allows for “the thorough analysis of the complex and particularistic nature of distinct phenomena” (Willis 2014) - in this case: Lebanon’s post-war sectarian power-sharing system.

Perhaps more importantly, this research method also presents a “theoretical stimulant” (Ibid), reflected in the fact that it has the intended advantage of ‘theory-building’ (Rule and John 2015: 4). Indeed, a qualitative single case study approach allows not only for empirically-rich, context-specific, holistic analysis into a phenomenon, but also provides the basis for the applying, testing, or building of a theory. This advantage was clearly reflected in the development of this study. To inform the case study of Lebanon’s power-sharing system, this study draws and builds on the theory of power-sharing - particularly its two central theoretical approaches of the consociational democracy model and the integrative approach. Thus, in studying the case of Lebanese power-sharing, this thesis inevitably explores and applies the main theoretical approaches of power-sharing theory, particularly
consociational democracy theory, with which Lebanon’s power-sharing system has often been associated. Yet, in applying the theoretical approaches of power-sharing - particularly consociational democracy theory - to Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system, this study is also able to build on power-sharing theory and its theoretical approaches. It effectively does so in two ways: firstly, in analyzing the ways in which Lebanon’s power-sharing system deviates from the existing theoretical approaches of power-sharing theory and secondly, in conceptualizing political sectarianism as an alternative lens through which to understand Lebanese power-sharing. It is important to note that this study does not seek to develop a new theoretical approach to power-sharing theory, but merely to highlight – on the basis of existing theoretical literature – a new lens through which to understand the dynamics and structures of Lebanon’s power-sharing system.

1.3.2. Research Design

Having outlined the research method that will help to answer my research question, it is important to lay out how this method will be employed throughout this study. As this study seeks to analyze various interrelated components, it is important to deconstruct how a qualitative theory-case based approach will be employed throughout the study to effectively address the research questions. Firstly, building on an extensive review of existing empirical and theoretical literature, the literature review explores the main concepts and debates surrounding power-sharing theory, particularly its two central theoretical approaches: consociational democracy theory - with which a number of scholars still associate Lebanon’s political system - and the ‘integrative approach’, often referred to as centripetalism. This assessment of the existing theoretical approaches of power-sharing is essential in developing the theoretical framework upon which this thesis’ analysis is built. Looking particularly at the ways in which Lebanon’s power-sharing system conforms to - or deviates from - the traditional approaches analyzed in the literature review, the theoretical framework showcases how power-sharing has been appropriated in the Lebanese case. To effectively showcase this, this study draws on extensive secondary theoretical literature to explore and conceptualize political sectarianism – that is: the important role that political sectarianism plays in shaping Lebanon’s political system. In doing so, this study highlights not only how Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system deviates from Lijphart’s
consociational democracy model, but also helps us to uncover a new lens through which to understand Lebanese power-sharing.

The literature review and theoretical framework serve as important benchmarks in the development of this studies’ analytical framework, namely the recurring dilemmas enshrined in Lebanon’s power-sharing system. The analytical framework will likewise build on existing secondary literature, particularly the notion of recurring dilemmas developed by Tamirace Fakhoury in her journal article: “Debating Lebanon’s power-sharing model: An opportunity or an impasse for democratization studies in the Middle East” (2019). This notion of ‘recurring dilemmas’ was chosen on the basis that it provides an analytical and empirical benchmark for assessing Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system, particularly why it perpetually fails to initiate and implement overdue and necessary reforms. However, this study will build on Fakhoury’s notion of Lebanon’s ‘recurring dilemmas’ by integrating observations and analyses presented by other authors and experts on Lebanon’s post-war political system, namely Amal Bourhrous (2021), Badran (2020), Rothchild and Roeder (2005) and Carmen Geha (2019). Based on an extensive analysis of this literature, this study identifies three main dilemmas – rooted in Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system – that have systematically undermined reform and citizen well-being. These dilemmas include: the proneness of its power-sharing formula to governmental deadlock, its institutionalization of impunity, as well as the growing chasm between elite-led politics and grassroots demands.

To effectively showcase and analyze how these dilemmas have manifested in Lebanon’s post-war politics, this study gathers empirical evidence from reports and findings published by international organizations such as the World Bank, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations. Empirical data gathered and published by Lebanese NGOs, Think Tanks and independent media organizations, such as the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, The Public Source, and Public Works, will also be analyzed to develop this studies’ analytical framework. Moreover, accounts from civil society activists, journalists, NGO workers, and political scientists on the ground provide intimate perspectives and understandings that build on the scholarly articles and academic theories presented in the literature review. In corroborating the academic claims presented in the literature review, they also serve to provide an important source of legitimacy to this thesis’s findings.
The bulk of this study’s analysis will center around how the dilemmas manifested in the tragic Beirut port explosion. The Beirut blast was chosen as the primary case study for this thesis not only because it represents the most current and tragic example of how these dilemmas have manifested, but also because it accurately reflects the ways in which their manifestation has undermined the two indicators being explored in this study, namely reform and citizen well-being. This thesis, however, does not intend to study the Beirut blast in an isolated manner. As the primary focus is to showcase the recurrent nature of these dilemmas, various other examples of how they have manifested in Lebanon’s post-war political trajectory will be explored and integrated into the analysis, such as the 2011 ‘Intifada of Dignity’, the 2015 YouStink movement, as well as the current fuel and electricity crises. It is also important to note that this study does not intend to suggest a causality mechanism between Lebanon’s power-sharing system and the Beirut blast. Rather, it intends to put the tragedy in the context of Lebanon’s broader political history of instability and ineffective governance in order to showcase the recurrent nature of these dilemmas.

Moreover, the analysis does not intend to merely list the various occurrences of when these dilemmas have manifested. It also seeks to analyze them with regard to their effect on citizen well-being, with a view to showcasing how these dilemmas transverse the financial and economic sphere to directly impact the lives of hundreds and thousands of citizens. This “indicator” of the three dilemmas analyzed was chosen on the basis of significant gaps in existing literature. Although extensive literature has been produced by analysts and scholars on the inherent flaws and downfalls of Lebanon’s power-sharing system, the effect these have had on citizen wellbeing, particularly the provision of the most basic services, remain grossly understudied and under-evaluated. ‘Humanizing’ the impacts of Lebanon’s power-sharing system is, however, extremely essential. For one, the inability of Lebanese citizens to access even the most basic public services, such as education, healthcare, and electricity, “has been one of the fundamental and most recurring grievances during the protests in Lebanon” (Bourhrous et al. 2021: 19). As the World Bank (2021: 41) underlines: “A sharp deterioration in basic services would have long-term implications, incurring permanent damage to human capital, which should be a matter of grave concern.” It threatens implications such as “mass migration, loss of learning, poor health outcomes, and lack of
adequate safety nets” (World Bank Group 2021: 41), which would not only lead to a “human
capital catastrophe” (Ibid), but would also make recovery extremely difficult. As the World
Bank Group (Ibid) accurately underscores: “Perhaps this dimension of the Lebanese crisis
makes the Lebanon episode unique compared to other global crises.” It is for this reason
precisely that this thesis has chosen citizen wellbeing - and particularly the (failing) provision
of public services - as this studies’ main indicator. In the absence of interviews, the analysis
of how citizen well-being has been affected by Lebanon’s ‘recurring dilemmas’ builds on
accounts and blogs written and published by Lebanese citizens currently living in Lebanon,
as well as interviews with Lebanese citizens that have been conducted by international and
local news outlets, such as the New York Times, Al Jazeera, and L’Orient Le Jour.

1.3.3. Limitations of chosen research design

In laying out the methods that will be used to answer the research questions, as well as how
these will be utilized throughout the study, it is equally essential to reflect on the limitations
of the chosen research design. Firstly, it is important to emphasize that the chosen research
design has a selection bias. The time frame and the number of case studies that can be
included in the study are limited as a deep understanding of each time period and case is
needed, which requires extensive data collection and analysis. An analysis of the entirety of
Lebanon’s political history would extend beyond the parameters of this master’s thesis. For
this reason, this study has selected Lebanon’s post-war era as the time frame (1990
onwards). This time period has been chosen on the basis that it provides a valuable analysis
of the dilemmas that are being explored, as well as a contemporary focus and outlooks for
the future. It is also important to note that this thesis focuses solely on studying Lebanon’s
power-sharing system as a root cause of the country’s political instability and inability to
implement overdue reforms. There are, undoubtedly, a range of other factors, notably
external ones, that have and continue to play a significant role in destabilizing the country.
Moreover, this studies’ analytical framework of the political system’s ‘recurring dilemmas’
builds solely on internal factors. Here too, it would be possible to identify a number of
‘external’ dilemmas that have similarly played a role in undermining reform and citizen well-
being. Analyzing these would, however, likewise extend far beyond the parameters of this
master’s thesis. A further limitation that can be identified is in terms of accessibility to secondary data, particularly existing literature that is only available in Arabic, such as speeches and statements given by Lebanese politicians. Nevertheless, as this study will encompass French, English and German literature – and given the accessibility of translation platforms – this limitation can be overcome. It is also important to note that given the prospective nature of the topic and the qualitative research approach, this study aims to explore the issue of Lebanon’s power-sharing systems’ inability to affect transformative change or implement meaningful reform by building on existing literature and providing new insights into the prospects for change. It does not seek to confirm a certain hypothesis.

Adopting a reflexive approach also necessitates evaluating the constraints that I encountered in the researching and writing of this thesis. One of the most significant constraints was that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to travel to Lebanon and conduct field work, including interviews with civil society members. When deciding on the topic and structure of my thesis in February of last year (2021), I envisioned field work and interviews to constitute the basis of this studies’ analysis. Nevertheless, due to the numerous COVID-19 restrictions in place, coupled with the ongoing and deteriorating crises in the country, traveling to Lebanon in the Fall of 2021 was not a viable option. This, inevitably, forced me to significantly rethink my research method and design. I considered the possibility of conducting interviews virtually, via Zoom. However, given that I wanted to mainly conduct interviews with civil society members, I decided that this would be too challenging. Therefore, I decided to instead adopt a qualitative approach based solely on the analysis of secondary theoretical, empirical and grey literature. Admittedly, the lack of first-hand accounts from civil society members, as well as first-hand insights from researchers and analysts, represents a significant limitation to this thesis. This limitation is particularly reflected in Chapter Five of this study, which analyzes how citizen well-being has been undermined by the recurring dilemmas entrenched in Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system. Gathering first-hand accounts by Lebanese citizens would have, undoubtedbly, provided significant value to the analysis. Nevertheless, I believe that my extensive analysis of secondary empirical literature, particularly that published by NGOs and think tanks working at a grassroots level in Lebanon, has at least in some part compensated for this gap.
Moreover, I believe that reflecting on my own positionality - notably the position I have adopted within this given research study - is also essential. Although I was unable to conduct any field research for this thesis, I believe that the time I spent in Lebanon prior to even conceptualizing this study is particularly valuable to understand not only my motivations behind this thesis, but also the themes and analyses I chose to underline in my work.

From August 2018 to May 2019, I had the opportunity to spend one year living in Beirut and studying at the Lebanese American University (LAU). It was during my studies at LAU that I was first introduced to power-sharing theory and the concept of sectarianism. Through class discussions, research papers and presentations, I was able to gain valuable insights and deepen my knowledge of Lebanon’s political trajectory, particularly the evolution and institutionalization of its sectarian power-sharing system since the country’s creation by the French in 1920.

Yet, I believe it was the conversations I had with my Lebanese friends, as well as all the Lebanese people I met while traveling the country, that moved me to undertake this study. Every Lebanese person that I encountered, whether young or old, Muslim or Christian, Shi’a or Sunni, shared with me their utter frustration, anger and helplessness with their country’s political system. My friends’ parents and grandparents - those that had lived through all, or parts, of Lebanon’s civil war - underscored that little had changed in almost three decades, particularly with regard to sectarian division and political instability. Meanwhile, my friends and fellow students that I studied with at LAU shared with me their utter lack of perspective for the future and their desire to leave the country as soon as possible. In September 2021, two years into Lebanon’s crippling ‘perfect storm’ of economic, political and humanitarian crises, my best friend who grew up and still lives in Beirut, wrote me the following lines: “Here in Lebanon we are no longer living, just surviving.” Only ten words, but this message struck me to the core. It made me want to better understand the vulnerability of Lebanon’s political system to instability, conflict and ineffective governance. I believe that this drive is
what ultimately laid the foundation for this study. After preliminary research, I decided to focus my thesis on Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system and how it perpetually undermines transformative political change and reform, with a view to uncovering how the system has also contributed to impairing citizen well-being. I believe that my experiences in Lebanon also particularly influenced Chapter 5 of my study, which focuses on ‘humanizing’ the impacts of Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system. While countless scholarly analyses have been developed on Lebanon’s destructive political system, existing literature fails to effectively capture the impacts this has had on citizens’ livelihoods. Ultimately, this study strives to at least in small part contribute to filling this gap.

Nevertheless, despite my time spent getting to know both Lebanon as a country and its people, it is still essential to note that I am a Western scholar writing on the intricate features of a country that is not my own. While I learnt a lot in the nine months I spent living in Beirut, that did not constitute nearly enough time to comprehensively understand the intricate culture of Lebanon, least yet the experiences of the hundreds and thousands of Lebanese that are currently suffering from the country’s compounding crises. My inability to consult existing literature in Arabic also represents a significant limitation, particularly with regards to possible bias and impartiality of non-Arabic sources. Nonetheless, I believe that this thesis at least attempts to navigate the above limitations as much as possible, and constitutes an important study for international organizations, think tanks, and ordinary citizens to better understand Lebanon’s complex power-sharing system, particularly the roots of its resistance to transformative political change and meaningful reform.
CHAPTER 2.

APPLYING THEORY AND LITERATURE

A vast amount of scholarly literature has relied on understanding Lebanon’s post-war political system through the lens of power-sharing theory and, more concretely, through the consociational democracy model. This chapter seeks to understand the two central theoretical models of power-sharing - consociational democracy theory and the integrative approach - that have been developed by scholars in the past century to manage conflict and institute political stability in deeply divided societies. Building on this analysis, the theoretical framework explores how power-sharing has been appropriated in the Lebanese case. It underlines how existing theoretical approaches on power-sharing fail to accurately capture Lebanon’s consociational prescriptions, as well as its post-war political realities. Instead, it focuses on the role political sectarianism has played in shaping Lebanon’s political system. In conceptualizing political sectarianism, this chapter uncovers the dynamics, as well as the material and structural factors, that shape Lebanon’s power-sharing system.

2.1. THEORETICAL LITERATURE REVIEW: Power-sharing theory and the consociational-integrative debate

The question of how to ensure political stability in ethnically divided societies has generated fierce scholarly debate and a multitude of competing research programs. Yet, limited consensus has been reached among the academic community as to the most appropriate model through which ethnic conflict can be institutionally managed in order to foster sustainable peace and political stability. One central theoretical framework - which has “become the theoretical umbrella for tackling conflict resolution in fragmented societies throughout the world” (Kettley 2001: 251) - is the power-sharing approach. Power-sharing is understood as a broad term that refers to a range of political engineering methods designed to manage conflicts in deeply divided societies (Fakhoury 2014: 231). In the context of the Cold War, two central normative models of power-sharing were developed, namely consociational democracy theory and the integrative model of ethnic conflict regulation.
Both of these models, which today constitute the most popular theoretical models of power-sharing, were originally developed to “explain the types of institutional design adopted in ‘deviant’ cases of fragmented, albeit stable, societies in Western Europe” (Kettley 2001: 250). It was also hoped that either model could assist newly independent, deeply divided or plural societies with the process of nation-building (Ibid). While consociational democracy and the integrative model have been developed as mutually exclusive, both theoretical approaches center on the underlying assumption that political stability in divided societies can only be achieved and maintained through joint decision-making and inclusive rule (Caspersen 2004; Keetley 2001). While conceptualizing different mechanisms and institutions through which political stability can be achieved, “they agree that the main vehicle to achieve such stability is power-sharing” (Keetley 2001: 251). These two principal theoretical models of power-sharing have claimed universality in their application, meaning that, since their development in the late 1960s, consociationalism or the integrative approach have been applied to plural, fragmented or deeply divided societies across the world, ranging from Switzerland, the Netherlands, Austria and Belgium, to Malaysia, Lebanon and South Africa. Lebanon’s power-sharing system has, for example, specifically been associated with the consociational democracy typology.

2.1.1. Consociational democracy theory

The first central theoretical framework of how political stability can be institutionally enshrined in fragmented societies was developed by Arend Lijphart in the late 1960s, and is referred to today as the consociational democracy model. This model denotes a “government by an elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy” (Hudson 1976: 226). In its theoretical fundamentals, it foresees the devolution of power among communities and the crafting of different institutions to enable their equal participation in decision-making, thereby ensuring not only peaceful co-existence but also the maintenance of a sectarian balance among these communities (Fakhoury 2019: 10). In his book Democracy in Plural Societies (1977), Lijphart makes four prescriptions for an effective consociational democracy: Firstly, an elite grand coalition, which should represent the various communities in the executive branch of
government. Secondly, the sectarian leaders or parties representing each of these communities should be awarded a mutual veto in order to protect minorities against abuses of the majority. Thirdly, Lijphart prescribes the proportionality as the underlying principle for all political and government matters, including the division of parliament, allocation of civil service positions, as well as the distribution of public expenditure. Finally, there should be segmental autonomy to enable every community to ‘run its own affairs’ (Schattevoet 2021: 92-93; Lijphart 1977).

According to Lijphart (1977), the fulfillment of these four consociational prescriptions will enshrine “peaceful co-existence” in fragmented or deeply divided societies, given that they ensure the maintenance of a sectarian balance, and prevent the domination of one sect over others (Baytiyeh 2019). The basic rationale behind Lijphart’s model is, thereby, clear: if all principal warring parties are incorporated into a country’s political system, they will inevitably be more likely to develop vested interests in the state’s stability and proper functioning.

This rationale has been supported and repeated by a number of scholars in the past decades. Proponents of Lijphart’s model posit that power-sharing enhances democratic governance and represents a viable political engineering method that allows divided societies to manage their fragmentation and promote elite consensus (McCulloh and McGarry 2017; Cammett and Malesky 2012). Proponents have also argued that consociational power-sharing represents the most viable way in which to guarantee political stability in multi-ethnic countries, as it gives all relevant groups a stake in the system (Cammett and Malesky 2012: 985).

Nevertheless, in light of a lack of empirical evidence to support Lijphart’s theoretical assumptions, an increasing number of scholars have questioned the validity and applicability of Lijphart’s consociational democracy model. In particular, a number of scholars have argued that consociationalism not only impedes effective decision-making, but also freezes and entrenches ethnic divisions (Fakhoury 2014; Geha 2019; Horowitz 2000; Roeder and Rotchild 2005; Caspersen 2004). Critics have particularly challenged the assumption that consociational formulas will reduce inter-communal tensions (Barry 1975: 393). Instead, it is
argued that in almost all cases, consociational power-sharing further exacerbates divisions. Given the participation of all ethnic groups in government, these divisions are likely to entrench “legislative stalemate and deep disagreement” (Geha 2019: 11) on fundamental decisions. Moreover, the ability of representative groups to veto governmental decisions, as prescribed in Lijphart’s model, “encourages inefficiency and rigidity, leading to poor governance and inferior public goods provision” (Cammett and Malesky 2012: 986). Ezzedine and Noun (2020: 13) concur with this critique, underlining that “the logic of power-sharing produces lengthy political stalemates almost by default and makes long-term decision making a Herculean task.” David Horowitz, perhaps the most vocal critic of Lijphart’s model, points also to its “reification of divisive identities” as well as its “inability to result in political stability” (Horowitz 2002: 20; Horowitz 2002: 197).

A central critique of consociationalism also centers on its “atrophied or lessened democratic quality and character” (Fakhoury 2009: 51). In particular, scholars have critiqued the lack of attention and importance that consociational democracy theory places on the relationship between social segmentation and elite cooperation (Kettley 2001: 258). Indeed, despite numerous contemporary examples of masses revolting against their leaders, the model ignores the important role that the masses play in creating or destroying stable societies. Instead, it is assumed that the masses will unhesitatingly support their leaders, and that these leaders will cooperate with each other and with society. The institutionalization of mechanisms to control elites’ behavior is, thus, deemed unnecessary. Yet, as underlined by Kettley (Ibid), “this assumption raises the question of whether a consociational political system can be referred to as a consociational democracy, since the masses are excluded from any real influence in the decision-making process.” This argument has been repeated by a number of scholars. Samuel Huntington (1991: 28) has, for example, dubbed the model as a ‘consociational oligarchy’; van Schendelen (1984) and van den Berdghe (2002) have, respectively, characterized it as an ‘elite’ or ‘bourgeois’ democracy. In addition, Dahl (1989) has underlined that, along with exacerbating intra-ethnic competition, it significantly weakens the presence of the opposition, particularly non-sectarian challengers - a fundamental feature of a democracy.
2.1.2. The integrative approach

The ‘integrative approach’ - developed by Donald Horowitz (2000) “as a response to the rigidity of the normative prescriptions of consociational democracy theory” (Kettley 2001: 260) - represents an alternative theoretical approach to power-sharing in divided societies. Horowitz’s integrative approach relies on incentives for intergroup and interethnic cooperation, with a view to fostering political systems that cross-cut ethnic loyalties (Carvalho 2016: 25). In the words of Carmen Kettley (2001: 261), the main goal of the integrative approach is “to enhance minorities’ influence in majority decision-making by the creation of incentives for moderation by political elites on contentious issues.” Unlike consociationalism, which constructs ethnic groups as separate political ‘pillars’, Horowitz’s integrative model proposes arenas of cross-ethnic bargaining, such as “electoral systems that encourage the formation of pre-election pacts among candidates or political parties across ethnic lines” (Ibid), as well as ‘ethnically blind’ public policies (McCulloh and McGarry 2017: 3).

Horowitz (2000) proposes five distinct mechanisms to facilitate the transformation of deeply divided societies into stable, integrated and multiethnic politics. Firstly, the devolution of the state’s territorial powers, to ensure that power is not concentrated at a single local point; Secondly, the devolution of power on ethnic criteria, in order to encourage intra-ethnic competition at the local level; thirdly, the establishment of inter-ethnic cooperation incentives, such as the creation of electoral laws that promote pre-election coalitions through the process of vote polling; fourthly, regulatory policies to encourage alternative social alignments, including those based on territory or social class; and finally, ensuring a fair distribution of resources to reduce inequalities among social groups (Kettley 2001: 261).

While presenting an alternative to Lijphart’s consociational democracy model, Horowitz’s integrative approach has been criticized by a number of scholars. One of the central critiques of the approach centers on the fact that “it is essentially majoritarian” (Sisk 1996). In encouraging the construction of mechanisms that encourage majority representatives to develop moderate attitudes, an integrative approach unfairly privileges the majority of largest group (Ibid). In other words, it provides inadequate protection of minority rights.
Caspersen (2004: 572) also highlights the issue of local acceptance, rooted in the unlikelihood of minority leaders to accept a system which gives them no assurances, as well as of nationalist parties to accept a system designed to undermine their power bases. The model is, therefore, regarded by many scholars as inappropriate for cases of deeply divided societies (Caspersen 2004: 572; Sisk 2001: 30; Reynolds 2000: 59-60).

2.1.3. Power Sharing: The Central Limitations of the Current Theoretical Debate

In analyzing consociationalism and the integrative approach - particularly the ways in which they have been applied in practice - a number of theoretical and empirical controversies arise. These controversies center on the fact that the theoretical construction of these normative prescriptions for power-sharing was “largely based on past and temporary instances of consociationalism and integrative practices” (Kettley 2001: 258). The majority of these instances have either been transformed into liberal democracies, reflected in the Netherlands and Austria, or have collapsed and renewed ethnic conflict, as observed in Lebanon and Nigeria (Ibid). The applicability and durability of traditional approaches to power-sharing, therefore, remains controversial. As Carmen Kettley (Ibid: 262) underlines, “the conceptual foundation of the current power-sharing debate is clearly not sufficiently reflective of contemporary practice.”

Moreover, the theoretical frameworks are largely based on a Western understanding of cultural diversity: both the consociational democracy and the integrative model were developed to explain the success of four European cases with ‘non-majoritarian forms of government’, namely the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, and Austria (Doyle 2021). The very premise that these societies actually represented deeply divided societies and fit the power-sharing model has, however, been highly contested (Doyle 2021; Daadler 1974). The validity of consociational theory as a whole has also been questioned based on arguments that South Africa, India, or Lebanon represent consociational democracies. As underlined by Kettley (2001: 259), “today, most of these countries retain no significant consociational elements in their political systems.” In other words, the traditional theoretical models of power-sharing have neglected “the great diversity of cases and the peculiarities of each
political, legal and social context to which it attempts to apply its universal model” (Ibid: 260).

Yet, even despite these limitations, both theoretical power-sharing approaches need not be dismissed. As underlined by Keetley (2001: 263), “questioning the validity and applicability of the models does not entail invalidating their basic ideas: that elite behavior, electoral systems, autonomy arrangements, and institutional mechanisms of conflict regulation have an essential contribution to make to the success of power-sharing design and implementation.” Indeed, a number of countries have and continue to adopt some of the features of both models. Nevertheless, it is clear that applying these theoretical approaches to institutional design in a unidimensional or dichotomous manner “often fail to provide adequate explanation of more recent patterns of power-sharing in countries experiencing various degrees of ethnic unrest” (Ibid: 248). In other words, while power-sharing theory has been, to a large extent, built on the models of consociational democracy and the integrative approach, it represents “more than the sum of [these] two models” (Ibid: 250).

It is thus essential that the debate on system design in multi-ethnic societies rises beyond the consociational-integrative divide, as this has become both a “false and unproductive dichotomy” (Ibid: 263). Indeed, it is important to take in to account that these theoretical models of power-sharing constitute “ideal conceptual frameworks where a range of empirical manifestations are possible” (Carvalho 2016: 25). Tamirace Fakhoury (2014: 239) concurs with this argument, underlining that “the theoretical and policy prescription dimensions of the [consociational democracy] model are seldom identical, for an actual consociation can never meet the ambitious criteria spelled out by consociational theorists.” Using one strategy or the other in its pure form is, thus, conceptually unrealistic. As underlined by Sisk (1996), it is essential that theoretical approaches to power-sharing take a range of other elements into account, such as the “structure of ethnic relations, the specific patterns of ethnic politics in a given community, the historical development of a given conflict, the relationship between ethnic group and the state, the attitudes and skills of the political leaders, and the ability of the groups in conflict to agree on the core principles of the political system” (Sisk 1996: 43). Integrating such an
understanding would allow for a more realistic and coherent theoretical framework for policy makers.

Despite these observations, limited steps have been taken to think and conceptualize beyond the consociational-integrative models or to test these models against contemporary patterns of ethnic division or conflicts. This rings particularly true for the case of Lebanon, whose power-sharing arrangements continue to be largely associated with Lijphart’s consociational democracy model. Yet, given the inherent limitations and controversies at the heart of both the consociational democracy and integrative models, “it is hardly surprising that [they] fail to capture Lebanon’s ‘consociational prescription’ on the one hand, and Lebanon’s post-1990 political realities, on the other” (Fakhoury 2014: 240). There are a number of scholars focused on Lebanese power-sharing that have, therefore, started thinking beyond the consociational-integrative models to conceptualize how power-sharing has been appropriated in the Lebanese case (Fakhoury 2014; Salloukh 2019; Ezzedine and Noun 2020; Cammett 2015). Their analysis moves away from consociational democracy theory and looks instead at the important role political sectarianism plays in shaping Lebanon’s political system. Indeed, Miktashi (2017: 270) views political sectarianism as “the system of power sharing that defines the Lebanese state.”

This study’s theoretical framework, developed in the following section, seeks to elevate the power-sharing debate beyond the consociational-integrative dichotomy by analyzing Lebanese power-sharing through the lens of political sectarianism rather than consociational democracy theory.

2.2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: The Appropriation of Power-Sharing in the Lebanese Case

Given the absence of an alternative theoretical framework or model adapted to Lebanon’s power-sharing system, recent analyses of Lebanon’s consociation have continued to adopt Lijphart’s consociational democracy model as “a normative yardstick while suggesting its limitations” (Fakhoury 2014: 252). Indeed, as introduced in the preceding section, scholars and political scientists focused on Lebanon’s post-war political development are increasingly
questioning the applicability of the consociational democracy model to Lebanon’s current consociational prescriptions, as well as its post-war political realities. Drawing on this literature, the following section highlights how Lebanese power-sharing is better understood through the lens of political sectarianism than through Lijphart’s consociational democracy model. In order to showcase this, the following section conceptualizes political sectarianism in post-war Lebanon, with a view to uncovering how it has come to represent “the system of power sharing that defines the Lebanese state” (Miktashi 2017: 270). This conceptualization is essential in understanding the distinctive features of Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system, which will, in turn, provide the basis for developing the analytical framework upon which this studies’ empirical analysis is built, namely the ‘recurring dilemmas’ entrenched in Lebanon’s ‘political sectarian’ power-sharing system.

2.2.1. Conceptualizing Political Sectarianism

According to Eric Davis (2008: 555), “our understanding of Middle East politics suffers less from the lack of empirical data than the poverty of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks through which it is studied.” This remark rings particularly true for the case of Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system, where a vast amount of scholarship continues to rely on Lijphart’s consociational democracy model to understand the country’s political arrangements and sectarian practices. Nevertheless, in recent years, a number of scholars have started approaching and analyzing Lebanon’s power-sharing system as one that “denatures the democratic typology spelled out by consociationalists” (Fakhoury 2014: 234). Drawing on these recent scholarly analyses - which diverge from consociational democracy and try to conceptualize Lebanese power-sharing beyond the consociational-integrative divide - helps to “illuminate the role played by sectarianism in shaping Lebanon’s political system” (Ibid). In particular, scholars point to the ways in which consociational democracy theory - although once serving as a useful paradigm - fails to accurately capture Lebanon’s consociational prescriptions, as well as its post-war political realities. They point in this regard to the entrenched sectarian division, political paralysis, and instability that have characterized Lebanon’s post-war politics, and underline how these deviate significantly from Lijphart’s prescriptions of ‘peaceful coexistence’ and a ‘culture of accommodation’. Instead, scholars are increasingly asserting that political sectarianism, rather than
consociational democracy, has come to denote both Lebanon’s political system and culture (Fakhoury 2014; Salloukh et al. 2015; Cammett 2014; Miktashi 2017). Drawing on this recent scholarly literature, the following section develops a conceptualization of political sectarianism, with a view to showcasing how power-sharing has been appropriated in Lebanon.

Yet, in order to understand the present dynamics of political sectarianism in Lebanon, including the material and structural factors that shape it, it is essential to first understand the term ‘sectarianism’ itself. Sectarianism has been described as a concept that is “notoriously difficult to define” and “imbued with considerable ambiguity” (Valbjørn 2021: 616). As a result, “conceptual reflections on sectarianism have traditionally been quite limited” (Ibid). Nevertheless, in light of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the notion of a sectarian - or ‘sectarianized’ - Middle East began to feature more prominently in academic literature. This has, inevitably, given rise to a range of conceptual reflections on sectarianism, starting with its definition. Vicken Cheterian (2021: 187) defines sectarianism as “a political order based on religious-sectarian identification and communal autonomy.” He explains that, in such an order, “religious affiliation has political consequences, placing individuals and groups within a hierarchical framework” (Ibid: 188). Similarly, John D. Brewer (2003) explains sectarianism to be “the determination of actions, attitudes, and practices by beliefs about religious differences, which results in their being invoked as the boundary market to represent social stratification and conflict.” Melani Cammett (2019) defines sectarianism as the “process of constructing and maintaining boundaries of a religious community, demarcating who belongs and who is excluded.” A common theme that can be identified across these definitions is the politicization of religious differences, resulting in social divisions and conflict.

While these definitions have contributed to greater conceptual attentiveness regarding the term, the central features of sectarianism remain debated and contested. Scholars have, for example, emphasized distinctions between positive and negative, as well as between folkloric, social, political and institutionalized sectarianism (Dodge 2014; Valbjørn 2021). The methodological question of how sectarianism can be ‘observed’ or ‘grasped’ is also a feature of fierce scholarly debate. Strategies proposed by scholars range from a focus on
attitudes regarding the role and prevalence of sectarianism in given societies, to an analysis of the discursive level by looking at rhetorical expressions of the term (Valbjørn 2021: 622). Another strategy looks at the ‘actual behavior’ of different actors in a society to analyze the presence of a ‘sectarian arithmetic’ (Hinnebusch 2019). This includes analyzing, for example, the composition of the ruling elite, who is included or excluded in a political system, as well as the ‘everyday’ practices of ordinary people (Valbjørn 2021: 622). Finally, the design of public institutions - including political, security, religious and welfare institutions - has been a dominant strategy through which to observe and grasp sectarianism. A mixture of these approaches will be applied in an effort to conceptualize sectarianism in the Lebanese case.

Given the ambiguous nature of the concept, and the range of conceptual reflections it fosters, it is important to explore how scholars have ‘grasped’ and conceptualized sectarianism in the Lebanese case. Within scholarly literature, Lebanon’s power-sharing system has been characterized by ‘political sectarianism’ in particular (Fakhoury 2014; Salloukh 2017; Miktashi 2017; Majed 2017). Indeed, Maya Miktashia (2017: 170) defines political sectarianism as “the system of power-sharing that defines the Lebanese state.” Lebanese thinker Martin Accad builds on this, emphasizing that political sectarianism constitutes “the political system established after the Lebanese civil war in 1990, where corruption, fraud and embezzlement are justified by or cloaked in collective interest.” Similarly, Salloukh et al. (2015: 3) emphasize political sectarianism in Lebanon represents the “holistic, economic and ideological system that permeates almost every nook and cranny of Lebanese life, undergirded by a clientelist patronage network and a symbolic repertoire that incorporates large segments of Lebanese society into corporatized sectarian communities.”

Political sectarianism in Lebanon can be ‘observed’, first and foremost, through the design of the country’s public institutions. The Ta’if Agreement, which was signed in 1989 and formally marked the end of Lebanon’s 15-year civil war, explicitly structured and institutionalized political representation along sectarian lines. As Ezzedine and Noun (2020: 7-8) emphasize, “The Ta`if Agreement enshrined a political framework that placed sectarianism at the heart of all facets of political life; political representation; justice and security; and access to resources.” Salloukh et al. (2015: 21) similarly emphasize how the
Ta’if Accord was more than a political settlement between Lebanon’s warring parties to end the war, “it was rather a constitutional remaking of the sectarian order” (Ibid). Instead of improving sectarian modes of political subjectification and mobilization, “the Ta’if Accord consecrated sects as the main pillars of political identity and mobilization in postwar Lebanon” (Ibid). Meanwhile, state institutions have been intentionally engineered to reproduce sectarian subjects (Ibid: 175). In this context, scholars emphasize a constructivist approach, underlining that political sectarianism is not a product of a sectarian political culture or timeless primordial identities (Salloukh 2017: 215; Cammett 2019). Rather, it is a “consequence of a complex ensemble of institutional, clientelist, and discursive practices operating to produce and reproduce docile sectarian subjects driven by sectarian incentive structures” (Salloukh 2017: 220).

It is important to note that the political sectarianism enshrined in the Ta’if Agreement was, however, envisaged as a temporary mechanism to ensure equal representation of Lebanon’s religious communities. Article 95 of the Lebanese Constitution underlines that a national committee - headed by the President and made up of the prime minister, speaker of parliament, as well as political, intellectual and social figures - is to “take appropriate measures" (Hamd 2012: 3) after the implementation of Ta’if to ensure the abolishment of political confessionalism according to a transitional plan (Ibid). The article does not, however, specify a timeline for when these ‘appropriate measures’ should be implemented. In making its abolition an open-ended question, the article thus legitimized the arrangements' long-lasting character (Fakhoury 2014: 240). Indeed, in envisaging sectarianism as a temporary solution, the Ta’if Agreement effectively put into question the “validity of consociationalism as a permanent project for the Lebanese nation”, which, ironically, “rendered political sectarianism’s ‘transitory’ nature more permanent than ever” (Ibid). In other words, the distorted implementation of the post-war Agreement has allowed political sectarianism to become more deep-seated than ever, which has entrenched marginalization and exacerbated division among Lebanon’s sectarian communities (Salloukh 2017: 220). In this sense, Lebanon’s post-war political system, institutionalized by the Ta’if Agreement, significantly deviates from Lijphart’s consociational democracy model, particularly its prescriptions of ‘peaceful co-existence’ and the ‘maintenance of a sectarian balance among communities through a culture of accommodation’ (Lijphart 1977).
Yet, beyond understanding and explaining political sectarianism through Lebanon’s historical and institutional dynamics, it is also important to analyze “the internal factors that shape the process of sectarianization and sustain political sectarianism today” (Majed 2017). Although anchored in its institutional structure, “the reproduction of [political] sectarianism in Lebanon is the result of a much more complex material and symbolic process that involves a whole array of technologies of social production, material domination, and national imagination” (Salloukh 2017: 223). These factors are rooted in the social and political economy of sectarianism entrenched in Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system.

There is a distinctive structural relation between political sectarianism and Lebanon’s political economy. As underlined by Salloukh et. al (2015: 174), “sectarianism is reproduced by, and plays an instrumental role in sustaining, Lebanon’s lopsided and patronage-based rentier post-war political economy.” This political economy centers on the control of state institutions and resources by Lebanon’s ruling sectarian elite. In other words, Lebanon’s political system is designed in a way where central political leaders are not only representatives of their sect, but also the main providers of basic services, jobs, and security (Majed 2017: 283; Baumann 2016). This system, in which political leaders are simultaneously communal and institutional leaders, has effectively enabled Lebanon’s ruling establishment to “appropriate public resources and redistribute them to maintain sectarian groups through clientelism” (Ezzeddine and Noun 2020: 14). As a result, Lebanese citizens have become reliant on sectarian leaders - rather than state institutions - for social welfare, including basic services (Cammett 2015: 78). In the words of Rima Majed (2017):

“Far from being a choice, Lebanese nationals are trapped in a system whereby their very existence in the modern nation-state is determined by their sectarian belonging, and their political representation and access to state resources is at the mercy of their sectarian leaders or ‘patrons.’”

Political sectarianism has, therefore, paved the way for a ‘distorted incentive structure’ (Salloukh et al. 2020: 3) to develop, whereby it is connections to sectarian organizations and leaders - coupled with demonstrated loyalty to a sectarian party - that constitute the benchmarks for citizen access to social welfare (Cammett 2015: 78). In this ‘distorted incentive structure’, it is almost impossible for Lebanese citizens to think of alternatives to
the political economy and hegemony of the sectarian system, given that their social welfare is reliant on it. Building on this, Majed (2017) underlines how, “the nuts-and-bolts of political sectarianism lie in the system of the non-state (or para-state) welfare and security, known as clientelism”.

In the social economy of sectarianism, which has developed in large part on the basis of Lebanon’s ‘sectarianized’ political economy, Lebanese citizens do not represent ‘citizens’ as such (Majed 2017). Rather, they are “members of religious ‘communities’ through which they subscribe to the state in order to access their political and social rights” (Ibid). Within this system, virtually all aspects of citizens’ social lives - be it marriage, divorce, birth, death, or inheritance - are tied to the laws of religious courts (Fakhoury 2014: 232). Meanwhile, political representation is closely bound to citizens’ sectarian identity. Lebanese sectarian communities, therefore, represent not only the “boundary markers in Lebanon’s social stratification”, but also the “building blocks structuring political relations” (Fakhoury 2014: 232).

Political sectarianism is also characterized by substantial material and legal coercive capabilities. The numerous cross- and anti-sectarian protests that have taken place in Lebanon over the past decade demonstrate that political sectarianism is not timeless, nor is it the by-product of “some immutable Lebanese essence” (Salloukh 2017: 232). Rather, sectarian identities are “historically constructed and reproduced continuously through a set of institutional, clientelist, and discursive practices that obviate the emergence of cross-sectarian alternatives” (Ibid). In other words, political sectarianism is not an inevitable reality. It was institutionalized through the 1989 Ta’if Agreement, and consequently maintained and entrenched through the clientelist and discursive practices, including co-optation and violence, employed by country’s ruling elite.

From this point, the dynamics of political sectarianism in Lebanon become inherently clear. Within Lebanon’s power-sharing system, different groups have differentiated relationships to power: while one group - in this case: Lebanon’s ruling establishment - is awarded the right to political monopoly, others - that is: Lebanese citizens - are deemed politically subordinate, dependent on the latter for basic goods and services (Cheterian 2021: 188).
This incentivizes clientelist political economic and institutional practices that work to further entrench sectarian identities, thereby “derailing prospects for state-building, and obfuscating the emergence of national integrative movements” (Salloukh and Verhej 2017: 172). Indeed, the “logic of political sectarianism denies Lebanese their existence as citizens with inalienable political and social rights, reducing them instead to unequal members of state-recognized sectarian communities” (Salloukh 2017: 232). This logic, inevitably, deems Lijphart’s consociational democracy as largely superfluous to understand the country’s post-war realities. Indeed, instead of ensuring ‘peaceful co-existence’ and ‘a culture of accommodation’ among Lebanon’s sectarian communities, Lebanon’s power-sharing system actually deeply entrenched the sectarian divisions it originally sought to resolve. This has resulted in a “self-perpetuating capture of the state by a political sectarian elite that both lacks national accountability and undermines government commitment to the public good” (Salamey 2009: 84). It has also established a state “notorious for its immobility and its inability to implement policies that would promote progress and prevent deterioration” (Ibid).

Thus, it is clear that Lebanon’s consociational arrangements, as well as its post-war political realities, are more accurately and effectively understood through the lens of political sectarianism, rather than consociational democracy theory. This understanding allows us to identify the distinctive features – as well as the dilemmas – enshrined in Lebanon’s ‘sectarian consociation’. On the basis of this theoretical framework, the following chapter explores how the country’s political sectarian power-sharing system has entrenched recurring dilemmas that have worked to systematically undermined political change and meaningful reform in the country.
CHAPTER 3.

3.1. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: Recurring dilemmas enshrined in Lebanon’s power-sharing system

A crippling economic downturn and a deteriorating humanitarian situation - coupled with the twin shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion - have brought Lebanon to the very brink of total collapse. It is no secret that reforms are urgently needed if Lebanon is to have any hopes of overcoming the multifaceted crises it currently faces. This has repeatedly been underlined by international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations, Lebanese think tanks and NGOs such as the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, as well as by Lebanese citizens themselves. For years, Lebanese citizens have been demanding the “implementation of political and institutional reforms to end the sectarian political system that fuels networks of patronage and clientelism and allows for the kind of systemic corruption that has left the country grappling with the worst economic and fiscal crisis since the end of the war” (Noureddine and Roccatello 2020: 1).

The long-standing dissatisfaction with government inactivity came to a head in 2015, when mass protests erupted in light of a waste crisis that became a potent reflection of state dysfunction. Represented by new grassroots movements such as the “You Stink” and “We Want Accountability” movement, these demonstrators called for an overthrow of Lebanon’s sectarian political system along with political accountability (Ibid). This demand was repeated by protesters during the 2019 October Revolution, who also called for the overthrow of Lebanon’s corrupt sectarian system. In the aftermath of the Beirut blast, protesters took to the streets again to call for an end to Lebanon’s destructive politics of sectarianism. The underlying narrative driving these movements was not solely the protest events themselves, but was based on a broader demand for reform and a gradual overthrow of the country’s entrenched sectarian political system. The international community has also long insisted that Lebanon implement a number of reforms as a precondition for financial assistance and support. Priority reforms identified by the IMF in 2021 included: confronting
the fundamental problem of weak governance, implementing a fiscal strategy, pursuing a comprehensive restructuring of the financial sector, and establishing a credible monetary and exchange rate system (Georgieva 2021).

Nevertheless, despite broad agreement on the diagnosis of the socio-economic challenges facing Lebanon, and despite largely concurring views on what reforms are necessary to help the country find a pathway out of the crisis, reforms have perpetually failed to materialize (Bourhourou et al. 2021: 29). The obstacles to reforms are intricately linked to the nature of Lebanon’s power-sharing system, particularly the features of its ‘sectarian consociation’ analyzed in Chapter 2. This chapter highlights three recurring dilemmas, rooted in Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system, that affect governance and state capacity and, in turn, perpetually create obstacles for efforts to initiate and implement change and reform within the system.

The notion of ‘recurring dilemmas’ constitutes the analytical framework upon which this studies’ analysis will be built. The framework builds on existing secondary literature, relying primarily on scholarly journals and books. Reports and findings from Lebanese think tanks, NGOs and journalists, such as the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies and Public Source, will also be integrated into the analysis. In particular, the analytical framework adopts and builds on the notion of recurring dilemmas first conceptualized by Tamirace Fakhoury in her article: “Debating Lebanon’s power-sharing model: An opportunity or an impasse for democratization studies in the Middle East?” (2019). In her analysis, Fakhoury explores how consociational arrangements in Lebanon, nested in the politics of sectarianism, entrench dilemmas regarding democratization, peace, and social justice. She identifies three core dilemmas that have recurred in Lebanon’s political trajectory: its power-sharing formula’s proneness to political deadlock, its leaders’ dependence on external powers to gain political leverage and predominance, and its weak responsiveness to demands from below (Fakhoury 2019: 9-10). Her work sets up an assessment framework for Lebanon’s consociational performance in the post-2011 period and shows how Lebanon’s sectarian-led system feeds on cyclical dilemmas and chronic tensions, to the detriment of effective governance and democratization (Ibid).
Albeit not directly characterizing them as ‘dilemmas’, a number of other scholars focusing on Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system have identified numerous ‘perils of Lebanese power-sharing’ that have worked together to undermine change and reform in the country (Rothchild and Roeder 2005; Bourhrous et al. 2021; Fakhoury 2019). For example, Rothchild and Roeder (2005), in their article “Power-sharing as an impediment to peace and democracy,” identify seven underlying characteristics of Lebanon’s power-sharing system that converge to thwart the consolidation of peace and democracy in Lebanon. These include the system’s limits on democracy, exacerbated particularly by the country’s ruling elites who capitalize upon sectarianism as a divisive tool to consolidate their own power (Ibid: 36). It also includes the inadequate enforcement of consociational principals; the institutional weapons that have enabled elites to challenge the power-sharing agreement; as well as the government inefficiency and government rigidity enshrined within Lebanon’s political system. Bourhrous and al. (2021) also underline government inefficiency - particularly the system’s proneness to political deadlock and immobilism - as a central limitation of ethno-sectarian power-sharing in Lebanon.

Building on these ‘flaws’ and ‘perils’ of Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system, this following chapter develops an analytical framework around the notion of the system’s core ‘recurring dilemmas’. This notion was chosen on the basis that it provides an analytical benchmark for assessing Lebanon’s ‘political sectarian’ power-sharing system, particularly why it perpetually fails to initiate and implement overdue and necessary reforms. Utilizing this notion, this study identifies three core dilemmas that have recurred in Lebanon’s political dynamics – to the direct detriment of political change and meaningful reform. These dilemmas include: the proneness of its power-sharing formula to governmental deadlock, its institutionalization of impunity, as well as the growing chasm between elite-led politics and grassroots demands. In describing and analyzing these dilemmas, this chapter also explores numerous examples of when these endemic dilemmas have perpetually manifested in Lebanon’s contemporary post-war politics, particularly in crisis situations.

It is, however, important to note that the analytical framework developed in this chapter is by no means all-encompassing. There are a range of other factors – particularly external ones – that also play a significant role in undermining stability and governance in the
country. Nonetheless, for the purpose of keeping this study focused and concise, this thesis concentrates on exploring the internal dynamics of the country’s ‘sectarian consociation’, with a view to uncovering how its distinctive features work together to undermine political change and reform. It is equally crucial to emphasize that the analytical framework does not intend to suggest a causality mechanism between Lebanon’s power-sharing system and the examples analyzed in the following, including the Beirut blast. Rather, it intends to put the tragedy in the context of Lebanon’s broader political history of instability and ineffective governance in order to showcase the recurrent nature of these dilemmas.

LEBANON’S RECURRING DILEMMAS – IN(ESCAPABLE)?

3.1. Dilemma One
An Immobile system? Lebanon’s tapestry of political deadlock

“Paralysis is both a feature and an output of the political system, in which self-preservation is valued over the need for reform.”
(Salamey 2009: 84).

This section explores and analyzes the first dilemma rooted in Lebanon’s sectarian consociation, namely its “proneness to political deadlock” (Fakhoury 2019: 10). According to Imad Salamey (2009: 84), the sectarian political system that emerged in the post-war era was one “notorious for its immobility and its inability to implement policies that would promote progress and prevent deterioration.” Indeed, since the signing of the Ta’if Agreement in 1989, Lebanon’s political system has been characterized by institutional immobility and perpetual political deadlock. This immobility has made it hard to elect a president or form a cabinet, least yet implement key policies on fundamental reform issues. The following section explores and analyzes, based on empirical evidence, the ways in which Lebanon’s sectarian consociation perpetuates political paralysis - and how these systematic periods of deadlock have undermined political change and reform.

The roots of Lebanon’s immobility can be traced to the provisions of Lebanon’s Ta’if Agreement. The Agreement – which institutionalized the country’s post-war power-sharing formula – gave all three major sectarian communities equal representation in government.
It failed, however, to institutionalize appropriate arbitration mechanisms in Lebanon’s political system (Fakhoury 2009: 331). Although Lebanon’s constitution lays out a general framework for the formation of government, “there are no clear regulations defining how that process is to be implemented, nor are there clear consequences for failing to meet the established deadlines” (Noureddine and Roccatello 2020: 8). In other words, the Agreement failed to enshrine a deadline for government formation, nor did it award the Prime Minister with a ‘deadlock-breaking’ mechanism to expedite such a process (Schattevoet 2021: 97). Instead, it established a political system where government decisions, including on fundamental policy issues, are dependent on rival parties’ ability to reach consensus. This has proven painstakingly difficult, given the divergent positions of Lebanon’s three main sectarian communities - namely the Christians, Shi’ites and Sunnis. The Ta’if Agreement also awarded Lebanon’s main parties with a veto over government decisions, which sectarian leaders have relentlessly employed to block decisions on key issues. As observed by Fakhoury (2019: 331): “in equalizing the three leaderships into the ‘Troika’, the Ta’if Agreement unleashed the “demons of discord.” What’s more, in situations of Troika disagreement, the Parliament and the Cabinet – instead of serving as an arena to overcome discord and enforce checks and balances – became more of “an extension of the centers of power” (Ibid). This practice of ‘collective-decision making’ – coupled with the indiscriminate use of vetoes by Lebanon’s key decision-makers – has proven impossible to reach agreement on fundamental issues, including the election of the president and the formation of Lebanon’s executive cabinet.

Governmental deadlock and political crises have become a defining feature of Lebanon’s sectarian political system, particularly since the assassination of the country’s former prime minister, Rafik Hariri, in 2005. The assassination triggered a chain of demonstrations - known today as the Cedar Revolution or the Independence Uprising - that called for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the end of Syrian influence in politics (Kurtulus 2009: 197). The revolution did, in fact, successfully lead to the complete withdrawal of Syrian troops on 27 April 2005. The withdrawal, however, created a deep political rift between two of Lebanon’s main political alliances, who came to be known as the 14 March and the 8 March Alliance. The former is made up of Saad Hariri’s Sunni Future Movement, Kataeb and the Lebanese Forces, who openly oppose Syria’s presence, as well
as any other forms of foreign interference, in Lebanon. The latter comprises Michel Aoun’s Maronite Free Patriotic Movement, and the Shia parties Hezbollah and Amal, who are united by their pro-Syrian stance. This divide has significant shaped the Lebanese political process in the years and even decades following Hariri’s assassination. Above all, it significantly contributed to exacerbating divisions between Lebanon’s sectarian communities, which has, in turn, entrenched perpetual cycles of political deadlock and crises. As underlined by Bourhrous et al. (2021: 6), the division “brought Lebanon into a cycle of relentless political haggling and bargaining, political crises and deadlocks, the heavy cost of which can be clearly seen in the sluggishness of government action and the weakness of the state.”

Since the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, all three of Lebanon’s branches of government have been disabled on different occasions. The most frequent - and arguably, most destructive - episodes of political deadlock can be observed at the executive level. On numerous occasions, Lebanon’s divided parliament has failed to achieve the two-thirds majority required to elect a new president. In 2007, it took Lebanese MPs six months to elect a new president after President Emile Lahoud’s term expired (Bahout 2016). In a similar fashion, after President Michel Suleiman’s term came to an end, the Lebanese National Assembly’s failure to elect a new president triggered a two and a half-year presidential vacuum (Ibid). This vacuum, as Badran (2020: 189) underlines, “was undoubtedly the most significant political impasse for Lebanon in the 21st century.” It wasn’t until 31 October 2016, on the forty-sixth attempt of the Lebanese National Assembly, that the country succeeded in naming a new president, Michel Aoun (Ibid: 190).

The formation of Lebanon’s government, the Council of Ministers, which the country’s prime minister is tasked with, has also proven extremely difficult. A crucial case in point manifested in 2006, when five Shi’a ministers, representing Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Amal parties, withdrew from government after their demands for a veto power in the cabinet were rejected. This, coupled with an ongoing presidential vacuum, resulted in a protracted 18-month political crisis that lasted until 2008. Although Lebanon was able to break free from its crippling paralysis through the signing of the Doha Agreement on 21 May 2008, another political deadlock ensued shortly after, when prime minister Saad Hariri failed to
form a government for five months following the 2009 parliamentary elections. It took Hariri’s successor and political rival, Najib Mikati, the same amount of time to form his Council of Ministers after Hariri’s government fell in January 2011. On 24 May 2018, Saad Hariri was appointed as Lebanon’s prime minister for a second time. Hariri’s government did not, however, come into fruition until January 2019, after laborious political negotiations and an 8-month political deadlock (Badran 2020: 190). It did not take long for Lebanon’s executive branch to be paralyzed once again. After the resignation of now ex-Prime Minister Hassan Diab and his cabinet in the wake of the Beirut blast in 2020, Lebanon’s government was paralyzed by a political stalemate for thirteen-months, during which the country was ruled by a powerless and ineffective caretaker government “which narrowly circumscribed prerogatives and minimal political support” (Crisis Group 2021).

Deadlocks have also plagued Lebanon’s legislative and judiciary branches in the past decades. Lebanon’s latest parliamentary elections were held in 2018, “nearly five years after they were constitutionally due” (Bourhrous et al. 2021: 7). This delay was caused by the Lebanese parliament’s failure to agree on an electoral law (Badran 2020: 189). Instead of engaging in further negotiations, in 2013, Lebanon’s parliament extended its own mandate for 17 months, with further extensions in 2014 and 2017 (Ibid). This means that in 2013, “people in Lebanon were [directly] prevented from exercising their right to vote, in violation of Articles 21 and 24 of the Constitution and Lebanon’s international human rights obligations” (Noureddine and Roccatello 2020: 8). The inability of Lebanon’s sectarian parties to agree on an electoral law has been a principal issue of contention driving Lebanon’s political and legislative crises in the past decade. Sectarian leaders have repeatedly sought to enact “electoral laws tailored to their own sectarian calculations and designed to enable them to maximize power” (Badran 2020: 189). Due to the structure of Lebanon’s political system, this pursuit of self-interests by Lebanon’s sectarian elite has laid the foundation for extended crises and protracted political gridlocks. Indeed, it was not until June 2017 that Lebanon’s political parties were able to agree on a new electoral law that provided the foundation for the May 2018 parliamentary elections.

Lebanon’s judiciary sector - particularly the Lebanese Constitutional Council - has also been paralyzed on several occasions. The Lebanese Constitutional Council serves - under Article
19 of the Lebanese constitution - to “review the constitutionality of laws and to arbitrate the results of the presidential and parliamentary election” (Ibid). The Council is composed of ten members, five of which are elected by the Parliament and five of which are appointed by the Council of Ministers by a two-thirds majority (Sleiman and Poll 2018). In 2008, the Council of Ministers delayed appointing five members of the Constitutional Council until May 2009, thereby disabling it from carrying out its duties for more than a year. Moreover, according to Lebanese law, the mandates of the Constitutional Council’s judges appointed in 2009 expire six years after their appointment - that is: in May 2015 (Ibid). However, when that time came, the Council of Ministers again failed to appoint new judges, meaning that the 2018 parliamentary elections were held under the supervision of an ‘expired’ Constitutional Council (Ibid). This was, however, not the first time that the Parliament and Council of Ministers failed to appoint new members of the Council. In 2003, the mandate of five constitutional judges expired, yet nothing was done to appoint replacements (Badran 2020: 190). Lebanon also lived without a Supreme Court – known as the Supreme Judicial Council - for four years between August 2005 and 2009 (Ibid).

This historic overview of Lebanon’s tapestry of political deadlock - spanning across its executive, legislative and judiciary branches - highlights the utter immobility of Lebanon’s post-war sectarian power-sharing system. Essentially, for more than three out of the past 10 years, Lebanon has been paralyzed by caretaker governments that were both unable - and, for the most part, unwilling - to effectively respond to citizen’s demands, much less embark on overdue political and legal reforms in a meaningful way. This has also been coupled with deadlocks in the country’s judiciary and legislative sectors.

The inevitable result of this immobility has been the development of a “tremendous sluggishness” (Badran 2020: 191) within Lebanon’s government, particularly reflected in its inability to pass laws and reforms that correspond with citizen’s needs and demands. In the majority of cases, it has taken the National Assembly a decade - or more - to effectively vote on a law. The most crucial case in point was the failure by Lebanon’s parliament to adopt a government budget between 2005 and 2017. This means that “the consecutive cabinets were free to use public money without any authorization or scrutiny from the representative of the Lebanese people for twelve years” (Ibid). Another example is a draft
law proposed in 2001 by a member of parliament to create a new centralized body to coordinate all disaster and relief efforts. Some 19 years later, the law remains in limbo, as Lebanon’s parliamentarians disagree over the body’s prerogatives and its sectarian composition (Salloukh 2020).

Political crises and governmental deadlock have also precluded major investments in some of Lebanon’s most crucial sectors, given that investments are contingent on the backing of all sectarian groups and leaders. The result is crumbling infrastructure and failing public service delivery. This development has particularly been reflected in Lebanon’s collapsing electricity sector, which is currently unable to supply Lebanese citizens with more than two hours of electricity per day (Durgham and Sly 2021). Thus, the ultimate effect of Lebanon’s tapestry of political deadlocks is a substantial - and ever widening - gap “between the priorities of the rulers and the interests of the governed” (Badrran 2020: 191), whereby the demands and needs of citizens - particularly for reform and basic services - are perpetually left unfulfilled.

3.2. Dilemma Two

An invincible shield? Lebanese power-sharing and its institutionalization of impunity

“For the last twenty-five years, successive Lebanese governments and the political elite have worked hard to undermine all shapes and forms of accountability in our political system.” (Atallah 2015).

In democratic systems, justice is regarded as one of the key principles through which a successful exercise of governance can be achieved. Yet, to be effective, justice relies on the rule of law to prevail, whether between groups of individuals, or between the ruler and the ruled. However, in Lebanon, “justice is relative and selective, granted and withheld according to the interests of those who control it” (Minteshreen 2022). This selective and relative justice can be traced back to Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system. Not only does the political sectarian system compound institutional immobilism and entrench recurring political stalemates, but the system has also enshrined impunity at the country’s highest levels. A lack of checks and balances and the obfuscation of an independent
judiciary - rooted in Lebanon’s sectarian political system - have entrenched a lack of accountability within the country’s political system. This has systematically worked to undermine calls for justice, as well as for political change and reform. As Noureddine and Roccatello (2020: 1) underline: Lebanon’s power-sharing system “set the stage for a severely flawed and selective justice system that grants near total impunity at every turn to Lebanon’s elite and only makes weak attempts to seek justice in a few high-profile cases, while denying it to ordinary people”. As a result, amnesties and a failure to prosecute those responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law have come to characterize Lebanon’s post-war politics.

Eighteen months after the signing of the Ta’if Accord which ended Lebanon’s 15-year civil war, “a general amnesty was granted for all political and wartime crimes committed before March 28, 1991, with the exception of assassinations and attempted murders of ‘religious dignitaries, political leaders, Arab and foreign diplomats’” (Noureddine and Roccatello 2020: 2). Although justified on the basis of ongoing demobilization efforts, the amnesty law has significantly undermined accountability by shielding perpetrators, as well as introducing discriminatory and unequal legal protections. For example, since the promulgation of the law, few cases involving ‘ongoing and repeated crimes’, such as enforced disappearance, have successfully resulted in convictions (Ibid: 3). Similarly, prosecutions involving political assassination have been rare. After 11 years in prison, Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces and the only warlord to be found guilty and sentenced to life in prison for political assassinations committed during the conflict, received a special pardon under Law 677 in 2005 (Ibid). Meanwhile, twelve years after it was officially established, the investigation into the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri remains in limbo. The only individual that has been indicted in absentia by the UN’s Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), Salim Ayyash, has still not been brought to justice (Hanania 2021). Unfortunately, the work of the STL has failed to make a significant dent in “Lebanon’s vast justice deficit” (Noureddine and Roccatello 2020: 3). Instead, war criminals and perpetrators of serious human rights violations have been able to walk free, “entrench power, accumulate wealth, and wield political influence to block any changes that could threaten their position or that of their allies” (Noureddine and Roccatello 2020: 3). Inevitably, this has had devastating consequences for the victims of conflict, as well as on Lebanon’s system of
government. Above all, it has created a ‘culture of impunity’ for Lebanon’s political elite, whereby “the same leaders and parties still retain power three decades after the war ended, and they have beat back every challenge to their authority” (Bazzi 2021).

In post-war Lebanon, impunity has also been entrenched by the “violations of the principle of separation of powers stipulated in the Preamble to the Lebanese Constitution” (Noureddine and Roccattello 2020: 4), which was established in 1926 and amended by the Ta’if Agreement. The Preamble reads: “The political system is established on the principle of separation, balance and cooperation amongst the various branches of government.” Unfortunately, in Lebanon’s post-war era, this separation has not been respected, “as the executive branch plays a self-appointed ‘preeminent’ role over the legislative [and judiciary] branch” (Sfeir 2021). In other words, the executive has direct control over the judiciary, meaning that there is, in turn, limited and ineffective parliamentary oversight of the executive branch. The relevant tools provided to parliamentarians by law, such as conducting interrogations, forming parliamentary committees, and withdrawing confidence from a minister of the government as a whole, have rarely been utilized (Noureddine and Roccattello 2020: 3). Moreover, the practice of establishing ‘national unity governments’, which are to include representatives from all of Lebanon’s political blocs in parliament, has significantly restricted parliament’s ability to exercise effective oversight. As a result, government administrations have been able to operate virtually unchecked (Ibid).

Monitoring agencies tasked with ensuring the proper performance of public administrations and appropriate spending of public funds, such as the Court of Audit and the Civil Service Board, are also directly affiliated with - and influenced by - Lebanon’s executive branch, notably its different sectarian parties (Ibid: 4).

Article 20 of the Lebanese Constitution also explicitly prescribes the independence of the judiciary. It reads: “The judges are independent in the exercise of their duties.” Judicial independence, a key aspect of the principle of separation of powers, refers to the independence of judges, courts, and the judiciary from the executive branch - notably the influence of political party members and leaders (Ramseyer 1994: 722). Yet, in practice, Lebanon’s judiciary lacks both administrative and fiscal autonomy. Indeed, in the post-war era, the country’s judiciary has become a mere “extension of the ruling elite’s influence and
patronage networks” (Chehayeb 2020). This is reflected most notably in Lebanon’s highest judicial authority, the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), often referred to as the Higher Judicial Council. The primary responsibility of the SJC is to oversee “the good functioning of the judiciary, its dignity and its independence, and the good performance of courts” (Daoud and Mansour 2010: 22). This also includes ensuring the independence of Lebanese judges. The composition of the SJC is, however, a source of grave concern. The judicial authority is composed of ten members, eight of which are appointed by a cabinet degree, which is passed by Lebanon’s executive authority upon the proposal of the Minister of Justice (Harb 2019: 10). The remaining two judges are elected by the Supreme Court’s – also known as the Court of Cessation’s - president and associate judges (Ibid). In other words, the executive branch has the power to appoint eight out of the Council’s ten members. Worse yet, the executive is able to appoint or reject candidates for the Council on any basis, without having to provide any adequate justification (Ibid: 11). These decisions are also not subject to any form of appeal. As a result, in almost all cases, the appointment of judges to the SJC are made not on the basis of merit, but rather on the basis of political and sectarian affiliations (Ibid). On top of its lack of political independence, the SJC is also unable to control its financial activity, which is in the hands of the Ministry of Justice (Chehayeb 2020).

Thus, ultimately, the composition of the SJC not only directly undermines the principle of separation of powers enshrined in Lebanon’s constitution, but it also makes Lebanon’s highest judicial authority extremely vulnerable to political interference by the executive, significantly compromising both its independence and impartiality. As Chehayeb (2020) accurately underlines: “Lebanon’s judiciary is neither financially nor administratively independent and has significant loopholes that prevent it from functioning autonomously and impartially as per its constitution.” Indeed, a survey conducted in 2016 by Sakker El Dekkene, a Lebanese NGO that aims to fight corruption in public administrations, found that only 14% of the Lebanese population trusts the judiciary. Out of all respondents, 64% mentioned political interference and the lack of judicial independence as the primary reason for their distrust (Sakker El Dekkene 2015: 5).

Another significant obstacle to effective accountability is the quasi immunity provided to ministers and parliamentarians by the country’s power-sharing system. Articles 39 and 40 of Lebanon’s constitution provides immunity to parliamentarians on the basis that it “allows
them to perform their duties effectively” (Noureddine and Roccatello 2020: 7). Although the parliament’s bylaws include steps on how this immunity can be lifted, this has rarely been done in practice. Lebanon’s constitution also stipulates that heads of state and government ministers can only be tried before a special court formed by the Parliament, the ‘High Council for the trial of presidents and ministers’ (Ibid). This Council has, however, never actually met, meaning that for the past twenty years, Lebanon’s political leaders have been granted quasi immunity by the country’s political system itself. The system’s impunity laws have come to play a significant role in the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut blast, particularly in undermining the ongoing domestic investigation into the tragic disaster (see Chapter 4.2.).

As underlined by one of Lebanon’s non-sectarian, progressive political parties Minteshreen, laws of immunities have placed government employees and officials “above accountability and liability thus facilitating their unlawful actions, which secures the continuation and expansion of their network of interests, services and benefits upon which their authority is based” (Minteshreen 2022).

Moreover, Lebanon’s Constitution sought to enshrine impeachment as a mechanism through which presidents and ministers could be removed from power on the grounds of alleged criminal conduct. Nevertheless, this accountability mechanism is limited to cases involving ‘high treason’ or the ‘violation of duties assigned to them’ (Noureddine and Roccatello 2020: 7). It also requires the approval of a two-thirds majority of all members of the Chamber of Deputies, “a bar that is almost impossible to meet given the disincentives created by the sectarian composition of the chamber” (Ibid). The Constitution also stipulates that impeachment trials should be held in front of the Supreme Council, which has, however, not been activated for years (Ibid). Tellingly, no president or minister has ever been impeached in Lebanon’s post-war political history.

Ultimately, the absence of effective checks and balances in Lebanon’s power-sharing system - coupled with the judiciary’s lack of independence and the immunity laws protecting the country’s political leaders - has entrenched impunity at the very heart of the country’s sectarian political system. This has resulted in a systematic failure by Lebanon’s post-war government to respond to calls for justice and accountability in the aftermath of crisis and disasters. It has also enabled the system’s political leaders to exploit the system to
systematically shield themselves from accountability. The Lebanese government has, through a policy of ‘state-sponsored amnesia’, endeavored to systematically silence investigations and formal inquiries into disasters and human rights violations (International Center for Transitional Justice 2014). The current actions being undertaken by Lebanon’s government to undermine the ongoing domestic investigation into the Beirut port explosion represent arguably the clearest manifestation of this dilemma - to be discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.

3.3. Dilemma Three
Exclusionary policymaking: An elite-led system divorced from grassroots demands

“The structure of the consociational framework in Lebanon [...] cuts ties between citizens and the state by allowing recognized sectarian groups to serve as intermediaries in many areas of life.” (Ezzedine and Noun 2020: 14).

As outlined in the introduction of this chapter, Lebanon’s post-war politics have been marked by systematic calls - by the country’s own citizens - for political change and reform to the sectarian power-sharing system, which they believe is at the very root of their political, social and economic demise. An analysis of Lebanon’s key episodes of contention and civil society upheaval since the end of the civil war reveals, however, that Lebanon’s political system has systematically failed to effectively institute any form of political change, least yet implement a sustainable reform program. In fact, in over three decades, “no deliberative processes have taken place between political and public spheres” (Fakhoury 2019: 18). Instead, Lebanon’s post-war political trajectory has been plagued by a growing disconnect between elite-led politics and politics from below, with devastating consequences for both the country and its citizens.

The roots of this ever-widening disconnect between elite-led politics and grassroots demands can be traced back to the distinctive features of Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system analyzed in Chapter 2, particularly its ‘sectarianized’ political economy. This political economy centers on the control of state institutions and resources by Lebanon’s ruling sectarian elite, whereby the country’s politicians are able to “appropriate public
resources and redistribute them to maintain sectarian groups through clientelism” (Ezzeddine and Noun 2020: 14). In effect, Lebanon’s public institutions now serve as “veritable sectarian or confessional bastions” (Bourhrous et al. 2021: 17). The Shia Amal Movement is, for example, considered “Lebanon’s deep state,” given the extensive clientelist networks it has established throughout the country’s public sector, such as the Ministry of Information and the Council of the South, both of which are considered as Amal’s ‘main patronage vehicles’ (Ezzeddine and Noun 2020: 15; Salloukh 2019: 48). Meanwhile, the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and the Shia Hezbollah Party dominate, respectively, the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation and the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (Salloukh 2019: 48). Awarding Lebanon’s sectarian elites with control over public state resources has rendered official public institutions as weak and inefficient. This has, in turn, enabled these elites to perform “state-like functions” in sectors such as healthcare, education, water, and electricity (Ezzeddine and Noun 2020: 17). The public sector has, thereby, become a tool instrumentalized by sectarian parties to ensure the dependence and loyalty of their constituents. In other words, in postwar Lebanon, citizens have become dependent on their sectarian leaders - rather than public institutions - for employment, as well as for other basic services such as healthcare, education and electricity (Ibid). This has, in turn, relegated Lebanese citizens to “unequal sectarian subjects compartmentalized in self-managed communities, rather than citizens with inalienable rights” (Salloukh et al. 2015: 2).

Inevitably, the structures of Lebanon’s ‘sectarianized’ political economy have caused the chasm between elite-led politics and politics from below to widen significantly. In enabling sectarian leaders to instrumentalize clientelist networks and weak public state institutions to maintain their own influence and authority, Lebanon’s political system has become starkly resistant to demands for reform stemming from Lebanese citizens (Ezzeddine and Noun 2020: 20). After all, reforms threaten to erode the religio-political model on which Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system - as well as the ruling elite’s own authority - is built. The country’s political leaders have thus made it their primary mission to exploit Lebanon’s political system and undermine any reforms that could undermine their grip on power. As Abdel Malik and Jamal Ibrahim Haidar (2021) accurately underline: “Politicians find it difficult to commit to reforming a system that benefits them.” The ultimate result of
this is, however, an elite-led political system that is completely divorced from grassroots demands, where basic services and the essential needs of citizens are systematically neglected.

A significant case in point of the disconnect between elite politics and grassroots demands is the lack of progress that has been made on legal reform. Since the signing of the Ta’if Agreement in 1989, Lebanon’s parliament has portrayed a particular lack of responsiveness to draft laws on civil marriage, civil personal codes and women’s rights. For example, former Lebanese president Elias Hrawi drafted a law in 1998 to legalize civil marriage. Yet, given that civil marriage would likely diminish the hold religious leaders have over their communities, parliamentarians quickly dismissed the draft. A similar draft law was again submitted by civil society organizations in 2011, but this has not yet been taken up by parliament (Fakhoury 2019: 18). A further law that has inspired significant mobilization across public, civil and academic platforms is the right of Lebanese women to pass their nationality onto their husbands and children. This initiative has, however, also been systematically blocked by the country’s elites, “on the grounds that it leads to naturalizing Palestinians” (Fakhoury 2019: 18), which “would upset Lebanon’s sectarian equilibrium” (Ibid).

The failure of Lebanon’s parliament to respond to demands for reform has become increasingly entrenched in the last two decades. A study carried out by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (Atallah 2018) revealed that “only a fraction of passed laws” in the time period between June 2009 and April 2017 effectively addressed citizens’ concerns and needs. The empirical study focused on citizen concerns that are sectoral in nature, namely health, education, water, and electricity. Out of the 352 laws passed in that time period, LCPS found that “only 31 addressed these concerns, comprising 9% of total laws passed” (Ibid). Even today, in the face of a crippling economic meltdown and a worsening humanitarian crisis, Lebanon’s ruling elite have again proven adamant against reforms that would undermine their interests or authority. This has been reflected in their lack of response to the ongoing fuel and electricity crisis, where the majority of Lebanese citizens are currently living without electricity for up to 23 hours a day (Durham and Sly 2021).
Lebanese citizens are also kept at bay from processes that directly affect their lives. Not only are they excluded from discussions and negotiations, “but they are treated on an individual rather than a collective basis, rendering them mere ‘aid recipients’” (Medico 2021: 7). This “chronic and deliberate exclusion of people from public policymaking” has fueled the spread of clientelism, and has significantly contributed to widening the gap between Lebanon’s ruling elite and the country’s citizens. Instead of distributing support and aid based on actual need, Lebanon’s political establishment has tended to support residents based on their religious or partisan affiliation. Lebanese families not affiliated with parties or associations, or lacking influential connections, have thus found themselves at an extreme disadvantage. This disadvantage has been reflected most prominently in the aftermath of the Beirut blast, where thousands of families were unable to receive the aid required to reconstruct their homes that had been destroyed. This alienation was further exacerbated by the reconstruction law passed in October 2021. While it established a committee to survey the damages of the blast, and allocate relief and compensation, the committee does not represent any rights holders, or affected residents for that matter. The ultimate result of this is that “residents remain outside decision-making centers where their fates are being sealed, only being able to access them through personal relationships and nepotism” (Medico 2021: 8).

This exclusion has, inevitably, also impacted the ability of Lebanese citizens to actively and meaningfully participate in Lebanese politics, which is rooted in the intrinsically ‘counter-revolutionary’ character of Lebanon’s power-sharing system. Indeed, the structures of Lebanon’s sectarian consociation “passively exclude the lower classes from any participation in political life” (Ibid: 5). Instead, the state makes “minimal participation and access to resources conditional on giving up post- or class-sectarian identities in favor of a homogenized imagining of the sect” (Ibid). As a result, the emergence of more inclusive, alternative forms of mobilization - including at a large-scale cross- and anti-sectarian level - are actively prevented, and demands for change and reform perpetually undermined. Indeed, since the signing of the Taif Agreement in 1989, “every effort to mobilize large-scale pressure for change has thus far failed to produce alternatives to challenge the existing system” (Salloukh 2020). While nascent opposition groups have formed, bringing with them new ideas on how to reform Lebanon’s power-sharing system, these groups have found it
inherently difficult to “assemble in broad coalitions and challenge the entrenched sectarian political system” (Salloukh 2020). One such group is the political party called ‘Citizens in a state’, which formed after the October 17 revolution. The party has presented an alternative plan for Lebanon rooted in the establishment of a civil state in the country, whereby society would be managed based on citizens’ needs and interests, rather than sectarian components (Naoufal 2020). These groups and parties have, however, faced stark resistance from Lebanon’s ruling establishment, which has employed strategies of “repression and coercion, alongside more subtle methods of co-optation and containment” to ensure Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system is maintained (Ibid).

Thus, in order to understand how Lebanon’s power-sharing system has evolved into one that is completely divorced from grassroots demands, it is essential to also analyze the discursive and coercive strategies that have been employed by the country’s ruling establishment. Two principal strategies Lebanese politicians have employed to maintain Lebanon’s sectarian political system and suppress political challengers is by utilizing counter-narratives and co-opting anti-regime demands by virtue of their strategic positions within government and within Lebanon’s sectarian communities (Geha 2019: 15). This can be observed in Lebanon’s post-war political trajectory.

Faced with mass protest movements - in 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2020 - all of which called for an end to Lebanon’s sectarian system, the country’s political leaders united on “co-opting protesters’ rhetoric and demands without making concessions” (Geha 2019: 15). They successfully did so in two ways. First, by publicly claiming that they agree with and support the demands being made by the protesters. Second, by showing how they and their allies stand behind and are part of the protest movement (Ibid). This made it inherently difficult for the protest movement to construct an ‘us-versus-them’ narrative, as an activist protesting with the 2015 YouStink movement underlined: “How were we supposed to mobilize if those we were mobilizing against said that they agreed with us?” (Ibid). During the 2019 revolution, Lebanon’s ruling elite employed these same co-optation strategies aimed at undermining and fragmenting the protest movement. Tellingly, as soon as the protests broke out in October 2019, Lebanese political parties were quick to co-opt
revolutionary hashtags and messaging, incorporating them into their own communication strategies (Ibid).

Another strategy that has systematically been employed by Lebanon’s ruling elite to demobilize protest movements and obstruct demands for reform is the deployment of counter-narratives. Since the end of the civil war, Lebanon’s politicians have turned Lebanon’s ‘sectarian consociation’ into a security issue (Nagle 2020: 140). They have used the concept of ‘common coexistence’ (*al-*’aysh al-mushtarak) to claim that the current sectarian system is the only means by which to foster political stability and security in Lebanon. Any attempts to reform or overturn the system thus pose an existential threat to the very essence of coexistence in Lebanon - or so the country’s leaders systematically claim. For example, in light of the 2019 revolution, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah claimed that while the Hezbollah first hailed the popular protests, these have turned out to be “politically exploited by foreign powers and suspicious sides inside Lebanon,” (Haidar 2019) and threaten to undermine the country’s political system which “must be preserved” (Ibid). Such counter-narratives have been driven by Lebanon’s political elite over decades and with one sole purpose: to discredit non-sectarian, anti-regime protest movements and obstruct reform that could undermine their authority. Tellingly, no legal, political, regulatory or policy measures were taken to address protesters’ demands after 2011, 2015, 2019 or 2020 (Bourhrous et al. 2021: 12). The inevitable consequence of this has been an ever-widening gap between elite-led power-sharing and politics from below, whereby Lebanon’s ruling establishment systematically proves unable - and for the most part, unwilling - to respond to demands for reforms, least yet to account for citizen’s grievances.

Arguably the most tragic manifestation of this growing chasm between elite-led politics and grassroots demands, coupled with Lebanon’s other two ‘recurring dilemmas’, can be observed in the lead-up to, and aftermath of, the Beirut blast - as the following chapter analyses.
CHAPTER FOUR.

THE TRAGIC TALE OF CONVERGENCE: The manifestation of Lebanon’s recurring dilemmas in the Beirut blast

On 4 August 2020, a massive explosion tore through the port of Beirut as hundreds of tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded. The tragic blast left more than 200 people dead, 6,000 injured and a quarter of a million homeless (Bazzi 2021). For a brief moment, it seemed that the disaster – now labeled the third worst non-nuclear explosion in history (Amos and Rincon 2020) – would force a moment of reckoning in the country. Yet, over eighteen months later, the country is even worse off than it was on 4 August 2020. In the aftermath of the explosion, Lebanon was paralyzed by a thirteen-month political stalemate, during which the country was ruled by a powerless and ineffective caretaker government that proved incapable of implementing necessary measures to curb Lebanon’s worsening crises. Meanwhile, despite systematic calls by Lebanese citizens for accountability and justice, Lebanon’s main sectarian parties have united to delay, impede, and undermine the domestic investigation into the tragic explosion. As a result, the gap between elite-led politics and grassroots demands has widened significantly in the aftermath of the blast, with the sectarian political system perpetually failing to implement a meaningful reform program to confront Lebanon’s multifaceted crises.

In analyzing the political deadlock, failing domestic investigation and growing chasm between elite-led politics and grassroots demands, the following chapter seeks to showcase how Lebanon’s ‘recurring dilemmas’ manifested in the aftermath of the tragic Beirut port explosion. Hereby, it is crucial to note that the following chapter by no means intends to suggest a causality mechanism between the country’s power-sharing system and the Beirut blast. Instead, it seeks to showcase a defining case study of how these recurring dilemmas have converged and manifested, and the tragic consequences such a manifestation can and will likely continue to have.
4.1 Dilemma One: Immobilism and Political Deadlock

The Beirut blast: a tragedy rooted in negligence and consociational failure

“Given the institutional framework of the port, the issue of overlapping ministerial jurisdiction, and competing political struggles over its management, the question of criminal negligence cannot be simply reduced to an individual affair. The entire system, constructed by the ruling class since the end of the civil war, is culpable.” (Advani 2020)

The tragic explosion that tore through the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 should be seen as an indirect consequence of the first ‘recurring dilemma’ rooted in Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system, namely the system’s inherent immobility. Not one of Lebanon’s sectarian parties was willing to take responsibility nor possessed the ability to decisively act on the presence of highly explosive materials in Beirut’s port, a fact that was known for years (Nakhoul and Bassan 2020). An investigation carried out by Reuters (Nakhoul & Bassam, 2020) revealed that the “first of many warnings about a deadly cargo in Beirut’s port came in February 2014, about three months after the arrival of the ship from Georgia” (Ibid). The investigation uncovered that a handful of senior political, judicial, security, military, and customs officials – including President Michel Aoun and former Prime Minister Hassan Diab – had been warned about the highly explosive materials (Nakhoul and Bassan 2020). Custom officials also said that their department had sent six letters to the judiciary demanding the removal of the ammonium nitrate (Advani 2020). In all six cases, they received no response (Ibid). Other investigations into the blast, carried out by Human Rights Watch (2020) and the World Bank (2021; 2022) reveal similar conclusions, namely that Lebanon’s ruling establishment, whose underlying task is to protect its citizens, knew about the over 2,000 tonnes of explosive ammonium nitrate being stored at the port for more than seven years and did nothing to remove the danger. As Hall (2020) underlines: “There are only two reasons why such a quantity of high explosive substance would be held in the port for so long: one is negligence, the other is corruption.”

Lebanon’s sectarian consociations’ proneness to institutional immobilism was also tragically highlighted in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion, whereby the country was again paralyzed by a crippling political deadlock. In light of mounting political pressure and anger
toward the government for their failure to prevent the disaster, now ex-prime minister Hassan Diab resigned along with his entire cabinet on 10 August 2020 - just six days after the explosion. Diab’s resignation was followed by thirteen months of political paralysis, during which Lebanon’s ruling establishment proved incapable of putting their interests aside to form a new government - despite ever-worsening financial and humanitarian crises. Instead, sectarian factions fought over control of the interior ministry, which will oversee the upcoming parliamentary elections in May 2022, as well as the justice ministry, which is playing a role in the ongoing domestic investigation into the port explosion (Bazzi 2021). As a result, for over thirteen months, Lebanon was ruled by a caretaker government “which narrowly circumscribed prerogatives and received minimal political support” (Crisis Group 2021).

The lack of a functioning executive for over one year meant that no reforms were carried out to overcome Lebanon’s multifaceted crises. Instead, the country’s financial meltdown continued to deepen, and its humanitarian crisis escalated significantly, with poverty rising to 70% (Abouzeid 2021). Although Lebanon’s new premier, billionaire Najib Mikati, finally managed to put together a government in September 2021, the “odds for swift progress toward reforms appear minimal” (El Houri 2021). In fact, the new government has yet to declare any concrete plan to address the country’s multilayered crises. As El Houri (2021) underlines: “The new government does not signal a break with the establishment that brought Lebanon to its knees.” Tellingly, less than two months after Mikati’s new government was formed, cabinet meetings were suspended for more than three months between 12 October 2021 and 17 January 2022. Hezbollah and Amal ministers had been boycotting the cabinet in a dispute over the conduct of the ongoing domestic investigation into the Beirut blast (Taleb 2022). Both Shiite parties have sought the removal of Judge Tarek Bitar who has been overseeing the blast probe. During this three-month period where the government failed to come together, Lebanon’s economic crisis became more entrenched with further depreciation in the value of the Lebanese pound (Abdallah 2022) Overdue talks with the International Monetary Fund also stalled (Abdallah 2022).

An analysis of the lead-up to and aftermath of the tragic Beirut port explosion thus reveals how Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system has perpetuated a political system prone to
institutional immobilism and political paralysis, both of which have had devastating consequences for the country and its citizens. Lebanon’s thirteen-month political stalemate following the resignation of Hassan Diab and his cabinet shortly after the blast - coupled with Hezbollah’s three-month boycott of cabinet meetings after a government was finally formed - significantly undermined progress on overdue reforms, causing the country’s multifaceted economic, humanitarian and social crises to deepen significantly. The Lebanese government’s response to the explosion did not, however, only underscore how Lebanon’s ‘sectarian consociation’ has entrenched institutional immobilism, but also impunity and a lack of accountability.

4.2 Dilemma Two: Power-sharing and Impunity Politics

The cost of impunity in the aftermath of the Beirut blast

“The investigation of the Beirut port blast […] shows the extent of political meddling in the justice system: certain judges have been removed and others appointed whose affiliation of sectarian background better suits the elites in power.” (Bourhrous et al. 2021: 34)

Lebanon’s second ‘recurring dilemma’, namely the sectarian power-sharing system’s institutionalization of impunity, has also dramatically manifested in the aftermath of the Beirut blast. Shortly after the tragic explosion, a domestic investigation was launched to uncover the causes of the blast and hold those responsible to account. Yet, more than eighteen months later, the Lebanese probe into the blast is yet to provide answers about who was responsible. In fact, the “embattled efforts of different judges to investigate have come to symbolize the sectarian political system’s entrenched culture of impunity, which systematically shields the country’s governing elite from accountability” (Thomsen 2021). Particularly, the capacity of the executive to influence the judiciary – coupled with the quasi immunity granted to political leaders – have worked together to significantly undermine the ongoing domestic probe into the tragic explosion.

Indeed, the latest report published by the International Crisis Group underscores that the Beirut blast probe has “raised more questions about its lack of transparency and political interference than it has provided answers about the blast” (Crisis Group 2021). This is, however, not due to the incompetence or a lack of trying by the investigative judge. Rather,
Lebanon’s ruling establishment has united to delay, impede and undermine the investigation.

In December 2020, Fadi Sawan, the first judge tasked with heading the investigation, charged now ex-prime minister Hassan Diab, along with three former ministers, with negligence (Blanford 2021). All of them refused to appear for questioning under the pretext that their jobs grant them immunity (Ibid). Shortly after, in February 2021, judge Sawan was removed by Lebanon’s highest court for “bias” following complaints put forth by two of the ministers (Ibid). Similar attempts have been made to remove his successor, judge Tarek Bitar. Bitar has made multiple requests to lift the immunity of several high-ranking politicians and ministers so they can be questioned on the suspicion of criminal negligence, including former prime minister Hassan Diab (Thomsen 2021). All of these requests have been undermined by Lebanon’s politicians, who have used legal procedures - such as filing lawsuits against Bitar - to cause the investigation to be suspended three times already (Shrago 2021; Thomsen 2021).

Alongside this, Lebanon’s ruling elite, particularly the Shiite militant group Hezbollah and its allies, have “launched a smear campaign against Bitar, accusing him of bias and attempting to cast doubt on his impartiality” (Thomsen 2021). In early August 2020, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah claimed that Bitar was using “the blood of victims to serve political interests” (El Houri 2021). Shortly afterwards, Nasrallah went even further by accusing the judge of targeting political allies of Hezbollah and demanding his immediate dismissal (Thomsen 2021).

Attempts to remove Bitar have, however, not succeeded thus far. In response, Lebanon’s sectarian ruling elite has resorted to a strategy it has honed over decades, namely “linking demands for accountability and justice to the threat of more violence or another civil war” (Thomsen 2021). Indeed, Lebanon’s former finance minister Ali Hassan Khalil - against whom Bitar has issued an arrest warrant - warned local media that the domestic investigation threatens to push Lebanon toward renewed sectarian strife. Ministers linked to the allied Shia parties Hezbollah and the Amal movement similarly warned in a cabinet meeting on 12 October 2021 that a failure to remove Bitar would lead to “trouble on the
streets” (Blanford 2021). Just two days later, on October 14, supporters of Hezbollah and Amal marched to Beirut’s Justice Palace to demand Bitar’s dismissal. The demonstration triggered the worst street violence Lebanon has witnessed in more than 13 years, killing seven people and injuring many more (Thomsen 2021).

These events have made one underlying point clear: Lebanon’s sectarian elites are more preoccupied with shielding themselves from accountability than helping their country confront the multifaceted crises that are bringing the country to the point of no return - and Lebanon’s sectarian political system has put in place all the tools to enable them to systematically do so. Indeed, several Shiite officials linked to Hezbollah recently boycotted cabinet meetings for three months - from 12 October 2021 to 17 January 2022 - over their steadfast demand to dismiss Bitar (Abdallah 2022). This three-month boycott not only postponed a number of overdue reforms, including talks with the IMF, but also put Lebanon on the path to recurrent, violent security incidents. The shameless obstruction of the domestic investigation has also led many Lebanese citizens - as well as international organizations such as Human Rights Watch (2020) and Amnesty International (2020) - to call for the establishment of an international, independent, and impartial fact-finding mission into the blast.

Ultimately, the failing investigation into the Beirut blast represents one of the most tragic and devastating manifestations of Lebanon’s political systems’ institutionalization of impunity. In granting its leaders with quasi immunity, and providing them with the space to politically influence the judiciary, the system has actively undermined justice and accountability for the Beirut port explosion. As a result, the country’s ruling elite appears to have taken comfort in the fact that, even if they get caught, they need not fear repercussions. After all, “if Lebanon’s leaders are able to shield themselves from a tragedy as grave as the Beirut port explosion, what they will get away with next does not bear contemplating” (Thomsen 2021).
4.3. Dilemma Three: An elite-led system divorced from grassroots demands

Mission impossible: the battle for reform after the Beirut blast

The tragic explosion that tore through the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 sent shockwaves throughout the entire country, and significantly intensified the frustration and anger of Lebanese citizens toward the sectarian political system and its leaders. Fueled by this fury over the corruption and negligence of their country’s ruling establishment, hundreds and thousands of Lebanese took to the streets of Lebanon’s cities and towns to demand political, social and economic reforms. Chanting the slogan “All of them means all of them,” Lebanese citizens also called for the removal of the country’s political leaders and an overhaul of the sectarian power-sharing system that guarantees their authority and immunity. Yet, just like many times before, the gap between elite-led power-sharing and the politics from below became ever-visible, and has continued to widen in the eighteen months since the tragic explosion.

This widening gap has been reflected in the political system’s perpetual failure to respond to even one of the demands made by the international community - or Lebanese citizens - since the tragic explosion. In the aftermath of the tragic port explosion, international donors, including the IMF, pledged aid that was conditional on a series of reforms, ranging from a “comprehensive restructuring of the country’s financial sector” to “tackling the fundamental problem of weak governance” (IMF 2020). Lebanese citizens have also made a number of demands for reform. These demands include a reform of the electricity sector to provide 24 hours of reliable power, which hasn’t been the case for over two decades but has gotten significantly worse over the past year (Momtaz 2020). Another demand that has frequently been made by Lebanese protesters is a reform of Lebanon’s banking system away from the “Ponzi scheme” model and toward a productive economy (Ibid). The passing of a reformed electoral law and the holding of free and fair parliamentary elections - with the possibility for non-sectarian groups to also run - is another frequent call that has been made by Lebanon’s population (Ibid). Being echoed throughout the country is also the demand for justice and accountability for the Beirut blast, which citizens believe will only be
achieved through the establishment of an international, independent, and impartial fact-finding mission into the explosion.

Nonetheless, in the eighteen months since the Beirut port explosion, Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system and particularly the rulers that dominate it have systematically failed to address any of these demands. Instead, they have relied on a “wait-and-see attitude” (Bourhrous 2021: 3) and resorted to “stop-gap measures” (Crisis Group 2021) that have not only deepened Lebanon’s multifaceted crises, but also shrunk the margin for addressing them. Indeed, two years into Lebanon’s crippling economic meltdown - and more than one and a half years after the tragic Beirut port explosion - Lebanon’s leaders have yet to decide on credible steps to confront the country’s cascading crises, let alone agree on a credible roadmap toward reform (Crisis Group 2021).

Lebanon’s ruling establishment has also responded to protests calling for accountability, justice and political change with well-honed strategies of violence and co-optation. For example, the Lebanese government employed batons and tear gas during a memorial protest held in July 2021 by families who lost their loved ones in the (Associated Press 2021). Moreover, on the one-year anniversary of the Beirut blast, water cannons and tear gas were deployed against protestors in a similar manner (Ibid). Lebanon’s ruling establishment is systematically employing this strategy of violence for one underlying reason: because the reforms demanded by the international community and Lebanese citizens threaten to obliterate the key mechanisms through which Lebanon’s established sectarian parties secure support from their constituencies. In other words, the reforms political leaders would have to actively support and carry out “carry political costs so high they have (and will continue to) prove prohibitive” (Ibid).

According to Crisis Group’s latest report (2021), the more likely scenario, in place of carrying out reforms, will be the rebalancing of the Lebanese economy at a significantly lower level and at the expense of the weakest members of society, “in an almost Darwinian fashion” (Ibid). The only group likely to benefit from such a brutal economic transformation is Lebanon’s ruling class itself, particularly given their political influence and capital abroad. Meanwhile, worsening economic positions will push those people with means and
qualifications to leave the country. In fact, the World Health Organization estimated that since October 2019, nearly 40% of Lebanon’s doctors and 30% of nurses had departed (Dadouch and Durgham 2021). Those who remain will be the less educated, poorer parts of the population, who will, in turn, become increasingly dependent on their political leaders for services such as jobs and healthcare (Crisis Group 2021).

This presents a vicious circle that will continue to put Lebanon on an extremely destructive future path. The country’s ruling establishment is going to continue to boycott all demands for reform because it directly benefits from doing so. As a result, Lebanon’s ruling elite will continue to enrich themselves as the rest of society grows poorer. This will, inevitably, cause the gap between elite-led politics and politics below to grow exponentially. In turn, Lebanese citizens will continue to grow more dependent on the politicians and the clientelistic networks they control - despite their primary wish being to break free from this dependency. Perpetually, it is a win-lose situation. Unfortunately, it is the Lebanese citizens that lose every time.
CHAPTER 5.

ASSESSING AND HUMANIZING THE IMPACTS: How the manifestation of Lebanon’s recurring dilemmas has undermined citizen well-being

“The current socio-economic order dominated by a coalition of communal elites has failed to establish a sustainable economic model that provides a decent level of services and opportunities to its citizens.” (Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2020)

The preceding chapters uncovered how permanent cycles of institutional gridlock, limited accountability, and an ever-growing chasm between elite-led politics and grassroots demands - Lebanon’s three ‘recurring dilemmas’ - have worked together to systematically undermine the state’s capacity - and willingness - to respond to demands for reform. This study’s final chapter seeks to explore and analyze the impacts this has had on the lives and well-being of Lebanese citizens. After all, while a vast amount of literature has been dedicated to exploring and analyzing the distinctive features of Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system, these explanations offer limited insights into how the system has shaped and impacted Lebanese citizens’ lives. For this reason, this final chapter seeks to examine how the perpetual manifestation of Lebanon’s recurring dilemmas has worked to undermine citizen well-being, particularly with regards to Lebanese citizens’ inability to access essential public services. In order to effectively do so, this chapter draws on surveys and interviews conducted by grassroots organizations as well as NGOs working on the ground in Lebanon. Blogs written and published by Lebanese citizens will also be integrated into the analysis.

5.1. A country in free-fall: Lebanon’s multifaceted crises

The concurrent manifestation of Lebanon’s recurring dilemmas in the aftermath of the Beirut blast - reflected in a 13-month political deadlock, a failing domestic investigation and an ever-growing chasm between elite-led politics and grassroots demands - has brought Lebanon to the brink of total collapse. Indeed, the country is currently in free-fall, propelled
by a series of economic, political, and humanitarian crises. The World Bank’s latest “Lebanon Economic Monitor (LEM)”, released in April 2021, classified the country’s economic and financial crises as “likely to rank in the top 10, possibly the top 3, [of the] most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century.” The report characterized Lebanon’s socio-economic crisis as a “deliberate depression,” rooted in government mismanagement and a lack of effective policy actions. In its World Report 2022, released on 13 January, Human Rights Watch builds on this analysis, underlining that “the corrupt and incompetent Lebanese authorities have deliberately” plunged the country into one of the worst economic crises in modern times, demonstrating a “callous disregard for the rights of the population that borders on the criminal” (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Since October 2019, the value of the Lebanese pound has depreciated by more than 90%, with inflation currently at 281% (Human Rights Watch 2022). Between August 2020 and August 2021, food prices increased by 550%. In 2019, Lebanon’s government announced that it would subsidize vital imports such as fuel, wheat, and medicine. However, in 2021, the country’s central bank ran out of money to finance these imports, which have had devastating effects on both the country and its citizens. Fuel shortages have caused electricity blackouts across the country, many of them lasting for up to 23 hours per day. Amid these shortages, hospitals, schools, and bakeries have struggled to continue operating.

The impacts of these crises on citizen’s well-being and basic rights has been unprecedented. In September 2021, approximately 4 million people - 82% of Lebanon’s population - were facing poverty, according to the United Nations multidimensional poverty index (2021). Purchasing power has also drastically decreased as a result, “with many families unable to afford essential needs, including education, electricity, food, health, hygiene items, and water” (World Bank Group 2021). Half of the country also lacks adequate health insurance and a third of the population has lost its jobs (Fouad et al. 2020: 2). The removal of subsidies on wheat, medicine, and other basic foods has disproportionately impacted marginalized communities, including refugees, migrant workers, and LGBTQ people (Human Rights Watch 2022). Meanwhile, promised social protection plans - including the dispersion of a $246 million World Bank loan, as well as a ration card program - have yet to be implemented by the Lebanese government (Ibid).
Despite these multifaceted - and ever worsening crises - Lebanon’s power-sharing system and its leaders have proven both incapable and unwilling to introduce comprehensive reforms that could mitigate their impact. This has, in turn, significantly impacted citizen well-being, particularly with regard to the provision of essential public services, as the following section highlights.

5.2. Failing public services

The failure of Lebanon’s power-sharing system to effectively respond to the country’s current socio-economic malaise means that Lebanese citizens’ ability to access healthcare, education, water and electricity services has become vastly inadequate. Human Rights Watch 2022 World Report (Human Rights Watch 2022) revealed that the human rights situation in Lebanon significantly deteriorated in 2021, with more than 80% of the country unable to access their basic rights, including health, education, and a sufficient standard of living, such as adequate housing and electricity (Ibid). The fragile state of Lebanon’s public service provision was also accurately reflected in an opinion survey carried out by the Arab Barometer in April 2021: 17% of respondents indicated that they are completely or partially satisfied with the healthcare system, while only 18% are completely or partially satisfied with the education system (Arab Barometer 2021: 23-24). This section examines how, in the context of Lebanon’s three consociational dilemmas analyzed in Chapter 3, the dynamics of sectarian power-sharing have penetrated various public sectors - such as the economy, healthcare, education and security - and significantly affected their performance.

Lebanon’s socio-economic crisis has had a devastating impact on the country’s healthcare sector. The double shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion, which severely damaged Lebanon’s hospitals, has put an immense strain on the country’s already fragile healthcare sector (Research for Health in Conflict 2022). Medical supplies and medicine, the majority of which are imported, are in extremely short supply. These shortages have already led to a number of deaths, and are increasingly putting the lives of patients with chronic illnesses, such as cancer, at life-threatening risk (Human Rights Watch 2022). Families across the country are now relying on packages from abroad to obtain
necessary medications and treatments. Meanwhile, electricity and fuel shortages “have pushed hospitals to imminent disaster with hospitals permanently closing or warning that they will be forced to cease their operations, threatening the lives of hundreds” (Ibid). A sharp decline in the value of nurses and doctors’ salaries has also triggered a mass exodus of healthcare workers, inevitably placing an additional strain on a sector already in deep crisis (Dadouch and Durgham 2021). Lebanon’s ruling establishment has, however, done little to protect the healthcare workers that continue to work tirelessly at the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government has also failed to disperse the billions of dollars that it owes hospitals. For example, the state owes Lebanon’s main COVID-19 treatment center, Rafik Hariri University Hospital, around 20 billion Lebanese Lira in unpaid bills for 2020 (Human Rights Watch 2022). In an effort to compensate for this and support Lebanon’s hospitals in responding to the surging COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank allotted 40 million in April 2021. Nonetheless, almost a year later, none of Lebanon’s hospitals have received any of this money, nor do they have any information as to how this money was spent (Ibid).

Lebanese students are also having increasingly difficulty accessing education. Although a total of 4.5% of Lebanon’s GDP is spent on the education sector, the government’s share is only 1.8% of GDP (Bourrous 2021: 5). This is because a significant amount of education spending is borne by households through private education (Ibid). Access to quality education is thus often dependent on socio-economic status, significantly undermining equitable access to education for all children. This means that “educational systems often contribute to perpetuating social inequalities rather than opening up opportunities for social mobility” (Bourrous et al. 2021: 22). Indeed, in light of the stark increase in poverty rates as a result of the country’s economic crisis, 54,000 Lebanese students have switched from private to public schools in 2021 alone (World Bank Group 2021: 44). Inevitably, this has put an additional strain on Lebanon’s public education sector, which was already facing “severe constraints in terms of available school infrastructure, education quality and service delivery” (Ibid). With a high likelihood that poverty rates will continue to rise, a high number of student drop-outs, particularly from marginalized households, is to be expected (Ibid: 45). Prolonged school closures due to COVID-19 lockowns have also disproportionately impacted students from marginalized households. In fact, about 60% of students in Lebanon
either do not have a computer or share one with at least three other family members (Ibid). Recent estimates by the World Bank Group (2021: 45) indicate that approximately 50% of Lebanese students are unable to access online learning.

It has also become increasingly difficult for Lebanese citizens to access electricity and water services. Lebanon’s paralyzing financial crisis - which has seen the value of the country’s national currency depreciate by more than 90% - has made it extremely difficult to secure the foreign currency needed to purchase fuel and other necessary imports. This has led to an acute fuel shortage that has particularly impacted the country’s already inefficient electricity sector. In 2020, Lebanon’s state-owned electricity provider - Électricité du Liban - was forced to cut its electricity production by 19%. Today, EDL is only capable of supplying Lebanese households with two or three hours of power each day. As a result, Lebanese households have been forced to become reliant on diesel generators, which the majority of population is, however, unable to afford (Boutros and Ricour-Brasseur 2022). These generators also do little to keep essential services, like hospitals, running (Ioanes 2021). Indeed, hospitals such as the Rafic Hariri University Hospital, Lebanon’s main coronavirus hospital, have been forced to close operating rooms and significantly reduce their services as a result of fuel and electricity shortages (Trew 2020). The country’s electricity crisis came to a dramatic head on 9 October 2021 when its two largest power stations, al Zahrani and Deir Ammar, ran out of fuel to provide even a few hours of electricity to households. As a result, the entire country descended into darkness for an entire weekend (Durgham and Sly 2021). Meanwhile, the Lebanese government has done little to address the electricity sector’s failings, particularly its financial deficit. Worst yet, in an effort to ease shortages, the government decided in August 2021 to lift fuel subsidies. This, however, caused fuel prices to skyrocket and substantially increased the cost of private generators that have become the only means for households - as well as hospitals and businesses - to receive more than three hours of electricity a day (Katabashy and Azar 2021).

The acute lack of fuel and electricity are also posing severe threats to the provision of essential health and water services. As all of Lebanon’s water pumps run on electricity, a lack of power inevitably affects water production. Out of the 250 to 300 water pumps in Lebanon’s Beka’a valley, 75%-80% of them have been affected by electricity cuts. This
means that only 50-60% of the water usually given is currently being provided to citizens (Alsharif 2021). This, undoubtedly, has dramatic and disastrous consequences for Lebanon’s population. As Yukie Mukuo, UNICEF’s representative in Lebanon, underlines:

“Lebanon’s precious public water system is on life support and could collapse at any moment. Unless urgent action is taken, hospitals, schools and essential public facilities will be unable to function and over four million people will be forced to resort to unsafe and costly sources of water, putting children’s health and hygiene at risk.” (UNICEF 2021)

Ironically, the government’s failure to provide public services has actually served to benefit and maintain Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system. The failing distribution of public services has provided sectarian actors with the opportunity to increase their own influence by providing relief to citizens (Cammett 2015). This has, in turn, allowed Lebanon’s ruling establishment - and the country’s sectarian political system - to become increasingly entrenched, as Lebanese citizens’ dependence on them to access goods and services deepened significantly. Lebanon’s Shi’a militant Hezbollah party has taken particular advantage of this paradox. It has tried to portray itself as the country’s ‘savior’ by, for example, transporting fuel from Iran into Lebanon via Syria in light of paralyzing fuel shortages (Ibid). The arrival of fuel from Iran in mid-October 2021 not only “highlighted the near absence of the Lebanese state,” but also represented a “political coup” for Hezbollah, who were consequently able to strengthen their image as the country’s defender (Bourhrous 2021: 5). As Amal Bourhrous (Ibid) underlines: “Lebanon’s crumbling public services have given sectarian actors the opportunity to increase their influence by providing relief. This allows them to become even more entrenched, which further undermines the state.”

5.3. ‘Humanizing’ the impacts: personal accounts by Lebanese citizens

“My country is falling apart and there’s not a single moment of my day that isn’t beholden to its collapse.” (Lina Mounzer 2021)

While laying out the perilous state of public service delivery in Lebanon is essential to gauging the impacts of Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system, it is equally important to uncover how this has impacted Lebanese citizens lives, notably their well-being. In order to
explore and analyze this, the following section draws on newspaper articles, blogs, and second-hand interviews focused on providing first-hand accounts of how Lebanese citizens have been affected by their sectarian political system and its acute failure to provide essential services.

What Lebanese are living in Lebanon today is “the end of an entire way of life,” writes Lina Mounzer, a Lebanese writer and translator living in Beirut (Mounzer 2021). To this she adds: “My country is falling apart and there’s not a single moment of my day that isn’t beholden to its collapse” (Ibid). The daily lives of Lebanese citizens, she explains, are now entirely occupied “with the scramble for basic necessities” (Ibid), and have been “reduced to the logistics of survival and a population that is physically, mentally, and emotionally depleted” (Ibid). According to Mounzer, the “standard by which normal or acceptable living conditions are measured have long been discarded” (Ibid). This observation has been echoed by Karim Emile Bitar, director of the Institute of Political Science at Saint Joseph’s University in Beirut, who underlines that the “Lebanese state has failed at every single level” (Ibrahim 2020). He emphasizes in this regard that “even in the face of state collapse, the Lebanese government has and will continue to fall short on delivering basic services.” This disillusionment and frustration with Lebanon’s political system and ruling establishment has been echoed by the majority of Lebanese citizens, who point particularly to their country’s failing healthcare sector and the effects of the country’s ever-worsening economic crisis.

At the root of Lebanese citizens’ suffering and worries is the country’s fragile healthcare system. In an interview with Al Jazeera (Marsi 2021), breast cancer patient Janette Marhij shares that the current healthcare crisis “has been more distressing than living through the country’s 15-year civil war that ended in 1990” (Ibid). Amid shortages in cancer medicine and a sharp increase in drug prices, Marhij is unsure if she will be able to complete her treatment. Mohammad Ajaj, a Lebanese citizen living in Tripoli, shares the same worry for his 33-year old sister-in-law Nada, who was also diagnosed with breast cancer (Ibid). “In the North, if you are ill and don’t have money for treatment, they’ll let you die,” shares Mohammad in an interview with Aljazeera (Ibid). For months, Mohammad left Tripoli in the middle of the night with his sister-in-law in order to arrive in Beirut by morning to ensure that she would receive her cancer treatment. Yet, in light of inflated drug prices,
Mohammad worries that his family will soon run out of the money needed to continue paying for Nada’s treatment (Ibid). Sade Slim, a 58-year old Beirut resident, is also facing increasing difficulties accessing cancer treatment. In light of Lebanon’s crippling financial crisis, Sade is no longer able to pay for chemotherapy or access vital cancer medication. If she does not receive urgent support to access her treatment, Sade faces imminent death. The economic and healthcare crisis have, however, not only affected cancer patients. In a personal account published in the New York Times, Lina Mounzer (2021) underlines how hundreds of Lebanese citizens are dying daily from treatable illnesses – such as scorpion stings and fever - due to shortages in medicine and healthcare staff, as well as a spike in drug prices: “Friends with children live in terror of their kids getting even mildly sick” (Mounzer 2021). Firass Abiad, director of Rafik Hariri University Hospital, also reflects on the tragic impacts of Lebanon’s healthcare crisis: “It feels like we are continuously firefighting with no end in sight” (Hubbard and Saad 2020).

The sharp decline in Lebanese citizens’ purchasing power, brought about by the country’s crippling financial crisis, has also had devastating effects on Lebanese citizens’ well-being and quality of life. In an interview with the New York Times, 65-year old Lebanese chef Antoine El Hajj accurately summarizes the impact of Lebanon’s ongoing economic crisis: “There used to be a middle class in Lebanon, but now the rich are rich, the middle class has become poor and the poor have become destitute” (Hubbard and Saad 2020). Indeed, a July 2021 report published by the Lebanese Crisis Observatory at the American University of Beirut revealed that the cost of a family’s basic food basket now stands at five times the national minimum wage, currently 675,000 Lebanese pounds a month, which is worth approximately $42 dollars on the black market (Ibrahim 2021). Wael Slika, owner of a fruit farm, explains how his sales have decreased by over 40% due to the economic crisis: “People can no longer afford staple foods, let alone luxury items like fruit” (Ibrahim 2021). Sabine Bustros, a mother of two and board member of the Chateau Kefraya wine producer, explains to United Press International (Saoud 2021) how the crisis has completely affected her lifestyle ethically. Sabine can no longer afford the things that she used to, and is now solely focused on saving whenever possible to cover urgent needs, such as education and healthcare for her two children. “I doubt that we will return to the Lebanon we knew. It is over,” underlines Sabine in her conversation with UPI (Ibid). Lina Mounzer (2021) shares
similar views to Sabine. In her personal account, Lina argues that what Lebanese citizens are currently experiencing equates to “economic warfare”. According to Lina, this warfare is being propagated by Lebanon’s own political system and ruling establishment: “Fuel and medicine, though scarce, are not entirely unavailable. They are unattainable, hoarded by politically connected individuals and organizations, likely to be exported or sold on the black market” (Ibid). Ahmed, a petrol station inspector working in Beirut, shares similar concerns: “Lebanon has twice as much fuel as its needs, but it’s being hoarded. Whether it’s politicians, the police, or even the army, everyone’s part of the black market” (Ibrahim 2020). Meanwhile, thousands of Lebanese citizens have resorted to bartering in order to obtain essential goods and services. Membership of a Facebook group called ‘Lebanon Barters’ has swelled over the past years, with over 16,000 followers. Lebanese citizens use the platform to offer “everything from poker chips to hookahs in exchange for food,” notably essentials such as milk, sugar and canned goods (Hubbard and Saad 2020).

Spanning across blogs, newspaper articles and other first-hand accounts is also the desire of Lebanese citizens, especially the youth, to leave the country. Lacking normal or acceptable living conditions, as well as a perspective that these may improve, “people with the means to do so are leaving” (Mounzer 2021). Nadar, a university student in Lebanon, shares that his only dream “is to get a VISA so [he] can leave the country as soon as possible” (Uptin 2021). His reasoning for this is rooted in the government’s failing public service delivery: “Lebanon’s story [...] is about a country in limbo, it is about patients who can’t get medicine, hospitals that are threatening to shut down because they don’t have electricity, and a young generation who can’t really work or go to school even online when the lights are off” (Ibid). “We are in hell; we can’t live like this; we can’t survive this way,” Nadar concludes.

The preceding section documents the direct impacts of Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing systems’ failure to respond to demands for reform and prioritize citizen well-being. First-hand accounts, retrieved from blogs and journalist interviews, starkly emphasize the tragic and devastating impacts Lebanon’s crises have had on citizens’ well-being. Lebanese citizens across the country are unable to access essential medications, and have been forced to continuously navigate power cuts and fuel shortages, as well as completely re-adapt their livelihoods. Unsurprisingly, those with the means to do so have left the country. Yet,
hundreds of thousands of Lebanese citizens remain, and they believe that their country’s only hope is to dismantle Lebanon’s power-sharing system, including its entrenched ‘recurring dilemmas’. In its place, they envision a secular system based on a new, non-sectarian social contract.

5.4. ‘De-sectarianizing’ Lebanon: an alternative for sectarian power-sharing?

“Removing political sectarianism is not a matter of changing a few laws, adding a secular personal status law, immersing oneself in alternative histories, and transforming the system of political representation in the government. Calling for the end of political sectarianism is the same as calling for the end of the modern Lebanese state.” (Mikdashi 2011).

In the context of Lebanon’s entrenched and ‘recurring dilemmas’ - which perpetually undermine both reform and citizen well-being - Lebanese citizens, political scientists, and scholars are increasingly concurring that an end to Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system represents the “only way that the country can pull itself out of the current chaos” (Jafaari and Battah 2021). Indeed, now more than ever, it seems essential to analyze the possible scenarios for change and reform to Lebanon’s “agonizing political system” or, at the very least, to explore options to make the system work more effectively (Apprioual 2016).

Lina Khatib, Director of the Middle East and North Africa program at Chatham House, underlines that “Lebanon’s sectarian political system is the key driving force behind the country’s economic collapse and political stagnation […] There can not be a full reform in Lebanon without a change in the sectarian system” (CMI 2022). The only solution, according to Khatib, is “completely removing it and replacing it with a secular political system that is based on merit not on sectarian representation” (Ibid). This demand has also been echoed by political activists Hussein El Achi, founder of a new youth-led political group called Minteshreen, as well as Rani al-Masri, member of Citizens in a State political party. Both of these Lebanese activists are convinced that “the only way forward for [their] country is to build a new system that is not rooted in sectarian competition” (Jaafari and Battah 2021). Inevitably, this entails the creation of a true secular state and a new social contract based on secularism (Ibid).
Yet, despite the wide-reaching concurrence that Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system must be abolished, limited consensus has been reached in both practice and theory on alternative - and feasible - design choices that could replace Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system. What scholars do, however, agree on is that ‘de-sectarianizing’ Lebanon represents a minefield (Fakhoury 2014: 243), and also seems utterly unachievable in light of Lebanon’s current multifaceted crises. As Bourhrous et al. (2021: 42) accurately underline, a transition away from Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system “may take years, particularly as the system continues to be deeply entrenched and reforms would have to be implemented by the very actors that benefit from the system.” This has been echoed by Niels Schattevoet (2021: 96), who emphasizes that the transition away from sectarian power-sharing has not yet commenced, and is unlikely to anytime soon. According to Schattevoet (Ibid), this is rooted in the fact that, for Lebanon’s ruling elite, changing the system would likely mean giving up their patronage networks upon which both their power and authority rests. Lebanese politicians will, therefore, “desperately strive to protect [the system] and resist any attempt to transform Lebanon into a fully democratic state” (Baytiyeh 2019: 228-29).

However, while undoubtedly complex, this does not mean that change can not be achieved in the long-term. Undoing Lebanon’s sectarian political system will not happen overnight, but will necessitate a comprehensive reform process that envisions change in the long-term. As Lina Khatib (CMI 2022) emphasizes: “Everyone in Lebanon and outside should take into consideration that the process of change is probably going to take a generation and work on that basis […] This means that one should focus on steps that can be taken in short and medium terms, leading to a change in the long-term”. One such step, according to Khatib, would be the “creation of small and medium size enterprises to rebuild Lebanon’s economy and break away from the patronage system” (Ibid). This would reduce the reliance of Lebanese citizens on sectarian leaders, given that they would have access to other ways of making a living (Ibid). The decentralization of power, i.e. giving more authority to locally elected bodies and municipalities, represents another step that can be taken. According to Apprioual (2016: 6), taking such a step would aid in “consolidating democracy, improving local participation and ensuring better service delivery.” Empowering political opposition movements calling for change is also an essential step. After all, a reform of the sectarian
system from ‘above’ is inherently unlikely, meaning that reforms must emanate from ‘the bottom’. Groups such as Minteshreen¹ and Citizens in a State² have emerged from the country’s major protest movements in the past years, notably the 2019 revolution, and are seeking to challenge traditional sectarian parties in the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for May 2022. For example, Citizens in a State have proposed a peaceful transition of power based on a transitional government that is given legislative prerogatives for a period of 18 months (Naoufal 2022). Nevertheless, two months out from the upcoming parliamentary elections, there appears to be “scant cohesion among the groups running in opposition to the traditional political parties” (Taleb 2022). Only when alternative parties such as Minteshreen and Citizens in a State manage to put their ideological differences aside and form a strong opposition will they have the opportunity to challenge the political sectarian status-quo that has been in place since the end of the civil war (Ibid).

Recognizing the complexity of dismantling and replacing Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system, Amal Bourhrous, Shivan Fazil, Meray Maddah and Dylan O’Driscoll (2021) explore the opportunities for reform within the current system. This includes reforms that “respond to the urgent needs of citizens while halting the processes of disintegration and collapse that threaten the continuity of the state” (Ibid: 42). The recommendations presented by the authors in their article include the restructuring of the bureaucracy and the public sector, whereby recruitment of public sector positions is carried out on the basis of qualifications and merits, rather than sectarian affiliation (Ibid: 35). The importance of providing space to and empowering non-sectarian movements in the upcoming parliamentary elections, as well as giving youth more opportunities for political and economic participation, is also an essential step that should be taken by Lebanon’s ruling establishment (Ibid). More concrete recommendations put forward by the authors include a comprehensive reform of Lebanon’s banking sector, which is essential to restoring trust in Lebanon’s financial system and securing financial assistance, as well as for a depoliticization of Lebanon’s water and resource management (Ibid: 45-46). In the short term, engagement by the international community is also essential. As underlined by Ezzeddine and Noun (2020: 34), “meaningful

¹ Minteshreen is a progressive social liberal party, founded in 2019, that seeks to build a modern, democratic and secular state based on social justice, the rule of law and the respect for human rights.
² Citizens in a state is another non-sectarian political party that has emerged in Lebanon with the goal of facilitating a peaceful transition of power to construct a civil state.
reform [within the system] will require heavy external conditioning to erode the stranglehold of sectarian elites over the state.” For this to be effective, however, there needs to be close cooperation between external donors - including international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, as well as the EU and the US - and Lebanese civil society, particularly non-sectarian opposition movements (Ibid).

While these recommendations present valuable opportunities for Lebanon, this study’s analysis has made undeniable that true transformative change will only be facilitated when Lebanon breaks free of its entrenched recurring dilemmas’. This, however, necessitates a complete overhaul of its sectarian power-sharing system, because only with a secular regime and a new social contract will the country be able to foster a true transition away from political sectarianism and toward democratic development. How this transformation will be achieved remains unclear, but it will, in any case, be one with many hurdles.
CONCLUSION.

LEBANON’S MOMENT OF TRUTH

“There is only one viable road ahead for Lebanon: a new social contract where the state services its citizens, political parties represent the people, and accountability is its foundational pillar.” (Lebanese Center for Policy Studies 2015)

6.1. Summary of key findings

Over the past three decades, Lebanese citizens have repeatedly taken to the streets to call for an overthrow of their country’s sectarian power-sharing system, which they believe is at the root of their economic, political and social malaise (Arnold 2019). Yet, despite these systematic calls, Lebanon’s post-war political system has proven starkly resistant to transformative change and meaningful reform. This study has sought to uncover the underlying roots of this resistance by analyzing the ways in which Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system entrenches recurring dilemmas that have - since the end of Lebanon’s civil war in 1990 - perpetually undermined both reform and citizen well-being.

To effectively identify these recurring dilemmas entrenched in Lebanon’s power-sharing system, and analyze their implications for meaningful reform and citizen well-being, this study first explores - on the basis of a comprehensive review of secondary theoretical literature - power-sharing theory, particularly its two central theoretical approaches of consociational democracy theory and the integrative approach. On the basis of this literary analysis, this study demonstrates how these theoretical approaches - particularly the consociational democracy model - fail to accurately capture Lebanon’s consociational prescriptions, as well as its post-war political realities. To understand why, this study draws on secondary theoretical literature to analyze and conceptualize the role political sectarianism plays in shaping Lebanon’s political system. In conceptualizing the dynamics of political sectarianism, including the material and structural factors that shape it, the theoretical framework identifies Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system as one where different groups in society have differentiated relationships to power. While one group - in
this case: Lebanon’s sectarian ruling elite - is awarded the right to political monopoly, others - that is: Lebanese citizens - are deemed politically subordinate, dependent on the latter for basic goods and services. This imbalance incentivizes, in turn, the establishment of clientelist political economic and institutional practices that work to further entrench and exacerbate sectarian identities, derailing the prospects for meaningful reform, and significantly undermining citizen well-being. Thereby, Lebanon’s post-war power-sharing system is characterized not by the consociational democratic prescriptions of ‘peaceful coexistence’ or a ‘culture of accommodation’ (Lijphart 1977), but rather by entrenched sectarian division, political paralysis, and instability.

The conceptualization of political sectarianism in the theoretical framework provides the basis for understanding the distinctive features of - and notably the main dilemmas enshrined in - Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system. The analysis identifies three recurring dilemmas enshrined in the country’s ‘sectarian consociation’. These include the system’s proneness to political deadlock, its institutionalization of impunity, and its veritable disconnect from grassroots demands. Drawing on secondary theoretical and empirical literature, this thesis uncovers how these dilemmas have repeatedly manifested in the aftermath of Lebanon’s civil war, and demonstrates the tragic implications their manifestation has had on meaningful reform and citizen well-being.

The first ‘recurring dilemma’ identified in the analysis is Lebanon’s sectarian consociations’ immobility, particularly its proneness to perpetual cycles of political deadlock. Drawing on the system’s lack of appropriate arbitration mechanisms and other entrenched institutional provisions - such as the veto power awarded to Lebanon’s main sectarian parties - this study underscores how Lebanon’s political system has – in the post-war era - been paralyzed by perpetual cycles of political deadlock. These cycles have, inevitably, translated into a systematic failure by Lebanon's government “to implement policies that would promote progress and prevent deterioration” (Salamey 2009: 85). Indeed, as the empirical analysis uncovers, political deadlock has translated into unanswered demands - stemming from Lebanese citizens - for political, social and economic reforms.
Lebanon’s sectarian consociations’ institutionalization of impunity is the second dilemma identified in this study. An analysis of the sectarian political system’s lack of checks and balances, coupled with the lack of judicial independence and the immunity laws protecting the country’s ruling establishment, reveals how justice in Lebanon is both relative and selective, granted and withheld according to the interests of the ruling political class. As a result, this study shows how demands for reform, as well as for justice and accountability, have, in the aftermath of disasters such as the 2015 waste crisis and the 2020 Beirut blast, systematically been left unanswered. Instead, amnesties and a failure to prosecute those responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law have come to define Lebanon’s post-war politics.

Finally, the third dilemma this study identifies and analyzes is the ever-growing chasm between elite-led power-sharing and politics from below. An extensive analysis of Lebanon’s post-war trajectory reveals that no deliberative processes have taken place between political and public spheres. The root of this disconnect can be traced back to the distinct features of Lebanon’s sectarian consociation, particularly the country’s ‘sectarianized’ political economy. In enabling Lebanon’s sectarian leaders to appropriate shares of public authority and resources, the country’s political system has enabled them to establish and develop patronage networks that serve their interests and strengthen their power. It has also made Lebanese citizens dependent on sectarian leaders - rather than state institutions - for basic services, including healthcare and education. Unsurprisingly, Lebanon’s sectarian leaders have proven adamant to maintaining this ‘sectarianized’ political economy and blocking any reforms that could undermine this system. The result has been the emergence of a political system completely divorced from grassroots demands, whereby demands for political change and reform are perpetually undermined and suppressed by Lebanon’s ruling establishment through coercive and violent strategies.

To effectively showcase the tragic implications that the manifestation of these dilemmas has had on reform and citizen well-being, this study draws - as its primary case study - on one of the most telling examples of when they have manifested and converged, namely the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Contrary to what Lebanese citizens and the international community had hoped, the blast did not produce the change or reforms necessary to save Lebanon.
Instead, it starkly highlighted the system’s proneness to political deadlock, its culture of impunity, as well as its utter disconnect from grassroots demands – the three dilemmas identified in this study. These were reflected in the 13-month political deadlock that paralyzed Lebanon in the aftermath of the explosion, the failing domestic investigation into the blast, as well as the failure by Lebanon’s government to effectively respond to citizens’ countless demands for reform. The last chapter of this study highlights the grave implications that the manifestation of these dilemmas – particularly in the aftermath of the Beirut blast - has had on citizen well-being.

6.2. Finding opportunity in tragedy: Policy lessons from the Beirut blast

Nevertheless, the analysis of how Lebanon’s ‘recurring dilemmas’ manifested in the Beirut blast allows us to draw valuable policy lessons of the disaster, particularly for the international community. Indeed, as Langlois (2021) underlines, international and regional actors have “contributed to the problem while failing to properly engage the issue.” For one, the United States has failed to establish a clear Lebanon policy. Meanwhile, the Gulf has largely distanced itself from the country in recent years, while Iran continues to support Hezbollah. Moreover, while France seems to be invested in stabilizing the country, its efforts have been limited to donor conferences and rhetorical calls for reform that have gone largely unheeded (Ibid). EU initiatives underway to sanction corrupt Lebanese politics, although a step in the right direction, will also not be enough to save Lebanon.

If this studies’ analysis of the ‘recurring dilemmas’ entrenched in Lebanon’s power-sharing system underscores one thing, it is the need for the international community to support the people, not the system. This must start with providing Lebanese communities with aid in the form of services like medical care, sanitation and food. Countries should work with international organizations such as the United Nations, as well as with local civil society organizations, to streamline such services. Such initiatives would support the majority of the country while “undermining the deep sectarian patronage underpinning Lebanon’s political groups” (Ibid). Beyond this, however, influential states should utilize diplomatic tools to pressure Lebanon’s ruling establishment into make progress on reform, particularly within the financial and governance sector. Lebanese leaders should also be encouraged to support
the establishment of an international, independent, and impartial fact-finding mission into the blast – a demand that has been made numerous times by international and Lebanese human rights groups, survivors, and families of the victims over the past year. Finally, in view of the upcoming parliamentary election currently scheduled for 15 May 2022, it is essential that the international community create space for alternative reformist candidates and parties who could lead future reform process of Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system. Indeed, it takes only ten members of parliament to submit a draft law (Geha 2021), and so a victory for even a few candidates would establish a valuable channel through which to free Lebanon of its ‘recurring dilemmas’ and develop a political system built on the foundations of democracy, accountability and justice. This will, by all means, be a difficult task, given that the international community has systematically failed to incentivize such reform initiatives in the past. However, it remains undoubtable that until these lessons of the Beirut blast are realized, Lebanon will continue moving quickly down the path of total collapse.

6.3. Conclusions and avenues for further research

Ultimately, this studies’ thorough examination of the entrenched dilemmas rooted in Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system - and the ways in which their manifestation systematically undermines meaningful reform and citizen well-being - underscores grave consequences for the future and prosperity of Lebanon, both in terms of opportunities for political change, as well as for citizen’s livelihoods. This studies’ analysis, therefore, reveals one underlying point: Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system requires (at the least) serious revision, and (at the most) a complete overhaul. If neither of these are achieved, the political system’s recurring dilemmas will continue to converge and manifest, as they have systematically done for the past three decades since the signing of the Ta’if Agreement in 1989. This study thus makes it undeniable that only when the country manages to break free of its entrenched dilemmas will it be able to implement meaningful reform and ensure prosperous livelihoods for its citizens. Such an emancipation will, however, likely only be realized by a complete overthrow of the country’s current sectarian political system and the establishment of a secular state based on a new social contract in its place.
The analyses and results uncovered in this study thus have both theoretical as well as concrete implications. One of its central achievements is that it develops a theoretical framework through which to understand the appropriation of power-sharing in the Lebanese case, including how its post-war power-sharing system deviates from the central theoretical approaches of power-sharing theory. In particular, this study attracts attention to the dynamics of political sectarianism in Lebanon, including the material and structural factors that shape it. Moreover, the lessons of Lebanese power-sharing developed in this study could also serve as a yardstick for other post-conflict plural societies that seek to embark on institutional and system reform. In particular, the Lebanese case and the analytical framework of Lebanon’s ‘recurring dilemmas’ developed in this study may prove particularly important to Arab countries that share many common characteristics, including religious cleavages, a propensity towards internal fragmentation, and a turbulent regional environment. Finally, through its thorough examination of how Lebanese power-sharing has undermined citizen well-being, this study more concretely contributes to the limited literature on understanding the ‘human’ impacts of post-conflict and fragmented power-sharing systems.

Nevertheless, while the question of what needs to be done has become clear through this study, the question of how this can be achieved remains painstakingly elusive. Most scholars focusing on Lebanese power-sharing agree that, in a country as divided as Lebanon, a majoritarian system would likely pose even greater problems than a consociational power-sharing system. However, most scholars also agree that Lebanon’s current power-sharing arrangements “contain the seeds of their own destruction” (Fakhoury 2014: 243). As underlined by Fakhoury (Ibid), this twofold realization represents a veritable impasse: “the sectarian mode of power-sharing in Lebanon has fared badly, yet changing the system would open up a Pandora’s Box.” Overcoming this impasse necessitates an analysis of alternative institutional models that could help Lebanon move from political sectarianism toward democratic development. While answering this question extended far beyond the parameters of this master’s thesis, this study could provide a framework upon which further studies could explore alternative institutional models for religiously and or ethnically divided societies like Lebanon’s. The central question that would have to be considered within such an analysis is how to foster a meaningful role for sectarian groups within both institutional
and non-institutional processes, but no longer to a point where these groups constitute the main building blocks of political life in Lebanon.

Exploring alternative institutional models for Lebanon’s political system could also include an examination of the ways in which to unite Lebanon’s non-sectarian political opposition groups. As this thesis has shown, Lebanon’s sectarian political system is organized in such a way that does now allow for the emergence of viable opposition candidates or parties. Yet, in light of Lebanon’s current circumstances and the upcoming parliamentary election in May 2022, conditions to shift the political system’s balance of power seem increasingly ripe. Two months out from the parliamentary elections, however, alternative opposition parties have failed to build a strong enough alliance that could counter the status-quo that has been in place since the end of Lebanon’s civil war. While many common themes unite the country’s current alternative parties - such as the establishment of a civil state, the rule of law, the upholding of democracy and social justice - ideological differences are rupturing possible cohesion. An examination of how these differences could be bridged, and a viable opposition to Lebanon’s traditional sectarian establishment be created, would thus present an interesting and valuable way in which to build on this study’s analysis and conclusion. After all, such an analysis would have the potential to pave the way for realizing the vision laid out by Samir Kassir in his book *The Unachieved Dream* (2006), namely a Lebanon that is “enriched by its differences, freed from confessional and clannish constraints, a state devoted to its citizens [...] a free and democratic society.” The road to realize this vision will, by all means, be a bumpy one, albeit not unreachable.
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