Breaking Sectarianism: Lebanon's 17 October Uprising

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Abstract

Lebanon's 17 October Uprising marked a watershed moment in the country's history as it challenged the very foundation of the political system: sectarian power-sharing. It was the largest and most diverse protest movement in decades and its anti-sectarian stature was entirely unprecedented. For the first time, many Lebanese called on their confessional leaders to resign. This thesis examines firstly why the uprising directed its focus toward political sectarianism as a primary cause of Lebanon's political and economic plight. The inability or unwillingness of sectarian leaders to deliver basic services to their constituents created a situation in which Lebanese across all sects were more united than ever before in their collective plight. Second, it explores the timing of the uprising in the fall of 2019. It argues that the uprising was the culmination of simmering resentments that finally erupted as a result of deteriorating economic conditions, political corruption, and a series of disasters that the government failed to prevent or address. Lastly, the thesis investigates how the uprising helped propel anti-sectarian ideas that were previously taboo into mainstream political discourse. While the 17 October Uprising ultimately failed to achieve its objective of establishing a secular rather than sectarian political order, it stands as the most significant challenge to political sectarianism in the country's history and could pave the way for future mobilizations in the same vein. This thesis will contribute to the nascent body of literature on the 17 October Uprising and the broader scholarship on sectarian power-sharing as a system of governance.

Keywords: Lebanon, 17 October Uprising, Sectarianism, Consociationalism, Power-sharing, Neoliberalism

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Chapter 1

Introduction

On 17 October 2019, Lebanese from all walks of life poured into the streets to demand the overthrow of the political establishment. Protesters chanted *Killun ya'ni killun* (All of them means all of them), referring to their goal of ousting all political leaders regardless of the sect they represent. Dubbed *al-thawra* (revolution) by its participants, it was the largest and most diverse protest movement in decades. What began that day as a furious response to a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls quickly evolved into a broad expression of economic and political grievances. Fundamentally, the movement was a concerted rejection of the sectarian power-sharing arrangement that underpins Lebanon's political system. Three main research questions guide this thesis. First, *why did the 17 October Uprising direct its attention toward political sectarianism as a primary cause of Lebanon's current economic plight?* Second, *why did this movement happen in the fall of 2019?* Third, *how did the uprising help propel anti-sectarian and secular ideas more into mainstream political discourse?* I argue that the uprising was the tipping point of simmering resentments that finally exploded on 17 October 2019. For the first time, many Lebanese called for their confessional leaders to resign because they could no longer provide basic services to their constituents. Thus, there was no more Maronite, Sunni, or Shia – just *Lebanese citizens,* suffering under the same corrupt system. Sectarianism is the central element of Lebanon's political system, and thus, calls to overthrow the system were inherently calls to dissolve political sectarianism. Crucially, the 17 October Uprising, while it ultimately fell short of its goal of establishing political secularism, helped push these ideas into the mainstream, potentially laying the groundwork for future mobilizations.

1.1 Evolution of the 17 October Uprising

On the eve of 17 October 2019, Lebanese citizens from all walks of life united in the streets of Beirut and other major towns and cities to protest a tax proposal that would apply to WhatsApp calls as part of the government's new austerity budget (Amnesty International, 2021). The proposal was met with immediate outrage in a country where cellular services are already priced exorbitantly, forcing citizens to turn to call applications for their daily connectivity (Baumann, 2021). However, the tax was merely the straw that broke the camel's back. Following in the footsteps of other modern protest movements across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA),

the immediate trigger receded into the background as the movement morphed into a broad expression of economic and social grievances (Feuer et al., 2019). There is not always rhyme or reason as to what will trigger mass mobilizations, especially in MENA. The self-emulation of Mohammad Bouazizi in Tunisia set the stage for a domino effect of revolutions across the Arab world that we now refer to as the Arab Spring. A tax proposal might appear comparatively trivial to the outside observer, but to those who are familiar with Lebanese politics, it is clear why the tax was the final straw for many people who had reached their breaking point.

Precipitating the uprising, Lebanon's economic situation was rapidly deteriorating. In 2018, over USD 11 billion was pledged to Lebanon at an international donor conference in Paris to help resurrect the country's declining economy. Aside from poor fiscal policies and reckless government spending, the economic downturn was exacerbated by the Syrian civil war happening across the border and the millions of refugees it sent fleeing to Lebanon, placing a strenuous burden on the system (France 24, 2018). In exchange for the aid, the Lebanese government promised the international community reforms that they were ultimately unable to meet due to political infighting. In September 2019, Prime Minister Saad Hariri declared an economic state of emergency. As the economic situation continued to sour, private banks began cutting off access to customers' dollar-dominated accounts to protect their reserves. Unemployment, inflation, and poverty rates all pointed toward an imminent economic meltdown. The next month, catastrophic wildfires spread across Lebanon's forests, which firefighters were unable to extinguish mainly due to the government's negligence in properly servicing the firefighting helicopters. With little government help, it was left to locals and civil society groups to courageously fight the wildfires, reflecting a recurrent theme in Lebanon, where the people are all too familiar with filling the void of a lack of proper governance. Simultaneously, violent sectarian clashes between members of adversarial parties were erupting across the country (Amnesty International, 2021). On 17 October 2019, the floodgates of brewing disillusionment over the state of political and economic affairs finally erupted.

One day after the protests began, the government rescinded the proposed tax on WhatsApp calls, not understanding that the movement had already evolved into something much more complex. Protesters were now calling for the outright downfall of Lebanon's entire political system. The 1989 Taif Accord that ended the Lebanese Civil War established a sectarian power-sharing arrangement as a mechanism for maintaining peace between groups that once fought one

another (Azhari, 2019). Although it successfully ended fifteen years of bloodshed, it also entrenched sectarianism into nearly every facet of Lebanese political and social life and is often blamed as a root cause of the country's political gridlock. It created a system of sectarian clientelism in which politicians provide resources to the constituents of their sect at the expense of other Lebanese. Sectarian leaders routinely point fingers at others to circumvent responsibility.

The 17 October Uprising brought a sense of national unity in a country infamously divided (Ghanem, 2021). The reclamation of civil spaces was the most visible show of the breakdown of literal and figurative sectarian barriers. Demonstrators blocked roads, occupied public areas, formed symbolic human chains, and reclaimed spaces that had been increasingly privatized throughout the years. Crucially, between October and December, 83 percent of recorded demonstration events were peaceful, and security forces demonstrated restraint and even instances of sympathy with the protesters. The peaceful nature of the initial period of the uprising stands in stark contrast to nearby Iraq, where at least 500 protesters were killed in that simultaneous movement (ACLED, 2020).

On 29 October, less than two weeks after the protests began, Saad Hariri resigned as prime minister, but a new technocratic government would not be formed until January 2020. On 19 December, President Michel Aoun appointed a university professor, Hassan Diab, to head the new government. Diab was backed by Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and the Shia Block, including Hezbollah. Diab was opposed by Saad Hariri's Future Movement, a contention that led to clashes between demonstrators and party militants such as Hezbollah in the latter period of the uprising. On 21 January, Diab was sworn in as prime minister only hours after hundreds were injured in clashes between demonstrators and security forces in Beirut (ACLED, 2020).

Following the appointment of Hassan Diab to office, the momentum of the uprising waned, and violent incidents became more frequent. Two months later, the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic exacerbated Lebanon's economic meltdown, and in March, the country defaulted on its debt obligations. The strict pandemic lockdown measures prevented new organizing efforts and provided security forces the opportunity to dismantle the protest camps and remove symbols of the uprising (ACLED, 2020). On 4 August 2020, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions on record ripped through Beirut's port, killing hundreds of people, injuring thousands, and rendering hundreds of thousands homeless. The scope of the damage to human lives and infrastructure is difficult to overstate. The explosion was the result of nearly three thousand tons of ammonium

nitrate that had been improperly stored in a port warehouse for years. Echoing past crises in Lebanon, including the 2015 Garbage Crisis and the 2019 wildfires, Lebanese officials were aware of the presence of hazardous materials stored in the port and failed to act on the information – a dereliction of duty that amounts to criminal negligence at best. Six days after the explosion decimated much of the Lebanese capital, Hassan Diab resigned from his short stint in office. His replacement, Mustapha Adib, resigned in September after failing to form a government. After Adib, Saad Hariri returned once again, just half a year after his resignation vis-à-vis the 17 October Uprising. But he too failed to form a government, and the months ahead for Lebanon would be filled with extraordinary levels of political instability (Al Jazeera, 2022). Investigations into those in government who knew about the hazardous materials in the port but failed to act are ongoing in 2023, with little accountability on the horizon.

1.2 An Unprecedented Movement

Since the civil war ended, Lebanon has been no stranger to popular protest movements. In the 'Garbage Crisis' of 2015, mass protests erupted across the country in response to mountains of uncollected waste in the streets, a movement that many people view as a precursor to the 17 October Uprising (Baumann, 2021). However, while these previous movements may have been *cross-sectarian*, they were not actively *anti-sectarian*. As Halawi and Salloukh (2020) aptly put it, "for the first time in decades, protesters dared point fingers at their own sectarian leaders, confident in the knowledge that their counterparts from other sects are doing the same" (p. 324). Hence, the slogan, *Killun ya'ni killun* (All of them means all of them). This is not to say that the identities of being Shia, Sunni, or Maronite suddenly disappeared. Rather, people of these respective sects were gradually beginning to view them as poor organizing principles for functional governance. The 1989 Taif Agreement that ended the Lebanese Civil War stipulated that the president would be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim. This means that members of sects that are not assigned to these roles are perpetually sidelined. While not all Lebanese people or even every protester in the streets were united in the desire to tear down political sectarianism, it is clear that the tides were turning in this direction. The 17 October Uprising helped push secular ideas into the mainstream, especially among younger and more liberal generations of Lebanese.

The 17 October Uprising ultimately failed to bring about the radical political overhaul that many protesters demanded. Lebanon today is objectively worse off by every metric and is highly unstable. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) included Lebanon in its "10 Conflicts to Worry About" report in 2020 (ACLED, 2020). Future research should focus on the aftermath of the 17 October Uprising and why it failed to achieve its goals. This thesis, however, will delve into the zeitgeist of the movement and the euphoric sense of cross-sectarian unity that defined it. Although it ultimately fell short of its goals, it could lay the groundwork for future mobilizations that learn from past mistakes and are uninhibited by unforeseen events like a worldwide pandemic. Due to the recency of the uprising, not enough time has passed for comprehensive scholarly analysis, and the situation in Lebanon remains as fluid as it is unstable. As such, this thesis hopes to serve as a building block for necessary future analysis of the 17 October Uprising and its implications for the future of Lebanon.

I argue in this thesis that the uprising was the tipping point of simmering resentments that finally exploded on 17 October 2019. For the first time, many Lebanese called for their confessional leaders to resign because they could no longer provide basic services to their constituents. Living standards had drastically collapsed across all sects. Thus, the divides between Maronite, Sunni, and Shia became smaller, as each was suffering under the same corrupt system that created staggering socioeconomic divisions. Since sectarianism is the defining feature of Lebanese politics, calls to abolish the entire system were directly or indirectly calls to dissolve political sectarianism. In expressing their outrage and disillusionment toward the state of political and economic affairs in Lebanon, many of the movement's participants made clear that they viewed political sectarianism as a root cause of their country's plight. While the 17 October Uprising ultimately failed to abolish political sectarianism, it helped propel secular ideas that were once taboo into the mainstream, potentially laying the groundwork for future mobilizations.

I spent time in Lebanon just weeks after the 17 October Uprising began. Standing in Martyrs Square in Beirut, the movement's beating heart, in a sea of Lebanese flags, I could not distinguish Maronite from Sunni from Shia. All I could see were Lebanese citizens of every creed who had come together to achieve better lives for themselves and their children. A palpable hope filled the air. It was a sight to behold and a memory I hold dear. In the spring of 2023, I returned to Lebanon to interview a handful of key participants in the movement and observe the changes that have taken place in the country since 2019. The economic situation is significantly worse and

many Lebanese, especially younger generations and those who participated in the movement, have fled the country. Many of the revolutionaries and activists who remain do not see another uprising on the horizon. When the movement lost its momentum going into 2020, many of its participants felt a sense of defeat and disillusionment after months of fighting for a better future for their country.

1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis will unfold as follows. The second chapter provides a critical overview of the existing scholarship and debates surrounding the merits of consociationalism (power-sharing as a system of governance) as a mechanism for maintaining peace and stability in divided societies like Lebanon. It then explores the debates over how this system has been implemented in the Lebanese case. In other words, does the issue lie inherently with the system of power-sharing as a broad philosophy or merely how it has come to fruition in Lebanon? The chapter also engages with the nascent body of literature on the 17 October Uprising, which this thesis hopes to contribute to. The third chapter pertains to the methodologies that were chosen to most accurately answer the questions that underpin this thesis. The fourth chapter provides a brief history of Lebanese sectarianism, tracing its origins from Mount Lebanon in 1860 when the system of confessional power-sharing was first introduced by the Ottomans to maintain peace between the two groups that dominated the area: the Maronites and Druze. It will then detail how sectarianism played a major role in the origins and perpetuation of the Lebanese Civil War between 1975-1990. The fifth chapter explains how the Taif Accord of 1989 redefined sectarian power-sharing in Lebanon in a way that ended the bloodshed of the civil war but failed to bring about proper reconciliation between warring sects, and further entrenched sectarianism into nearly every facet of Lebanese life and politics. It will then discuss how the Taif Accord, hand-in-hand with the leadership of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, helped enable Lebanon's neoliberal reconstruction, and how sectarianism and neoliberalism mutually reinforced each other. The sixth chapter conveys important insights from Lebanese who either participated in or have substantial knowledge of the 17 October Uprising. In this final empirical chapter, I also draw from participant observation from the first time I visited Lebanon amid the uprising in the fall of 2019 and the second time I visited in the spring of 2023 to conduct the interviews. This chapter includes important discussions that

seek to combine the themes discussed in previous chapters with insights from interviewees, participant observation, and other primary source data.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides a critical overview of the existing scholarship and debates surrounding Lebanon's system of political sectarianism and engages with the nascent body of literature on the 17 October Uprising itself. The first section will discuss the philosophy that underpins Lebanon's power-sharing system: consociational theory, which was first articulated by Arend Lijphart in 1969 as a way to bring peace and stability to pluralistic societies like Lebanon. The second section will engage with debates on the merits of this system and how successful it is in practice. Much of the debate surrounding political sectarianism pertains to whether the problem lies with the philosophy of power-sharing broadly or how it is carried out in practice. Those in the latter camp argue that, in the Lebanese case, this form of governance has been corrupted, whereas the first believes that political sectarianism as a form of governance inherently leads to the kind of political gridlock and corruption observed in Lebanon. In the limited scope of this thesis, I will not make any broad claims regarding the merits of political sectarianism as a philosophy, but rather, how that system has come to fruition in Lebanon. I argue that, in Lebanon, political sectarianism is fundamentally broken and has directly enabled much of the country's political gridlock and incompetence. Sectarian power-sharing in Lebanon could have worked better with more controls put in place to ensure proper functioning governance. While political sectarianism helped bring an end to the Lebanese Civil War, it failed to bring about proper reconciliation between citizens and actually, worked against it. Finally, the chapter will outline some of the nascent academic literature on the 17 October Uprising, bearing in mind that only three years have passed since the movement occurred. While the constraint of recency is an inherent limitation of this thesis and other scholarship that has been done on the 2019 movement, it is also what makes embarking on this topic of the utmost importance.

2.1 Consociational Theory

Arend Lijphart first articulated in 1969 that "Consociational democracy means government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmental political culture into a stable democracy" (Lijphart, 1969, p. 216), and he laid out the favorable conditions for such a democracy can succeed. One of these conditions is that the elites "have the ability to transcend cleavages and

to join in a common effort with the elites of rival subcultures" which, "in turn depends on their commitment to the maintenance of the system and to the improvement of its cohesion and stability" (p. 216). This condition implies that the sectarian elite cartel is acting in good faith. Lijphart propped up Lebanon as one of the "successful consociational democracies" (p. 216), but also expressed some reservation that the careful social equilibrium in the country could be maintained: "The stability of Lebanon is partly due to its productive economy and the social equilibrium it has maintained so far, but it may not be able to continue its successful consociational politics when the burdens on the system increase" (pp. 218-219). At this juncture, Lijphart was a proponent of such a system to maintain peace and stability in deeply divided societies such as Lebanon. Since then, consociationalism has become the default model for pluralistic, post-war societies. Note that the term "consociationalism" is often used interchangeably in the literature with "political sectarianism" and "confessional power-sharing" (Bogaards, Helms, Lijphart, 2019).

After the Lebanese Civil War, Lijphart remained a proponent of consociationalism, albeit a more critical one, arguing that "In such deeply divided societies the interests and demands of communal groups can be accommodated only by the establishment of power-sharing (Lijphart, 2004, p. 96). He argues that instead of replacing the sectarian political model, it should be repaired, as it remains the best method of preventing violence between groups (Lijphart, 2002). This forms the first major camp of scholarship on political sectarianism, which contends that power-sharing along ethnic and religious lines remains the most realistic way of maintaining peace in fractured societies. Bogaards, Helms, and Lijphart (2019), for instance, argue that "the value of consociationalism as a concept for peaceful conflict regulation increases with the degree of polarization and division in a given society" (p. 342). When those societies collapse into social turmoil nonetheless, this camp tends to problematize the implementation of the system rather than the philosophy of power-sharing itself. While this camp may be correct in its assessment that power-sharing is still the most realistic post-war model, it is important to realize that it is not a one-size-fits-all solution, and there must be conditions for it to work successfully. In Lebanon, those conditions clearly were not met.

2.2 Power-Sharing in Practice

Lebanon is perhaps the most prominent case study of consociationalism in practice. In fact, it is the only country to adopt consociationalism twice: once in 1943 (the National Pact) and again in

1989 (the Taif Accord). There is some debate over whether Taif amounted to a repackaged version of the National Pact (Bogaards, 2017), as it merely adjusted sectarian proportionality in government without providing a mechanism to account for natural demographic shifts. Following the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, numerous Middle Eastern countries with pluralistic and heterogenous societies previously held together by autocratic rule fell into disarray and some considered Lebanese-style political sectarianism to bridge deep divides between each group. If other Arab and Middle Eastern countries are to adopt political sectarianism in the style of Lebanon, it is crucial to identify and avoid the pitfalls of its implementation in Lebanon. The Lebanese case is missing a well-rounded mechanism for accounting for natural demographic changes and adjusting proportional representation in government accordingly. Assigning a specific office to a specific sect in perpetuity fosters sectarian clientelism, as well as resentment between sects since the system prevents qualified candidates from other sects from running for that office. John Nagle (2018) argues that the consociational system inherently excludes those who fall outside the traditional confessional groups, including atheists and agnostics, ethnic and religious minorities, sexual minorities, and simply those who do not wish to conform to rigid sectarian boundaries (Nagle, 2018).

Many scholars and everyday Lebanese alike have argued that, in Lebanon, the Taif Accord never brought about the proper reconciliation that was required to heal the deep wounds between groups that once fought each other. In other words, it merely applied a temporary bandage to fifteen years of sectarian strife and bloodshed. Bahout (2016) remarks that "processes of reconciliation, justice, and the redistribution of resources" must occur (p. 4) for consociationalism to work successfully. Moreover, while political sectarianism brought diverse sects together to share the burden of governance, it also prevented the formation of a national consciousness and pitted sects against one another in the quest for the accumulation of power and resources. Ghosn and Khoury (2011) argue that "Peace does not come about by merely signing a peace agreement with extensive power-sharing elements and by assigning a guarantor. There needs to be genuine political will and continuous efforts to make the transition from 'negative peace' to 'positive peace' (i.e., from the absence of direct violence to promotion of reconciliation and stability) possible. Such efforts require a resolution of the underlying issues that led to the civil war to begin with" (p. 385). While many scholars argue that Lebanon never met the conditions to be a successful consociational democracy, Dekmejian (1978) argues that Lebanon never actually reached the parameters required

to be a successful consociational model due to the substantial presence of Palestinians in the country as an "unassimilated" group "frequently used as pawns by outside powers to disturb the country's communal balance. He concluded that "The survival of some form of consociational democracy in Lebanon is closely related the ultimate settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict" (p. 261).

Crucially, political sectarianism as defined in the Taif Accord was never intended to be permanent. The 1989 Taif Accords in Saudi Arabia ended the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), which was fought down sectarian lines. It established a balance of power situation in which the president is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim. Lebanon's 18 officially recognized religious groups are all proportionally represented in parliament and throughout civil service institutions (Fakhoury, 2014). This system was premised on the notion that violence between sectarian groups is inevitable if not for artificially imposed lines of power-sharing (Baumann, 2016). Geha (2019) explains that "Although Ta'if was supposed to eventually lead to a transition away from sectarian power-sharing, the end of the war entrenched the system in practice and turned former warlords into politicians, ministers, and members of parliament" (p. 14). Thus, somewhat paradoxically, while sectarianism was at the core of the civil war, it was also at the core of the solution to the violence. Many scholars do not mince words when discussing the effect that political sectarianism has had on the Lebanese societal fabric. Geoffrey Bowder (1983) wrote:

> The country's endemic core of instability stems from its sectarianism which is officially sanctioned and perpetuated by a system that allocates posts in the government, civil service, army and judiciary not on merit but by religious affiliation. Among the general public, therefore, sectarian loyalties tend to predominate over those of the nation, thus weakening the fabric of Lebanese society and encouraging confessional interests at the expense of national unity The system also has the effect of thwarting the politically ambitious who, because they may not be Maronites, Sunnis or Shi'ites, are debarred from top government posts. (p. 445)

Multiple scholars such as Bahout (2014) have pointed out that the post-Taif sectarian balancing act in Lebanon may have only worked due to the presence of an external regulator: Syria. When Syria withdrew from Lebanon following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, the system was at great risk of collapsing. Sunni-Shia relations soured, as many Sunnis were suspicious that Hezbollah was involved in the assassination. A system that has to depend on an

external enforcer, however, is an inherently precarious one. It is also a system that invites potentially destabilizing interference from external actors who may benefit from the success of one sect at the expense of others. Baumann (2023) notes that Syria, as an external regulator between 1990 and 2005, directly reaped the benefits of Lebanese political sectarianism.

Hannes Baumann is one of the most prominent critics of Lebanese-style political sectarianism. He argues that Lebanese political sectarianism is grounded in a deeply unequal political economy, as the population depends on resources controlled by *their* confessional leaders, who redistribute the wealth concentrated at the top through sectarian clientelism. Thus, leaders neglect to come together to provide basic services to the people, as politicians are locked into clientelist obligations to their own constituents at the expense of others. Lebanese leaders depend on this system of dependency to maintain power, and thus, any challenge to the sectarian system is viewed as a threat to their power and influence. In the 1990s, trade unions, one of the few non-sectarian institutions, stood up to the sectarian elite, challenging the very foundation of Lebanon's post-war political system, and were subsequently suppressed by the government (Baumann, 2016). Two cross-sectarian movements that erupted in 2011 and 2015 were quickly extinguished by the government (Geha, 2019), but as I argue in this thesis, were not actively *anti-sectarian* like the 17 October Uprising, which presented a direct challenge to the sectarian elite who depend on the status quo system to retain power and influence (Baumann, 2021). My argument regarding the causes of 17 October aligns with Baumann's assertion that political sectarianism in Lebanon was implemented in a way that directly enabled corruption, incompetence, and rampant partisanship among the sectarian elite cartel. This meant that politicians were incentivized not to work together, but actually to work at the expense of members of other sects. Baumann (2019) writes that "Taif produced the mutual obstruction of the 'troika' of president, prime minister, and speaker working at cross-purposes and vetoing each other while seeking to maximize their share of economic rents, thus reproducing the 'weak state'" (p. 65). This inability and unwillingness to work together resulted in the wider political and economic plight that created the resentment toward political sectarianism that was expressed in the 17 October Uprising.

2.3 17 October Uprising in the Literature

While the 17 October Uprising is a relatively recent event, there is, fortunately, a nascent body of academic literature such as *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution* (2022) by

Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed, which is the first complete book on the uprising. It provides a thorough foundational account of the movement, including primary sources such as photographs, protest materials, and interviews with participants. These authors situate the Lebanese uprising as part of the wider wave of revolutionary movements that have occurred in greater frequency since the Arab Spring in 2011. However, what distinguishes the Lebanese case from its revolutionary counterparts across MENA is the opposition to a particular system, which Majed (2022) describes as "sectarian neoliberalism," saying that "sectarianism and neoliberalism feed into each other to reproduce more of the same" (p. 76). While the Arab Spring revolutions rejected neoliberalism, they were not rejecting the political sectarianism distinct to Lebanon. Majed points out that the 17 October Uprising was not a traditional revolution because it failed to overthrow the regime as a whole. She suggests, however, that it should be viewed as a revolutionary *process* instead, especially since there was no definitive end to it (Majed, 2022).

The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon (2015) posits that the 2011 uprisings did not spread to Lebanon specifically because Lebanon's sectarian system proved to be too rigid (Salloukh, et al., 2015). Similarly, Fakhoury (2014) argues that the Arab Spring did not spread to Lebanon specifically because the sectarian divides among society prevented collective mobilization: "Lebanon's model of governance undermines the emergence of a public sphere in which Lebanese meet as citizens and not merely as members of their sects" (p. 9). Indeed, the Lebanese system has proven time and time again to be resilient. However, the 2019 uprising stands as its most significant challenger and could set the stage for future mobilizations in the same spirit. Others who have written about the 2019 uprising see it as distinct from its Arab counterparts in 2011. In other words, it was no 'Arab Spring 2.0' as Sarah Feuer and Carmit Valensi argue in their research report, most notably because democratic aspirations were not the central message in the Lebanese case. They also say that the Lebanese protesters learned from many of the failures of the Arab Spring. Instead of seeing the Lebanese movement as a late-stage continuation of the Arab Spring, these authors situate it within a distinct wave of worldwide movements beginning with France's Yellow Vests in 2018, the protests in Hong Kong in 2019, and anti-government demonstrations in Chile, which all share the similar concern of political disenfranchisement. This international framing of the Lebanese uprising thus avoids the risk of methodological nationalism that confines events to their region only (Feuer and Valensi, 2019).

While this thesis will focus on the *why* behind the 17 October Uprising, it is also crucial to understand the *how* – that is, how do we know that the movement was actively anti-sectarian? The demonstrators expressed their rejection of the sectarian political system by chanting *Killun ya'ni killun*, uniting across diverse sects in the public sphere, and they prominently flew the Lebanese flag in a country infamous for a general lack of national unity. For the first time, Lebanese from all walks of life were united under the same flag, sidelining what separates them. The reclamation of civil spaces during the movement helped foster the free association among Lebanese who might not otherwise interact. Vértes, van der Borgh, and Buyse (2021) argue that civil spaces are viewed as a threat by the government which depends on sectarian divisions to maintain the political status quo that helps them stay in power. During the uprising, "protesters challenged the dominant 'confessional group versus confessional' group narrative, replacing it for a 'citizens-versus-elite' discourse" (Vertez, et. al., 2021, p. 269).

2.4. Expanding on the Literature

This chapter provided a critical overview of Lebanon's system of political sectarianism, investigating its theoretical foundations and examining its practical implementation. There exists a robust body of literature on consociationalism (power-sharing) as a mechanism for maintaining peace in deeply-divided societies like Lebanon. Lebanon is perhaps the most prominent example of such a system in practice. The main debate surrounding political sectarianism in Lebanon is whether the issue lies with the philosophy of power-sharing as a system of governance or in its corrupted execution. I will not condemn the philosophy of consociationalism as inherently doomed to fail. I will, however, emphasize that certain conditions must be met for the system to function properly. As Lijphart (1969) stressed, actors must be working in good faith to ensure smooth and cooperative governance and for this to happen, there must be some form of accountability mechanism. This is probably the most difficult condition to achieve. I contend that the biggest failure of consociationalism in Lebanon as defined in both the 1943 National Pact and the 1989 Taif Accord is its failure to account for natural demographic changes over time and thus, adjust sectarian proportionality in government. Maronite Christians' outsized role in Lebanese politics was not the only catalyst for the Lebanese Civil War but did help propel and promulgate it. The Taif Accord merely amended the divisions of power that were stipulated in the National Pact, leading many scholars and everyday Lebanese alike to question whether the former amounted to

a repackaged version of the latter. Taif could have called for recurring census taking to track demographic changes, but it did not. Much of the sectarian elite cartel ensures that the sectarian lines remain rigid in the name of power interests. Moreover, I heavily agree with the scholars who problematize Taif for failing to bring about proper reconciliation between citizens. There were no tribunals held to hold ex-combatants accountable for their crimes following the civil war. Instead, warlords shed their bloody uniforms for suits and many sit in the seats of parliament today.

In contrast to the wealth of literature on political sectarianism in Lebanon, there remains a lack of scholarly focus on the 17 October Uprising largely due to the relative recency of the event. As such, this thesis will build upon the nascent body of literature on the uprising and how it targeted sectarianism in Lebanon.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Lebanon's 17 October Uprising was unprecedented in its size, diversity, scope of demands, and anti-sectarian stature. The scope of this thesis is interested in explaining the simultaneously cross-sectarian and anti-sectarian elements of the uprising. The main research questions are as follows. First, **why did the 17 October Uprising direct its attention toward political sectarianism as a primary cause of Lebanon's current economic plight?** Second, **why did this movement happen in the fall of 2019?** Third, **how did the uprising help propel anti-sectarian and secular ideas more into mainstream political discourse?** This chapter will detail the research methodologies that were employed to best answer the guiding research questions.

3.1 Triangulation: A Multipronged Approach

To answer the research questions that guide this thesis, a process of triangulation will be used, which combines multiple qualitative methods to produce more robust and verifiable results. One of the foremost benefits of using qualitative research methods is that they can more accurately capture the nuances of the human experience, without reducing people to numbers (Choy, 2014). As such, qualitative methods have the potential to provide a more insightful and in-depth analysis of a social phenomenon (Dudwick, 2006). As Merriam (2002) eloquently puts it, "The world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research" (p. 42). Using only one qualitative approach, however, may not provide results that are substantial enough to draw a conclusive analysis. This potential pitfall can be mitigated with the use of triangulation, which combines multiple qualitative methods to produce more verifiable results and convincing conclusions (Choy, 2014). The goal of triangulation "is to use the strengths of one methodological approach to compensate for the weaknesses of the other…When different approaches yield broadly similar findings, the researcher can be more confident that those findings are indeed correct" (Dudwick, et al., 2006, p. 38). One of the qualitative methods used in this thesis is a limited number of semi-structured interviews. While these interviews are unique and insightful, they are also small in sample size and anecdotal. When fortified with other methods, however, the interviews help provide a fuller picture of the beliefs and attitudes behind the movement. As such, the interviews will be combined with an analysis of

secondary academic literature, various primary source data, and participant observation from my time in Lebanon both during the uprising in the fall of 2019 and upon my return to the country in the spring of 2023.

Another key benefit of utilizing qualitative research methods, especially in the case of Lebanon, is that "In situations where governments are highly suspicious of quantitative surveys, qualitative work may be the only research option available for assessing social capital issues. And although small samples are more frequent in qualitative research, it is possible to conduct larger-scale, cross-country qualitative research" (Dudwick, et al., 2006, p.4). It is likely the case that a quantitative approach would not be possible for this thesis, given the lack of any available or accurate census or polling data in Lebanon. The last official census ever conducted in Lebanon was in 1932 (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011). During the uprising, the Lebanese government was keen on downplaying the magnitude of the movement.

As stated, small sample sizes can be a drawback of qualitative research methods. Semi-structured interviews "are unlikely to encompass a large enough sample to yield precision of the 'plus or minus *n* percent' variety" (Adams, 2015, p. 493). Moreover, the samples are usually selected deliberately and in an idiosyncratic manner by the researcher or on the recommendation of other participants, which can create a "snowball" sampling effect wherein participants are more likely to share many of the same views (Dudwick, et al., 2006). The limitation of small sample size and "snowball" effect is acknowledged in this thesis. However, these potential drawbacks can be substantially mitigated when combined with other methods. With more time, a much larger interview sample size could have been conducted, but when time does not allow for this, a smaller sample size of interviews can provide key insights and human perspective to complement the other methods. When conducting interviews, it is imperative to consider the sensitivity of both the topic in question and the openness of the given political environment. Fortunately, Lebanon remains one of the more liberal environments among its Arab and Middle Eastern counterparts regarding the discussion of political matters. That said, it remains imperative to acquire consent from interviewees to publish their names and the content of the interviews. If participants ask for any part of the interview to be omitted after the fact, it is important to comply with these wishes. All five interview subjects agreed to be featured in this thesis and have their names available. Upon their permission, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed to ensure their authenticity. The interviews were semi-structured, with the overarching goal of ascertaining the

motivations, viewpoints, and arguments of those who participated either participated directly in the movement or had unique knowledge about it.

The secondary sources will include much of the preeminent academic literature on sectarian power-sharing and how it has been implemented in Lebanon. The primary sources will include local articles, reports, and analyses of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and think tanks. Reporting on the uprising, particularly that of native Lebanese journalists who were in the streets during the protests will be immensely insightful in gaining an accurate picture of the events from local eyes. Many of these journalists reported in real-time on Twitter and other social media networks what they were witnessing firsthand. I will also draw upon participant observation from my time spent in Lebanon in November 2019 when the protests were happening in full force. I was present in Lebanon when Saad Hariri resigned as prime minister, and I walked among protesters in Beirut, having countless opportunities to speak with people. My time in Lebanon that fall is etched into my memory and is what inspired me to embark on this project. Between March 14 and March 31, 2023, I returned to Lebanon to conduct semi-structured interviews and observe the changes that have taken place in the country. All of the aforementioned data collection methods will be examined together to gain the fullest possible picture of the 17 October Uprising, which represented a significant, albeit ephemeral, new stage of unity between Lebanese citizens from all walks of life. This thesis intends to contribute to the nascent body of literature on the 2019 uprising, thereby complementing and strengthening existing research. The thesis hopes to elucidate the unprecedented nature of the 17 October Uprising and how it may set the stage for future mobilizations in Lebanon that might break through the usual sectarian divisions once again.

3.2 Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research methods that were selected to address the guiding questions of the thesis. Due to the lack of available or accurate census or polling data in Lebanon, qualitative methods were deemed most suitable for examining the topic of the 17 October Uprising. To mitigate the limitations associated with using a single qualitative method, a process of triangulation will be employed to ensure more accurate and verifiable results. With more time, future researchers may consider delving deeper into one or more of these methods. One recommendation is conducting a more extensive survey involving a larger sample size and

engaging with a broader spectrum of participants over an extended period. Furthermore, conducting multiple interview sessions with each participant could yield additional insights, allowing them to reflect and expand upon previous discussions.

Chapter 4

Lebanese Sectarianism: A Brief History

"While it is an exaggeration to hold that all things political in Lebanon are fundamentally religious, it is nevertheless true that any explanation of Lebanese politics will be incomplete unless the role of religious attitudes and organizations are taken into account."
(Crow, 1962, p. 489)

4.1 Origins of Lebanese Sectarianism

To understand the nature of sectarianism in modern-day Lebanon and how it permeates nearly every aspect of daily life, it is necessary to trace back its origins. Mount Lebanon, which was a part of the Ottoman Empire since 1516 (Malley, 2018), enjoyed de facto autonomy and was often a refuge for religious minorities. It was dominated by Maronite Christians, who held a majority over the Druze (Crow, 1962). Between May and June 1860, the Maronites and Druze clashed over control of the mountain. Caught off guard by the violence, Sultan Abdülmecid sent Foreign Minister Fuad Pasha to investigate the massacres and restore order. Pasha's investigation was assisted by a French army sent by Napoleon III, as well as an international commission with representatives from France, Austria, Russia, and Prussia (Makdisi, 2002). That the violence warranted such an international intervention reflected both the scale of the bloodshed and foreign interests in maintaining stability in the area. In 1861, the *Mutasarrifiyya* government was established as a product of the investigation and the international commission, thus beginning the enduring status quo of confessional power-sharing in Lebanon (Weiss, 2009). The arrangement stipulated that the governor would be an Ottoman Christian, assisted by an elected administrative council of twelve members representing the respective religious communities they represent within the borders of the *Mutasarrifiyya.* The *Mutasarrifiyya* was granted privileges not shared by any other region in Syria, such as being exempt from paying taxes to the central government and its citizens being exempt from military service. This meant that neighboring regions often wished to join the orbit of Mount Lebanon (Abu-Manneh, 2013).

Recognizing that Mount Lebanon needed to combine with other regions to be an economically viable state and believing that Beirut in particular was "the key to Lebanon," the first governor of the *Mutasarrifiyya* lobbied the Porte in Istanbul unsuccessfully to annex lands outside of the *Mutasarrifiyya* (Abu-Manneh, 2013, p. 122). Nearly six decades later, the French gained control

of Greater Syria after the San Remo Conference of 1920, which divided the former Ottoman provinces between France and Britain. It was then that Maronite Christians successfully lobbied France to carve out a Maronite-led state around Mount Lebanon (Malley, 2018). Thus, in 1920, the State of Greater Lebanon was created, extending the traditional borders of Maronite-led Mount Lebanon to include the majority-Shia, Beqa Valley, and the important coastal cities of Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon, and Tyre, all majority-Sunni except for Shia-majority Tyre. The territorial expansion was to ensure an economically viable state independent of Syria. However, the inclusion of areas outside of Mount Lebanon meant that the Christian-Muslim ratio was narrower, especially as Muslim birthrates outpaced that of Christians (Crow, 1962). The majority of Muslims during the French occupation did not recognize the new borders, nor did they identify as Lebanese. Most preferred to reunify with Syria. Most Maronite Christians, on the other hand, identified as Lebanese and felt more akin to the Western than the Arab world (Malley, 2018).

Precipitating Lebanon's independence from France in 1943, Maronite President Bschara al-Khoury and Sunni Prime Minister Riyad al-Solh came to an unwritten agreement called the National Pact that Lebanon would become a sovereign, independent, and neutral country, with a division of power based on the 1932 census. All positions – legislative, executive, judicial, plus civil service – would be allocated along confessional lines (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011). The ratio of Christians to Muslims in parliament would be 6:5. The president would be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim (Malley, 2018). Crucially, the 1932 census was the first and last official census ever conducted in Lebanon. The National Pact of 1943 stipulated the divisions of power that remain in place today, albeit with a post-civil war realignment that changed the confessional ratio to 5:5 instead of 6:5 between Christians and Muslims (Hudson, 1997). According to Riyad al-Solh, the National Pact aimed to "Lebanonize Lebanese Muslims and to Arabize Lebanon's Christians" (Bahout, 2016, p. 7). While the National Pact was unwritten, the Lebanese Constitution explicitly stipulated sectarian proportionality in government:

> As a provisional measure and for the sake of justice and amity, the sects shall be equitably represented in public employment and in the composition of the Ministry, provided such measures will not harm the general welfare of the state. (Article 95, as amended in November 1943)

The constitution does not, however, make clear how long the "provisional measure" should continue. In other words, there was no phasing-out mechanism. Exacerbating the ambiguity of this article, other constitutional articles directly contradicted it:

> All Lebanese shall be equal before the law. They shall enjoy civil and political rights and shall equally be bound by public obligations and duties without distinction. (Article 7)

> Every Lebanese shall have the right to hold public office, no preference being made except on the basis of merit and competence, according to the conditions established by law. A special statute shall guarantee the rights of state officials in the departments to which they belong. (Article 12)

The constitution also neglects to define the procedure by which representative proportions should be determined – that is through recurring censuses or by other means. There are numerous other questions that the Constitution fails to answer. For instance, should the proportions be based solely on Lebanese who reside in Lebanon, or should they include the substantial number of Lebanese in the diaspora? Already in 1977, the diaspora accounted for more than double the domestic population: 5 million outside to 2.5 million inside (Chamie, 1977).

Although on paper the law should be applied equally to all Lebanese, in practice, laws profoundly vary from one sect to another, something that greatly hinders the development of a Lebanese national consciousness. Each sect has complete autonomy to establish its own personal status laws, which pertain to matters related to engagement, marriage, divorce, inheritance, and more. There are no civil courts to address personal status matters. This means that interfaith marriages are incredibly rare. In educational matters, sects have the autonomy to establish their own schools and curriculums. There is also the presence of numerous foreign educational bodies in Lebanon. What this means today is that members of each group are raised learning profoundly different narratives of the Lebanese Civil War and everything else in between. The members of each of Lebanon's 18 sects tend to identify with their sect before country (Chamie, 1977).

In the first decade or so after the National Pact, the political formula that it stipulated was *tolerated* by most of Lebanon's sects. The arrangement of confessional power-sharing appeared to be performing impressively from afar. Lebanon experienced rapid economic growth and enjoyed

a level of political stability and openness that set it apart from the majority of its Arab counterparts. The Lebanese model of power-sharing was seen as a model for divided societies elsewhere. Eventually, however, the 6:5 ratio of Christians to Muslims started to come into question, particularly among Shia Muslims. There was also the growing external threat from the Arab-Israeli conflict. By the start of the civil war in 1975, the Lebanese government was severely weakened. The Christian president and Muslim prime minister were finding it difficult to work together, and the army was finding it difficult to control violence stemming from the growing numbers of Palestinians in Lebanon at the time – estimated at some 400 thousand (Hudson, 1997). The carefully-calibrated balance of power was reaching a breaking point. Many Muslims were increasingly frustrated and resentful toward the balance of power that favored Christians. Already in the years before the National Pact, it was evident that the Muslim population was catching up if not surpassing that of Christians. After all, the last official census ever conducted in Lebanon was in 1932. The National Pact neglected to account for natural demographic shifts that might occur over time (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011).

4.2 The Lebanese Civil War

The Lebanese Civil War – fought between 1975 and 1990 – was a long and bloody conflict that went through multiple phases. There was no one cause of the outbreak of the war but rather, a series of interrelated events and simmering sectarian tensions. However, if one should pinpoint the event that truly initiated the spirit of sectarian conflict, it would be on 13 April 1975, when a prominent member of the Phalangists – a Maronite militia strongly hostile to the presence of armed Palestinians in Lebanon – was killed. His death was blamed on Palestinian guerillas. Later that day, 27 Palestinians along with their Lebanese sympathizers were riding a bus through a Christian neighborhood when they were brutally ambushed by Phalangists seeking retribution. Fighting between Palestinians and Phalangists ensued for a week until a truce was negotiated. The Muslim prime minister resigned after facing intense criticism for failing to adequately respond to the violence in which many innocent Lebanese were killed in collateral.

In the years leading up to the war, Muslims were demanding a larger role in politics and in the military, which was perceived as a threat to the Maronite-dominated political formula defined in the 1943 National Pact and the Constitution, both seen as the only safeguards to Christian dominance in Lebanon. Broadly, there were two main groups of combatants. On one side, there

were the right-wing "traditionalists" headed by the Lebanese armed forces consisting mainly of Maronites and other Christians, including the Phalange Party. This side advocated for the maintenance of the political status quo that ensured the continued dominance of Christians in politics and the military, as defined in the 1943 National Pact that stipulated the 6:5 ratio between Christians and Muslims. The other group of combatants consisted of a much looser coalition between various groups, including Lebanese "progressives" and Palestinians. This side generally advocated for reforming the Lebanese political system "because it is highly corrupt, ineffective, unstable, and strongly biased in favor of one sectarian community over another" (Chamie, 1977, p. 177). Most on this side preferred a secular instead of a sectarian system, although, in practice, this would mean a greater role for Muslims politically and in the military. The popular perception toward the combatants was that the traditionalists were the "haves" while the progressives and others on that side were the "have nots." This perception was evidenced by deep socio-economic divides between them. The average incomes of Christian families were 16 percent higher than the average Druze income, 28 percent higher than the average Sunni income, and a staggering 58 percent higher than the average Shia income. Educational levels were also significantly higher among Christians. Birthrates among Muslims were substantially outpacing that of Christians, further contributing to the existential threat perceived by many Christians. If the Muslim population were to surpass that of Christians, the first questions that arise pertain to the balance of power in politics. For instance, would the president remain a Maronite Christian if Christians were to become the minority?

In addition to the ideological differences between the combatants, the issue of Palestinian refugees was a primary cause of the war. There were some 400 thousand Palestinian refugees in a country of just 2.5 million at the time. Many traditionalists viewed the Palestinians as a shadow state within Lebanon and felt that the Palestinian militia groups using Lebanon as a launching point for attacks against Israel were threatening the territorial sovereignty of the country. Thus, the goals of the traditionalists were to disarm the Palestinians and prevent further confrontations with Israeli, while the progressives were more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and more likely to tolerate and assist Palestinian resistance against Israel from within Lebanon (Chamie, 1977).

Although the Lebanese Civil War was fought throughout the country, Beirut was the main epicenter. The capital was divided between the ideologically Christian East and Muslim West. The once cosmopolitan downtown of Beirut suffered from devastating urbicide, which is defined as

"the deliberate killing of the city fabric," (Tamimova, 2022, p. 6) as the so-called Green Line divided the city center down the middle. Unlike the Berlin Wall or Israel's West Bank "security" wall, there was no physical demarcation but rather, sites where intense violence took place. People relied on physical objects and buildings to indicate which side they were on. One of the most intense episodes of the civil war was the "Battle of the Hotels" in downtown Beirut, which culminated with the fall of the famous Holiday Inn hotel in March 1976 to Muslim militias. The first couple years of the war are remembered as the most brutal and consequential period, defined by a divided city, atrocious massacres, checkpoints, assassinations, roadside bombs, and snipers. During this period, it was citizen against citizen, whereas the latter periods of the war can be characterized more by the presence of international actors and other external elements that made the playing field utterly convoluted (Tamimiva, 2022).

By October 1976, a staggering 2 percent of the Lebanese population had been killed and 5 percent were injured (Chamie, 1977). Even more unimaginable than these numbers is that the war would grind on for another 14 years. By 1990, at least 144 thousand people lost their lives, 184 thousand were injured, 13 thousand were kidnapped, 17 thousand were missing, 175 towns were partially or entirely destroyed, 750 thousand Lebanese were internally displaced, and there were at least USD 25 billion in physical damages (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011). The Lebanese Civil War was very much a war of attrition defined by scattered violence over a long period of fifteen years.

4.3 Summary

The story of Lebanese sectarianism cannot be fully understood without tracing its origins back to its inception. This chapter provided an account of how Lebanon's formation was shaped by externally-imposed sectarian divisions, first by the Ottomans, then by the French, and culminating in the National Pact that paved the way for independence in 1943. The delicate sectarian balance was shattered when the Lebanese Civil War erupted in 1975, fueled in part by deep-seated resentment and mistrust between Christians and Muslims. While the causes of the war are complex and multifaceted, with external factors such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict playing a major role, sectarianism was a significant contributing factor that prolonged the conflict for fifteen arduous years in which Lebanese citizen fought citizen. Sectarianism undeniably became the fault line along which the conflict unfolded. The capital city, Beirut, was divided between the Muslim West

and Christian East. The story of Lebanon is one of a nation in a constant struggle for its identity and a pervasive lack of national unity.

Chapter 5

Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction

This chapter will identify the 1989 Taif Accord as a primary catalyst for Lebanon's neoliberal reconstruction. Indeed, the agreement brought an end to fifteen years of bloodshed between Lebanese citizens of warring sects, but it also entrenched the same type of sectarianism that fueled the civil war into every facet of Lebanese life. Politicians such as Rafiq Hariri exploited, intentionally or unintentionally, sectarian clientelism in a way that enabled the country's neoliberal reconstruction. Sectarianism and neoliberalism mutually reinforced each other, eventually leading to much of the plight experienced by Lebanese today.

5.1 Sectarianism after the Taif Accord

The Taif Accord, also known as the Document of National Reconciliation, was signed on 22 October 1989 in Taif Saudi Arabia (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011) with the active mediation of the Saudis and the discrete involvement of the United States and Syria. The agreement adjusted the consociational rules stipulated in the National Pact: instead of 6:5, the ratio became 5:5 between Christians and Muslims. While the president would remain a Maronite Christian, his powers were substantially weakened. The prime minister would remain a Sunni, but the powers of the Council of Ministers, which he chairs, were strengthened. While the speaker of parliament would remain a Shia, his term was increased from one to four years, in turn increasing his influence. The powers of parliament also increased as a result of the elimination of the rule that allowed the executive to circumvent parliament on legislation he deems as "urgent" (Hudson, 1997, p. 113). Crucially, Taif explicitly called for the eventual phasing out of political sectarianism: "abolishing political sectarianism is a fundamental national objective" (Malley, 2018, p. 125). However, just like the National Pact and Lebanese Constitution, Taif neglected to provide a timeline or a mechanism for what the process of secularization should look like in practice. Moreover, Taif made the exact mistake that was made in the National Pact: it failed to account for future shifts in demographics (Hudson, 1997).

It was a full year until Taif came to fruition. Even though all surviving Lebanese parliamentarians except for one voted to approve the agreement, it did not have the support of President Michel Aoun and other Maronites, who believed that Taif did not guarantee a Syrian

military withdrawal from the country. As part of the agreement, the parliamentarians decided on a new president, but Aoun blocked him from entering the presidential palace. Intense fighting ensued in December 1989 between Aoun's forces and Syria. On 13 October 1990, Syria launched a massive air and ground attack on Maronite areas, after which all sides agreed to cease fighting and agree to the parameters of Taif. All Lebanese militias disbanded except for one Shia group, Hezbollah, which presented itself as the sole defender of Southern Lebanon against Israel (Malley, 2018).

While the Taif Accord brought an end to fifteen years of intense sectarian violence in Lebanon, it simultaneously entrenched sectarianism into every facet of Lebanese society. Many scholars argue that Taif basically put a temporary bandage on the wounds of the war without properly addressing the root causes. Instead of further physical violence, sectarian hostility was channeled into politics creating much of the political gridlock seen today. In fact, in a survey conducted between January and May 2009, 85 percent of respondents across all sects believed that the Lebanese people have not reconciled with one another (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011).

Another issue preventing proper post-war reconciliation is that blanket amnesty was given to all combatants, thus failing to hold to account gross human rights violations committed throughout the war. This encouraged retired combatants to forget their crimes, and, as the saying goes, those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. With their records now clean, militia leaders were able to easily transition into government. Many of these same individuals remain in power today. An additional issue preventing reconciliation was the continued presence of the Syrian military in Lebanon, which had an interest in keeping the country socially fragmented to allow itself the pretext of being a peacekeeping force (Ghosn and Khoury, 2011). Since the end of the civil war, fears persisted that sectarian violence might suddenly reunite. This was especially the case after Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in 2015, which resulted in a popular uprising that prompted the withdrawal of Syria's armed forces from Lebanon. Fears of a resurgence of violence were also on the rise in the years following the Syrian Civil War in 2011, which resulted in more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon (roughly 25 percent of the overall Lebanese population) (Malley, 2018). However, Lebanon managed to weather these societal tests without deteriorating into sectarian violence. Instead, the socio-economic divides that once helped fuel hostilities between Lebanon's sects became narrower as the country sank further into a collective plight.

5.2 Post-War Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction

In the years following the civil war and the Taif Accord, there were forces that worked to further entrench sectarianism into the societal fabric of Lebanon. The late Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, launched an ambitious post-war reconstruction plan intended to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and make Lebanon competitive in the global economy. In a few years, he turned the country into a magnet for Gulf capital and a construction boom ensued. This period of neoliberal reconstruction can be characterized by a reduction in welfare spending and a focus on Lebanon's global competitiveness. As a result, the sectarian elite cartel became richer while the middle class shrank. Baumann (2016) argues that Lebanese sectarianism is grounded in a deeply unequal political economy, as wealth is concentrated at the very top while the rest of the population is dependent on resources controlled by *their* sectarian leaders, who redistribute these resources through *sectarian clientelism.* Any challenge to this system is seen as a threat to the elite cartel, who depend on it to remain in power. In the 1990s came the biggest challenge with a trade union protest. Trade unions in Lebanon were among the only organizations historically independent from the sectarian elite cartel running the country. During the civil war, they were the only non-sectarian force willing to stand up to the militias. Their post-war foe became Rafiq Hariri and his neoliberal reconstruction project perceived as benefitting only those at the top. Hariri responded to the protests with repression and enacted "state of emergency" powers to prohibit protests. In the end, the president of the trade union was arrested by Hariri's forces, and the trade union lost its independence, thus ceasing to be the last non-sectarian vestige in Lebanon (Baumann, 2016). That the challenge from trade unions warranted such a heavy-handed response from Hariri, illuminates the lengths to which the elite cartel will go to guarantee the maintenance of a status quo that keeps them in power.

The system of political sectarianism that the Taif Accord created led to a welfare system in which Lebanese can depend only on their confessional leaders for resources. It was not until the confessional leaders could no longer provide these resources to their constituents that the patronage system began to crumble. Patronage transcended almost every facet of life in Lebanon in the years following Taif. For instance, confessional politicians and charities paid for disadvantaged members of their sects to attend private-fee paying schools. Baumann (2019) argues that "Schools catering mainly or exclusively to particular religious communities are a way of reproducing

sectarian identities" (p. 69). It tends to be lower-class Lebanese dependent on these patronage resources as they have nowhere else to return. Even garbage services in Lebanon are affected by sectarian clientelism. After the civil war, garbage collection was privatized and no longer a municipal responsibility. When the contract of the private company that handled waste collection in Beirut and Mount Lebanon expired, garbage began to pile up around the city, as Lebanon's ruling elites failed to work together toward an alternative. This prompted the so-called Garbage Crisis of 2015 and the resulting protests (Baumann, 2019). It becomes clear that the Garbage Crisis was a harbinger of subsequent crises, including the 2020 Beirut Port Explosion in which, the sectarian elite cartel, instead of working together to address the unstable ammonium nitrate in the port, pointed fingers at one another to address the problem. This would, of course, result in one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history in the heart of Lebanon's capital city.

5.3 Summary

The preceding two chapters have outlined three pivotal events that encapsulate the story of Lebanese sectarianism: the establishment of the *Mutasarrifiyya* government in Mount Lebanon in 1861 by the Ottomans, the formation of the National Pact in 1943 that laid the groundwork for the modern Lebanese state, and the signing of the Taif Accords in 1989, which brought an end to the civil war but also entrenched sectarianism deeply into the fabric of political and social life. Today, sectarianism in Lebanon stands as one of the most institutionalized forms in the world. It has "contributed to concentration of power in the hands of a sect-based political and economic elite, whose influence stretches far into various sectors of Lebanese society, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, and most parts of civil society" (Rønn, 2020, p. 88). Sectarianism, as promulgated by the 1989 Taif Accord, and neoliberalism, driven by Rafiq Hariri's post-war reconstruction project, mutually reinforced one another. The marriage between the two has resulted in heightened inequality, corruption, and a system of rent-seeking clientelism. As a consequence, the unintended outcome, as I argue, is the socio-economic convergence of Lebanese citizens across all sects, as the middle class shrank, and the sectarian elite cartel grew wealthier. The conventional wisdom shared by many scholars was that "In Lebanon, acute economic crises can explode into sectarian political conflicts" (Hudson, 1997, p. 120). However, in the 17 October Uprising, quite the opposite occurred: large cross sections of Lebanese society came together to protest sectarianism itself. There were also claims that "issues of contention have divided Lebanese

sectarian communities rather than fostering a feeling of shared plight" (Fakhoury, 2014, p. 242). Nonetheless, on 17 October, citizens directed their frustrations not towards each other but against a sectarian ruling class perceived to benefit from a clientelist system that keeps them in power while subjecting the rest of the population to poverty and socio-economic immobility.

Chapter 6

Voices from the Uprising

By the second day of the 17 October Uprising, the movement had already assumed an actively anti-sectarian character. Not only were protesters chanting famous Arab Spring slogans such as *Ash-sha'b, yurid, isqat an-nizam!* (The people want the fall of the regime!), but most prominently, *Killun ya'ni killun* (All of them means all of them), the latter an explicit call to oust all political leaders regardless of the sects they represent. The proposed WhatsApp tax, which was rescinded the same day, became background noise. Protesters were united in their anger toward the sectarian political establishment that, in their belief, enabled Lebanon's political and economic plight. Can we say for certain that every Lebanese person or even every protester felt the same way about political sectarianism? Can we conclude that everyone who chanted *Killun ya'ni killun* truly meant it toward their own confessional representatives? As with any popular movement, especially one as diverse as 17 October, these would be gross generalizations. However, we can posit quite safely that an unprecedented cross-section of Lebanese was genuinely united in their push to abolish political sectarianism. This chapter will illuminate the anti-sectarian dynamics at play in the 17 October Uprising through an analysis of primary sources, including local reporting, photographs, and protest materials. Above all, it will share the voices of a few of those who participated in the movement.

I first visited Lebanon in the fall of 2019 during the apex of the uprising. Between 14 and 31 March 2023, I returned to Lebanon to interview diverse individuals who either participated in the movement directly or indirectly, as well as to assess the changes that have taken place since my first visit. I spoke informally with people all over the country and from all walks of life and conducted five semi-structured interviews with individuals who had significant insights to share about the movement. Firstly, via Zoom call, I interviewed Nader Durgham, a journalist who formerly reported on Lebanon and Syria for the Washington Post. In 2019, he was an active participant in the movement. In Metn, on the outskirts of Beirut, I sat down with Verena El Amil, one of the main organizers of the uprising, and later, the youngest person to run for parliament in Lebanon's spring 2022 elections, in which she ran unsuccessfully on a secular platform in her Maronite district. In Beirut, I interviewed Karem Monzer, a Druze who was a prominent participant in the uprising and even camped in the streets of downtown Beirut for many months.

Karem is also a journalist for *Beirut Today.* In Amsterdam, I sat down with human rights lawyer, Fadi Hachem, who volunteered for the Lebanese Red Cross throughout the uprising. Fadi was also working as a human rights violation manager for a non-profit, monitoring violations against protesters in Lebanon. He is now serving as regional advisor on human rights and legal affairs for the US-based Search for Common Ground while working toward a PhD at the University of Amsterdam. Lastly, I sat down with journalist and photographer Ousama Ayoub, who did not participate in the uprising, but reported on it for multiple Lebanese news outlets. All of these interviewees had unique and illuminating insights to share about their respective experiences and reflections on the 17 October Uprising. A couple of demographic notes to bear in mind: except for Ousama, all interviewees were in their 20s and represent a more liberal and secularly-oriented cross-section of Lebanese society. That said, they come from different sects and had differing opinions and reflections on the movement.

6.1 Straw That Broke the Camel's Back

None of my interviewees anticipated the scale that the 17 October Uprising would reach. What began with spontaneous protests against the WhatsApp tax quickly morphed into the largest and most diverse protest movement in Lebanon's history. All of my interviewees in hindsight identified the events that precipitated it: a rapidly deteriorating economy, catastrophic forest fires, growing inequality, an electricity crisis, and deteriorating living standards. Nader said that, before the uprising, "the economic troubles were getting worse. The Lebanese lira was starting to fall on the black market. Obviously not as catastrophically as now. But the cracks were starting to show." I asked Nader when the movement became about more than the WhatsApp tax, to which he answered, "Oh, the very first night. The moment people hit the streets on the night of October 17 it was not about the WhatsApp tax and that was very clear. It was [about] the downfall of the regime."

Karem was one of the first people on the streets of Beirut on 17 October. He and his friends helped shut down the main intersection between downtown, Achrafieh (an affluent Christian neighborhood), and various Muslim neighborhoods. This now-famous intersection is colloquially referred to as the "Ring." Being a physical intersection and also an ideological meeting point between sectarian neighborhoods made it a prominent symbol of the anti-sectarian character of the uprising. It is where people from different faiths and socioeconomic backgrounds came together

in the initial period of the movement. Drivers coming home from work abandoned their cars to join the movement. From the Ring, the protesters marched downtown toward parliament, where they clashed with soldiers. That first night, they were already chanting "thawra" (revolution) on repeat. Karem, a member of the Druze faith, said that there were "people from Hezbollah, people from Amal…we were united. We were united out of anger. Our generation was calling for secularism." In previous protest movements, the groups Karem mentioned were not historically inclined toward common cause with other sects. As both Hezbollah and Amal are Shia Muslim groups, their sect gained the largest single increase in political power following the Taif Accord meaning that, they are not often incentivized to protest the system that enabled their political clout. And yet, on 17 October, at least some members of those groups were united with others in the streets calling for the downfall of political sectarianism. It was unprecedented. From that night forward, Karem and his friends set up tents and camped out in downtown Beirut for weeks and months.

Nader also discussed the significance of the shutting down of the Ring Bridge in Beirut. Today, it is famous for being at the epicenter of the uprising in Beirut. Before 17 October, however, it was merely an intersection. Nader recalled being out for dinner with his friends on the evening of 17 October when his mom called warning him to avoid the Ring Bridge on his way home, to which he replied, "What's the Ring Bridge?" He laughed and said, "Never forgot what the Ring Bridge is since." The repeated references to this bridge illuminate the significance and symbolism that physical spaces and objects played in enabling the uprising. Rafiq Hariri's neoliberal reconstruction of the country led to a privatization trend, a construction boom, and a diminishment of areas that can be utilized and enjoyed by the public. Today, in Beirut, there is hardly a public park in sight. So, during the uprising, the reclamation of spaces for public use was a key tactic that enabled Lebanese from all walks of life to come together. Many of these physical spaces represented the division of Lebanese society and, finally, in 2019, were dismantled in a symbolic and euphoric way. Some Lebanese people even saw "the uprising as a genuine end to the 1975 Civil War – a war that gave birth to religious, political, and social boundaries – by organically bringing together the country as one, demonstrating under one flag, the Lebanese flag" (Sinno, 2020, p. 193).

The "Egg" in downtown Beirut is perhaps the most prominent symbol of the reclamation of spaces for public use. The Beirut City Dome (i.e., the "Egg") was meant to be an avant-garde

cinema and a centerpiece of downtown Beirut. When the civil war began in 1975, the Egg found itself situated directly along the Green Line that divided the city, and it became a strategic base for sniper operations. It sat unfinished, abandoned, and off-limits to the public until the fall of 2019 when it was reclaimed by protesters and used as a key organizing space (Kosmatopoulis, 2021). The Egg today is very much a symbol of the legacy of the uprising. For some Lebanese, it reminds them of the euphoric sense of unity felt between Lebanese of all different creeds. For others, it is a haunting reminder that the uprising fell short of its goals. In November 2019, I climbed to the roof of the Egg early one morning to watch the sun rise over Martyr's Square following a night of mass protests downtown. Returning to the Egg in March 2023, I was surprised to see that the fence that once kept it off-limits to the public had not been rebuilt. Walking around the inside of the Egg, the revolutionary murals and slogans I saw on its walls three years earlier had not been touched.

The ideas that propelled the 17 October Uprising, namely, a push for secular politics, had been slowly inching their way into the mainstream for years leading up to it. It was not an overnight process that people turned their attention toward political sectarianism. Verena discussed in depth this buildup toward an alternative political discourse. She identified the 2015 Garbage Crisis protests, which she participated in, as a major turning point in which rhetoric in support of a secular rather than sectarian system began to take hold. In the 2016 municipal elections that followed the Garbage Crisis, there was a nascent body of candidates running outside of the traditional confessional parties, which Verena said, "was the first indicator…concrete indicator…that a lot of people have had enough with the ruling class who were all running together on the same list." By this, she meant that, traditionally, candidates merely run on being Maronite, Sunni, Shia, or Druze, rather than on actual policy issues. Many people were beginning to open their eyes to the shortfalls of such a system.

Verena spoke extensively about how sectarianism transcends seemingly every part of life in Lebanon. She recalled running for university elections as a student at St Joseph University in Beirut. Even in that academic setting, students ran on sect before policy issues. "There was no electoral program or debate," she said. "No one ever discussed ideas or real politics. I told myself that I shouldn't choose between bad and worst. Why not have an alternative?" So, that is exactly what she and her friends decided to do: they created an alternative. They began a student movement called "Talib" which is a play on the words, "student" and "demand" in Arabic – "the students demand." Gaining 5 out of the 11 seats in the university election, Talib gained far greater traction

than its founders anticipated. Capitalizing on its success, Talib expanded to other faculties and universities, creating a network of like-minded university students intent on creating a secular alternative to the traditional confessional parties.

While the other interviewees were rather adamant regarding the anti-sectarian nature of the uprising, Fadi was a bit more hesitant and cautioned that not everyone who chanted *Killun ya'ni killun* truly meant it with regard to their own confessional leaders. He did, however, acknowledge the unprecedented nature of the movement. When I asked him how 17 October differed from previous protest movements in Lebanon, he said that "It was bigger. It grew really quickly to all regions of Lebanon. And that was different." Previous movements, he said, like the 2015 Garbage Crisis protests, were confined primarily to Beirut, whereas with 17 October, the whole country seemingly erupted at once. Even with his reservations over protesters' genuine desire for *Killun ya'ni killun,* Fadi said that "Everyone had Lebanon's best interest in mind."

6.2 "One Beating Heart"

Except for Fadi, all of my interviewees were unanimous that the driving goal of the 17 October Uprising was the downfall of Lebanon's power-sharing system of governance. For many Lebanese in the fall of 2019, the simultaneously cross-sectarian and anti-sectarian nature of the movement represented a proper reconciliation between citizens, who were pointing fingers at their own sectarian leaders. "It was openly *Killun ya'ni killun*" professed Verena. For Verena, 17 October felt like a true end to the civil war. It was discussed in the previous chapter that the Taif Accord failed to take the steps necessary to bring about proper reconciliation between Lebanon's sects. Verena explained that while the civil war…

> …ended in the 90s, there was no transitional justice. We felt that the traumas were still there and there was fear and bridges between the Lebanese people because we felt that the civil war page wasn't really closed. I think that is why [the confessional elites] persisted, not because they showed the people that they are competent or that they have [the people's] interests, but that they can protect them from the other. They were using this fear to govern. So, during the uprising, I felt that all of Lebanon – Tyre, Tripoli, Beirut, Metn – was one beating heart for the first time.

Nader told me that for the first time, "people in the streets were talking about their own experiences with their politicians…Sunnis talking about how the Hariri family never helped

them…Armenians talking about how their own Armenian party is just as corrupt." He said that "the wall of fear has been broken in the sense that people were not afraid to call out their leaders." Overwhelmingly, my interviewees felt united with their fellow citizens across different sects in ways they never had before. Nader said that "There was definitely cross-sectarian unity in the streets. I can definitely attest to that. [It was] interesting that [there were] protesters not necessarily divided sectarian-wise but class-wise." Karem told me that on 17 October "people started trusting each other. It was the first time I felt Lebanese. It was the first time I felt happy, proud to be Lebanese. At least we were trying to do something."

Among my interviewees, there was a general sense that the Lebanese population, by 17 October 2019, had slipped into a shared state of plight. According to Verena,

> The crisis isn't only on one confession or the other. It's not like Maronites are rich but Shia are poor. It's not like in Syria where you had a certain elite from a certain confession having a lot of money. Here we are all equal in misery! We have the same pain. And because of it, we are the same people. If together we manage to change the system, maybe we can all have a better life.

Verena was especially clear about the goals of the uprising: "Redefine politics. Make it so politics isn't only about protecting the confession. It should be about achieving the interests of the people. We want a country based on meritocracy."

6.3 Reflections from the Uprising

Where my interviewees differed most substantially was in their reflections on the uprising. On the third anniversary of 17 October, Nader posted a picture from the protests on his Twitter page, writing: "Feels so surreal that this was 3 years ago. So much has changed since then, including how I personally feel about everything that went down. We may still have a long fight ahead in Lebanon, but October 17 still gave me some of the most glorious days of my life." In fact, this was the post that prompted me to reach out to Nader in the first place for an interview. When I asked Nader how he felt during the uprising, he recalled a sense of overwhelming disbelief that "over a million people in the streets of Lebanon [were] asking for the same things." When asked how he feels looking back on the uprising, he spoke extensively about the tragic series of events that followed the uprising: the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis, and the Beirut Port explosion

in August 2020. He expressed a general sense of disillusionment over the prospects of change and a feeling of defeat that the uprising failed to bring about its intended goals. It is not all doom and gloom, however. Nader told me that, while the movement failed to achieve its desired goal of overthrowing the entire sectarian system, it was not a total failure because "the political landscape ever since that day has not been the same and will never be the same again." By this, he means that anti-sectarian sentiments now reach far and wide across Lebanese society in ways unimaginable before the uprising. Nader sounded almost exasperated while reflecting on certain parts of the uprising. "It was insane," he said. "I breathed so much tear gas."

Another point on which interviewees differed is when the uprising truly ended. For Verena, it ended when Hassan Diab was sworn into office and his cabinet was given a vote of confidence. She explained that this fractured the movement because Diab asked the country to give him 100 days to put the country back on track. Many people wanted to give him a chance while others did not. Naturally, that will fracture a popular movement. Crucially, during those 100 days, the COVID-19 pandemic began, and the country went into lockdown. People were forced to remain in their homes. For Nader and Karem, the pandemic was the official end of the uprising and the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020 was the nail in the coffin. Some idealistic revolutionaries whom I met on the streets told me that the uprising never really ended; that it is lying dormant ready to be reinvigorated.

6.4 Looking Ahead

The interviewees also differed substantially in their respective outlooks on Lebanon's future. Journalist Ousama Ayoub simply said that "Lebanon will never change at all." Karem described feelings of defeat and disillusionment over the shortcomings of 17 October and the events that followed. I asked him why the movement did not reignite after the Beirut Port explosion, to which he responded:

> People were defeated. A lot of people left. We protested and they [the army] opened active fire on us…not rubber bullets…active fire. People lost their eyes, their legs. Now my aim is to go outside this country. I won't think about raising a family here. I don't want to get used to this. I don't want my kids to live in this misery.

Fadi said he believes that "at least 70% of the people that were in the streets in 2019 no longer live in Lebanon now. [The revolutionaries] are gone or they are fed up." Verena also noted that many,

if not most of the revolutionaries have left the country. While she said that she does not blame those who abandoned the fight, she said that it is important not to lose them (the diaspora) completely.

Most of my interviewees and other Lebanese I spoke to on my latest visit still refer to the 17 October Uprising as "al-thawra" (revolution). I asked Karem whether, in hindsight, it was actually a revolution since the confessional power-sharing system remains in place. "It's a good question," he responded. "We tried. We did not succeed. But we were able to change the mentality of many people. My family didn't vote for the same people they used to vote for 30 years." While he did not exactly answer whether 17 October amounted to a revolution, the question was one of futile semantics. The last part of his answer highlights an important point shared by all of the other interviewees: 17 October was not a complete failure because it managed to considerably sway popular political attitudes. Fadi said that if the criteria for success was *Killun ya'ni killun*, the movement was a failure. It did, however, profoundly change the way many people in Lebanon think about politics and planted the seed of doubt in their minds when it comes time to vote between their traditional confessional leaders or new candidates. "Whether it succeeded or failed is not a yes or no question," said Fadi. "It succeeded and failed at the same time."

While anecdotal, almost everyone I spoke to in Lebanon said that Lebanese today are more in support of a secular system than ever before, which segues into a question I posed to all of the interviewees: Could 17 October lay the groundwork for future mobilizations? After all, the situation in Lebanon today is objectively worse than it was when the uprising began three years ago. Nader said that, in his opinion, the Lebanese people are at a point where they cannot afford to protest let alone put bread on the table. They are "more dependent on their warlords than ever before," said Nader, referencing the enduring system of sectarian clientelism. Conventional wisdom might posit that the worse off people are economically, the more likely they are to protest and overthrow their leaders. However, as the impact of economic sanctions around the world has shown, this is not usually the case. Verena echoed this and said that "Some people think that the poorer a society is the more the possibility of revolting, of having a revolution. I don't think this is the case. People are worried about their children eating…they can't afford living." Moreover, many Lebanese politicians today use 17 October as a convenient scapegoat for any number of the country's current problems.

Although she does not see another uprising in the vein of 17 October on the near horizon, Verena is cautiously optimistic about Lebanon's future. After the uprising, she launched a political campaign based on the ideas that propelled 17 October, and, even earlier than that, her university campaign, "Talib." She was the youngest candidate to run for parliamentary elections in Spring 2022 and the very last to register with seven minutes left on the clock. Her campaign explicitly called for the end of political sectarianism, which she made sure to articulate in a way that translated into real-world issues for average voters across all sects. It is not always obvious the degree to which sectarianism transcends almost every issue in Lebanon, even outside of politics. It also shapes personal statist laws, explained Verena. "There are 15-16 laws in Lebanon about personal statist matters." For instance, "In some confessions, women and men can get married at the age of 10 or 11…which is against all international treaties and the constitution." Her campaign was also openly pro-LGBTQ rights, something that Verena believes has been brought more into the mainstream in Lebanon, helped along by 17 October. "That's where I tell myself [the uprising] wasn't for nothing," said Verena. Although her parliamentary campaign was ultimately unsuccessful, she gained a substantial following and immense political clout that might set the stage for a future run. At 26 years old, there is plenty of time to run again, and, unlike many of her friends and colleagues who left Lebanon, she says that she is not going anywhere. Verena told *L'Orient-Le Jour*, "I am still in this country because I believe in change and because there's still hope" (Sader, 2022). She told *Beirut Today*, "I don't want the next generation to say that we didn't try. I'd rather try and fail than not try, and earn the honor of trying" (Nabaa, 2022).

6.5 17 October's Legacy in Lebanon

The 17 October Uprising remains very much alive in the Lebanese national consciousness, even among those who did not participate. A museum in Beirut dedicated to addressing the painful legacy of the civil war now features exhibits commemorative of the 17 October Uprising and those who lost their lives in it. The museum's artistic director and curator, Roy Dib, wrote the following: "Beirut today is ugly, cruel, and harsh, but I still love her. Something was born inside me on October 17th, and something died inside of me on August 4th." Around cities – Beirut, Tripoli, Tyre, Sidon, and elsewhere – symbols of the uprising are difficult to ignore. The word *thawra* is still plastered on walls. Replicas of the famous revolutionary fist from Beirut's Martyrs Square can be found in other towns. Erected along the walls of Beirut's port is a modest memorial to the

victims of the port explosion, as well as to those who lost their lives in the uprising. It honors the "nine heroic martyrs of the glorious revolution" and says that while "revolutionaries may die…the revolution never dies…the revolution lives inside each person who is against the corrupt state." The last line reads "All means all," the main slogan from the uprising. In downtown Beirut, the wall that was erected by the military to secure government buildings during the 2019 uprising still stands and remains plastered with revolutionary slogans and murals – the so-called "REVOLUTION WALL." Although Martyr's Square, the epicenter of the uprising in downtown Beirut, has since been converted into a parking lot, the first that reads *thawra* stands tall. The subtle phrase "Fuck the government" is spray painted on one façade after another. Clearly, the sentiments that led people into the streets in the fall of 2019 have not disappeared. If anything, it becomes clear when speaking with people that these feelings have only strengthened. Only time will tell whether that leads to a renewed mass mobilization in the vein of 17 October.

Visiting Lebanon in 2023, it becomes clear that while the uprising might have ended, its legacy is omnipresent. Almost everyone I spoke to – both young and old, and those who protested and those who did not – acknowledged 17 October's salient memory. Younger generations of Lebanese in particular will evoke the uprising, which they refer to proudly as *thawra,* in conversation without being prompted. It becomes clear that no discussion on modern Lebanon is complete without touching on the 17 October Uprising. It was an unequivocally pivotal moment for the country.

6.6 Summary

The evidence accumulated through the methods employed in this thesis, including the analysis of existing academic literature, interviews, participant observation, and other primary source data reveals a deteriorating narrative wherein the absence of sectarian power-sharing would lead to the disintegration of Lebanese society into chaos once again. The lingering wounds of the Lebanese Civil War continue to haunt many Lebanese who lived through it, and their fears of a resurgence of violence have been exploited by politicians as a justification for maintaining the existing system of power-sharing as a mechanism for the maintenance of peace. However, more than three decades after the Taif Accord brought an end to the civil war, the political and economic situation in Lebanon was crumbling, nonetheless. People were realizing that the system was no longer working as it was supposed to. The tides were changing among a

substantial segment of Lebanese who took to the streets on 17 October to demand the downfall of a broken system. The magnitude and diversity of the 17 October Uprising, coupled with its call for political secularism, serve as a testament to this shifting tide. The interviews presented in this chapter, while they are by no means exhaustive, provide a valuable glimpse into these evolving attitudes. Additionally, through informal conversations that I engaged in throughout my travels around the country, Lebanese from all walks of life, including ones who did not participate in the movement, confirmed the tremendous impact that 17 October had on political discourse and attitudes.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The 17 October Uprising marked a watershed moment in Lebanon's political landscape, even though it ultimately fell short of its objective to abolish political sectarianism. Initially sparked by a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls, the uprising rapidly evolved into a widespread expression of political and economic grievances. This thesis was guided by three primary research questions that explored the reasons behind the uprising's focus on political sectarianism, its timing in the fall of 2019, and its impact on mainstream political attitudes in Lebanon. By contextualizing the uprising within a deteriorating economic situation and a series of disasters that plagued the country, it is apparent that the movement was the culmination of simmering resentments that finally erupted. The uprising managed to forge a broad coalition of Lebanese from all walks of life. However, unlike previous protest movements that were cross-sectarian, 17 October was actively *anti-sectarian* to an unprecedented degree in a country where challenging the political status quo was often seen as akin to jeopardizing the very arrangement that had maintained peace since the end of the civil war. The chant *Killun ya'ni killun* (All of them means all of them) exemplified the explicit call to oust the entire political establishment, disregarding sectarian affiliations. For the first time, many Lebanese demanded the resignation of their confessional leaders, as leaders across all sects were failing to fulfill the implicit agreement of sectarian clientelism: providing basic services to their constituents. While the uprising did not erase the distinct identities of being Maronite, Sunni, Shia, or any of Lebanon's 18 recognized religious communities, it emphasized the shared suffering experienced by all.

The 17 October Uprising remains an understudied topic in Lebanese and Middle Eastern studies largely due to its recent occurrence. Therefore, this thesis has contributed to the emerging body of literature on the uprising, as well as the broader scholarship on sectarianism and power-sharing as a governing philosophy. Numerous avenues for future research on the 17 October Uprising exist, including an investigation into why it ultimately failed to achieve its goals. As suggested by several interviewees, the uprising was not a complete failure, as it helped popularize previously taboo secular ideas into mainstream political discourse, and it instilled doubt in the minds of voters who historically supported only their confessional leaders when it came time to vote. The impact and legacy of the 17 October Uprising extend beyond its

immediate outcomes, necessitating further analysis of its implications. A more extensive study should involve a larger sample size, extended research duration, and engagement with a broader spectrum of participants. The limitations of this thesis were mitigated by employing the methodological approach of triangulation, which combined multiple qualitative methods, including the existing academic literature, semi-structured interviews, various primary source reporting, and participant observation, all of which collectively validated the underlying theories of the thesis.

Only time will reveal whether the legacy of 17 October will pave the way toward future mobilizations that embrace the diversity of being cross-sectarian, while simultaneously calling for the downfall of sectarianism as a governing apparatus. As multiple interviewees pointed out, numerous factors diminish the likelihood of a renewed uprising, including a prevailing sense of disillusionment regarding the ability of ordinary people to effect change in a rigid system and the high levels of emigration from the country that have occurred since 2019. The state of political and economic affairs in Lebanon today is objectively worse than in 2019. Many Lebanese who supported the uprising now feel that, more than three years later, they can no longer afford to protest and must focus on survival. As Lebanon is experiencing the fourth year of an economic meltdown, it is estimated that more than 80 percent of the Lebanese population lives in poverty (Human Rights Watch, 2023). According to the World Bank, "Lebanon's economic and financial crisis ranks among the worst economic and financial crises globally since the mid-nineteenth century," as the Lebanese currency has lost more than 95 percent of what its value was before the crisis (World Bank, 2023). The economic crisis has been severely compounded by the COVID-19 global pandemic and the massive Beirut Port explosion in August 2020, which rendered hundreds of thousands of people homeless.

Whether a new movement emerges in the future or not, it does not diminish the legacy of the unprecedented mobilization that took place across the country in the fall of 2019. Prior to the uprising, any challenge to Lebanon's political system was perceived as a threat to the stability of Lebanese democracy. The sectarian power-sharing system established by the Taif Accord played a crucial role in ending fifteen long years of bloodshed. However, Taif recognized that this arrangement was not intended to be permanent and called for its eventual phase-out. More than three decades later, this transition to secularism never materialized, and sectarianism instead became deeply woven into almost every aspect of Lebanon's political and social fabric.

Consequently, many Lebanese continued to identify themselves primarily by their religious affiliations rather than as Lebanese. On 17 October, however, a remarkable shift occurred as these groups marched together under a single flag. Everyone was welcomed, and for a brief moment, they stood united as Lebanese, stronger than ever before.

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