

The Relative Success of Consociational Institutions in Deeply Divided Societies: A Comparative Study of Northern Ireland and Lebanon

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Abstract

Lebanon and Northern Ireland conjure opposite images on consociationalism in the minds of many political scientists. While in Lebanon, the consociational system widely proved inefficient in preventing the outbreak of ethno-national conflicts, the Northern Ireland's experience of consociationalism remains vastly positive. Following a "Most Similar Systems Design" defined by Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune (2000), this research note tests the hypothesis that the positive nature of exogenous influences participates to a higher political stability in Northern Ireland relative to Lebanon, where external influences of negative nature had the reverse effect. For the sake of this study, the developments taking place after the signature of the agreements shaping both consociational systems – the Ta'if Agreement of 1989 in Lebanon and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 in Northern Ireland – are analysed through a particular focus on elites' external relations with patron states and their interactions with their regional or global environments.

Keywords

Comparative Politics; Consociational Democracies; Divided Societies; Good Friday Agreement; Ta'if Agreement

Introduction

The age-old question of why deeply divided societies almost always dissolve into conflict has been approached from many angles. One of the most promising solutions for restoring political stability in such environments may be found in consociationalism, defined here, for the purposes of this analysis, as a form of democratic system regulating the sharing of power between elites from different groups (ethnic, religious or regional).

Northern Ireland and Lebanon, both qualifying as divided societies, reflect differing levels of political stability that may be attributed to correspondingly different levels of consociationalism in each context. In both countries, political organizations are formed across the divisive lines of religious or ethnic identities, whose allegiances have derived from binaries resulting from the memory of communities clashing.

Northern Ireland's contemporary religious-political tensions root as far back as the 12th century, up to the recent 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Similarly, Lebanese society has long been subject to ethnic-religious clashes and tensions that culminated into the long 1975 and 1990 war – a domestic political conflict interacting with the Arab-Israeli conflict, which ended with the Ta'if Agreement. In both cases, a consociational system was implemented through various agreements in order to regulate ethno- or religious-national conflicts.

In Northern Ireland, deeply entrenched tensions between Protestants and Catholics since the 12th-century Anglo-Norman invasion culminated into the most recent conflict known as “*Na Trioblóidí*” or “The Troubles” that emerged during the campaign led by the Catholic minority to end discrimination by the country's Protestant government (Wallenfeldt 2019). Met by violent response from Protestant loyalists, this movement resulted in a pervasive conflict along religious lines centered around the decision to remain or leave the United Kingdom. The “low-intensity” conflict between Protestant unionists and Catholic republicans ended in 1998 with the GFA, providing for the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly, based on a power-sharing consensus.

After its declaration of independence from France in 1943, the new Lebanese Republic adopted a rigid power-sharing constitution defining the parliamentary democracy. Granting more parliamentary seats to Christians and the presidency to a Maronite Christian despite the roughly equal demographic balance, this arrangement induced resistance from Muslim communities, willing to obtain a stronger representation within state institutions. These tensions between religious communities intensified as the flow of Palestinian refugees into the country following the 1967 and 1970 Arab-Israeli wars destabilized the

Lebanese fragile demographic balance. Regular clashes between Christian and Palestinian militias culminated into urban warfare and civil war in 1975, following the *Ayn el Remmaneh* incident in Beirut. After nearly 15 years of conflict, the Ta'if Agreement provided the basis for the end of the Lebanese civil war and laid the foundations for constitutional amendments to the consociational system established in 1943.

Consociationalism consists in the representation of the different collective identities within a given society through the use of the electoral system and the formation of political coalitions. In contrast to majoritarian systems aiming at integrating minorities, consociationalism lies in accommodating minorities through the granting of collective rights (Mainwaring 2001). Elites in a consociational system adopt a coalescent political behaviour, according to which they are committed to an overarching cooperation with other sectarian elites, in contrast to adopting an adversarial behavior (Lijphart 1969, 175). In this framework, the rationale for establishing a consociational system in deeply-divided societies derives from the hypothesis that cross-cutting social cleavages – in contrast to mutually-reinforcing cleavages – prevent communal conflicts, and heavy demands ought, hence, to be placed on sectarian elites for moderating these conflicts (Daalder 1974).

Lebanon and Northern Ireland conjure opposite images on consociationalism in the minds of many political scientists. While in Lebanon, the consociational system widely proved inefficient in preventing the outbreak of ethno-national conflicts, the Northern Ireland's experience of consociationalism remains vastly positive. Understanding the causes for this divergence is, therefore, essential for policymakers to assess whether consociationalism is an appropriate approach to moderate conflicts in plural and deeply divided societies.

This comparative study aims at questioning the work of Arend Lijphart (1969) and his model based on nine factors determining the success of consociational democracy. This typology almost exclusively emphasizes internal dynamics, and, I argue here, remains highly irrelevant to account for the drift between Northern Ireland's and Lebanon's experiences of the consociational approach from an empirical perspective.

While much of the contemporary literature on Lebanese and Northern Irish consociational systems emphasizes the presence or absence of endogenous factors theorized in Lijphart's model, this research note focuses instead on the ways in which the nature of exogenous influences impacts the interactions between external and internal elites, and, most particularly, the political behavior of the former.

Following a “Most Similar Systems Design” defined by Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune (2000) derived from John Stuart Mill’s system of logic, this research note tests the hypothesis that the positive nature of exogenous influences participates to a higher political stability in Northern Ireland relative to Lebanon, while external influences of negative nature had the reverse effect. Based on this design as a *method* of identifying both similarities and differences between the Lebanese and Northern Irish consociational systems, this research thus identifies political stability as the dependent variable and considers different types of exogeneous influences as independent variables.

In the context of this study, the success of the consociational agreement is measured against the concept of political stability encompassing four dimensions: (1) the level of political violence and tensions within society, including political assassination and violent demonstrations, (2) the propensity of regime or government change, (3) the instability of policies including a high frequency of changes (Kostad 2007), and (4) the presence of sectarian tensions since the agreement’s signature. Literature on post-1998 Northern Ireland accounts for a relatively high level of political stability, with the decommissioning of the paramilitary force IRA (Irish Republican Army), the settlement and solidity of policies on welfare reform and finance, the regime stability, and the absence of major sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants since 1998 (Kelly 2019). While a more nuanced view on the stability of Northern Ireland’s consociational system is adequate in view of the numerous political deadlocks and clashes between the two main parties—the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin’s nationalist party since 1998—this is still in stark contrast when compared to the Lebanese experience of consociationalism.

Literature on Lebanese consociationalism (Dekmejian 1978; Jabbra and Jabbra 2001; Salamey 2015) is univocal on the failure of the system to provide political stability in the country according to the four factors identified. Several aspects attest to this deeply-entrenched volatility – from the 2005 war to the prevalence of political assassinations such as Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri’s (whose investigation has still not been settled), the 2011 Uprising of Dignity influenced by the Arab Spring, the looming sectarian tensions particularly since the collapse of Saad Hariri’s government in 2011, the immobilism of Lebanese parliament characterized by its incapacity to adopt policies and reforms, the massive demonstrations across the country calling for systemic change in the face of elite corruption since October 2019, and the frequent government’s resignations.

McGarry and O’Leary (2006) suggested that the different natures of consociational agreements reached in both cases account for the different outcomes in terms of success

and, thus, exclude the role of external factors. A study on consociationalism in Iraq, however, referred to the malign intervention by external actors and their role in polarizing communities and contributing to the failure of the system (Ltaif 2015).

This research note critically questions the developments unfolding after the signature of consociational agreements in Lebanon and Northern Ireland. For the sake of this study, the two last agreements that have shaped both consociational systems—the Ta'if Agreement of 1989 in the case of Lebanon and the GFA of 1998 in Northern Ireland—are analysed in light of the developments taking place since their signature, with a particular focus on how these have come to reflect elites' external relations with patron states and their interactions with regional dynamics.

Basis for Comparison

Northern Ireland and Lebanon are two cases of divided societies characterized by the existence of particularistic loyalties along ethnic or religious lines. The demographic characteristics of both countries are similar, in the absence of a solid religious or ethnic majority in society, with a balance of 45 % of Catholics and 48 % of Protestants in Northern Ireland in 2011 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2011). Similarly, in Lebanon, the CIA World Factbook (2018) estimated the Sunni population at 30.6 % of the country's population, the Shia at 30.5 %, the Christian population at 33.7 % (20 % Maronites and 10 % Eastern Orthodox), and the Druze at 5.2 %.

In both cases, a consociational power-sharing approach was taken in order to regulate ethno-national conflicts. In Northern Ireland, the latest period of violence between Protestant Unionists and Catholic Republicans started in 1968. On April 10th of 1998, representatives of both parties, as well as the governments of the Irish Republic and the UK, concluded the GFA, also known as the “Belfast Agreement”. This agreement shaped the consociational system and provided for the formation of a coalition government involving and accommodating all sides of the conflict. Emerging against the background of “The Troubles,” defining the period of irregular war and political violence since the 1960s, it also committed participants to “exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences on political issues” (GFA 1998, 2). A consociational system in Northern Ireland – or rather, a consociational democracy – was then established on the basis of:

- “(a) a permanent grand coalition vis-à-vis the power-sharing Assembly and Executive; (b) the considerable degree of autonomy particularly in the areas of education and culture enjoyed by the two main ethno-national groups; (c) the

extensive use of evidence of proportional representation; and (d) the introduction of the principle of mutual consent” (Zuhair 2008, 53).

In the case of Lebanon, the Ta’if Agreement reiterated the sect-based governance system or consociational system, first established in the National Pact of 1943 (Bahout 2016). The Ta’if Agreement, in fact, responded to the growing opposition to the political hegemony of the Maronites by redistributing seats among Christian and Muslim communities according to a 50-50 formula (Ghosn and Khoury 2011, 383). By responding to demographic changes within Lebanese society, this agreement provided “the basis for the ending of the civil war and the return to political normalcy in Lebanon”, according to Krayem (2015, 412).

In both cases, engaging in consociation enabled paramilitaries to “wind down military campaigns and to collect the political rewards of constitutional politics” (Kerr 2013, 185), reflecting the similar positions of the Northern Irish nationalist party, Sinn Féin, and the Shi’a parties, Hizballah and Amal, in Lebanon.

Another commonality among these cases lies in the fact that both agreements were externally engineered (Kerr 2013). In the case of Northern Ireland, the GFA was, to a large extent, imposed by British authorities, through the threat to re-implement direct rule if both parties would not live up to their commitments, ranging from the decommissioning of weapons to the wider moral obligation to “the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community” (GFA, 1989). In the case of Lebanon, the provisions in the Ta’if Agreement were largely imposed and re-interpreted by pro-Syrian figures within the Lebanese government. In fact, Syria imposed a de facto protectorate over Lebanon in the post-civil war period and acted as a power broker, subtly playing a balancing act between Christians and Muslims (Bahout 2016).

Divergence in the Consociational Experience

Large disparities in Northern Ireland’s and Lebanon’s respective experiences of consociationalism are observable. In the case of Northern Ireland, the GFA of 1998 paved the way for the formation of a more inclusive society and for the successful resolution of the conflict (Zuhair 2008, 54). Authors such as Lijphart (1975) argue that political stability in Northern Ireland was permitted through the mutual character of the GFA, contrasting with the previous Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, which lacked support among Protestants. Since 1998, no major conflict has taken place between Catholics and Protestants and positive political developments such as the reopening of cross border

roads, the closure of security bases and the departure of British troops took place (Zuhair 2008, 54).

In contrast, the Lebanese consociational system remains under constant distress. Ghosn and Khoury (2011, 396) have argued that the Ta'if Agreement has left Lebanon with a “negative peace”, based on the “priority placed on the short-term absence of war rather than long-term stability”. Sunni-Shia tensions were increasingly observable, developments that were attributed, to a large extent, to the post-war order established by the Ta'if Agreement and “Syria’s possessive grip” over the country (Norton 1991, 473). Moreover, the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005 further destabilized the Sunni-Shia balancing act and is considered by Bahout (2016, 14) as “the clinical death of Ta'if”, as, for Sunnis in Lebanon, the indifference of the Shia Lebanese to the protests at Martyr’s Square in Beirut following Hariri’s death contributed to the downfall of the peaceful coexistence.

In fact, between Syria’s departure from Lebanon and the 2011 uprisings, uncertainty and sectarian violence characterised the political situation in the country, as exemplified in 2008, when Hezbollah opened fire on Sunni neighborhoods as a response to the government’s decision to shut down Hezbollah's telecommunication network, leading Saad Hariri to seek the protection of the army. Furthermore, the absence of national reconciliation was observable in multiple instances since the Ta'if agreement, such as the political clashes and tensions between sectarian groups following the collapse of Hariri’s government in 2011 before the vote of confidence of the new cabinet (Ghosn and Khoury 2011, 397). A series of political assassinations paralyzing the political life in Lebanon also took place – ranging from journalists to politicians identifiably hostile to Hezbollah (Bahout 2016, 15). Further, the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah – backed by Syria’s Bashar al-Assad – refueled sectarian grievances.

To sum up, while Northern Ireland’s political system has become highly stable, consociationalism in the Lebanese case has become “a term for a pathology of fragmentation and destruction” (Norton 1991, 473).

Developing a Hypothesis

A very significant difference is observable in the cases of Northern Ireland and Lebanon: the nature of their external influences. Up until today, consociational theorists have largely neglected the role of external actors and dynamics in the promotion and operation of consociational agreements. In Lijphart’s model based on his observations of West European countries, eight out of the nine criteria listed as the elements conducive to consociationalism are endogenous. The only external criterium is “the perception of a

common threat from an external source” which would “increase internal unity” (Lijphart 1977, 124). However, Lijphart, as most other theorists, have failed to take into account the significant role of outside forces through pressures, mediation or incentives (McGarry and O’Leary 2006).

While a positive external climate shaped the compromise in the case of the GFA, a rather negative external climate is observable in the case of Ta’if. The negative and positive influences of external factors can be categorized along different types. In the determination of the terms of the agreement, external intervention is observable through specific external actors’ promotion or discouragement of political inclusivity within the consociational system (1), as well as through their promotion or limitation of the autonomy and/or sovereignty of the subject (2). In the long-run operationalization of the agreement, the exogenous factor is observable through the regional environment’s role in promoting the sustainability of the agreement, such as with the imposition of democratic constraints and human rights protection (3), and, lastly, through the region’s own political and security stability (4). I argue that these levels are intrinsically tied to each other as specific external state actors’ decisions (or lack thereof) shape an inclusive consociational system and promote autonomy and sovereignty – indeed, both Ireland and Lebanon are impacted by the political and security stability of their respective regional environments.

First, the positive influence of external actors in the promotion and framing of the agreement has largely participated to the success of consociationalism in Northern Ireland. In the case of the GFA, the UK government undertook a constructive role as it realized that no military solution would succeed in providing a sustainable solution to the conflict. Furthermore, the UK’s participation in the Anglo-Irish Agreement – which consisted in giving a limited role in the Republic of Ireland in policy-making in Northern Ireland, as well as in promoting an agreement on devolved governments shared between unionists and nationalists – had a positive impact on both camps’ willingness to engage in consociational power-sharing (McGarry and O’Leary 2006). In this context, the US administration— influenced by weighty Irish-American lobbies established since the Clinton era—also exerted a positive role in increasing the confidence of Irish republicans in negotiations. In fact, it was the Clinton’s administration that persuaded the Senate Majority leader, George Mitchell, to chair a commission to arbitrate disputes between the UK and Irish governments (McGarry and O’Leary 2006). For both camps of the conflict, US participation increased their perception of the agreement’s impartiality.

The GFA was in fact not designed to retain sovereignty or exclude Northern Irish elites, and, thus, was highly successful in satisfying contradictory claims of self-determination (Kerr 2013). In this respect, the UK was instrumental in promoting political inclusivity. The adoption of the principle of autonomy by both the governments of Ireland and the UK, with British sovereignty being “legally defined, not imposed” (Bishara 2018, 21) contrasts with the Lebanese experience.

In contrast to the GFA, Parts II and IV of the Ta’if Agreement were inherently designed to pose limitations to Lebanese’s sovereignty, as it largely bounded Lebanon to political coordination with Syria. In fact, whereas the GFA highly motivated elites in Northern Ireland to engage in consociational politics, in the case of Lebanon the linkage between accepting a consociational political reform and Syria’s withdrawal was missing for Christian and Sunni Lebanese (Kerr 2013). Here, rather, the political representation of communal groups determined by the Ta’if Agreement was highly reflective of the strength of their ties with external backers, particularly with hegemonic Syria. In fact, the small Alawite community received two seats, largely as a result of its direct links with Syria’s leadership (Kerr 2013). As Dekmejian (1978, 255) had already advanced, “the pattern is clear: as soon as Lebanese politicians lose in the elite cartel, they will try to broaden the scope of conflict to attract foreign supporters in an attempt to defeat their opponents.” In this framework, it comes as no surprise that the agreement was perceived as illegitimate by several communities. Furthermore, the Syrian veto to some aspects negotiated at Ta’if left some issues regarding the functioning of the consociational system in Lebanon unresolved (Kerr 2013).

Authors (McGarry and O’Leary 2006) have argued for the influence of the nature of consociational agreements on the success of consociationalism. While this remains true, I argue that an observation of the external factors leading to this difference is necessary. In fact, while Ta’if aimed to consolidate sectarian coexistence with a “law above the law” through the concession of state sovereignty, the GFA aimed at devolving power to administrative bodies, and hence successfully linked the establishment of a consociational system with the accommodation of rival claims of self-determination (Kerr 2013). This difference can be largely attributed to the contrast between UK’s acceptance to leave the question of sovereignty open, with Assad’s Syria imposing a power-sharing framework that established a hegemony in pursuit of its own interests.

Reasoning beyond the sole focus on external actors, regional environments also participated to the success or failure of the consociational arrangements in both cases. In

the case of Northern Ireland, the democratic nature of its surrounding environment largely contributed to the success of the consociational system. In fact, the democratic culture of both the Irish and British governments framed the consociational agreement and ensured that no consociational power-sharing agreement could exist outside of the framework of democracy (Bishari 2018). This democratic environment promoted the formation of an inclusive society, the strengthening of anti-discrimination laws and the expansion of social rights – factors which largely account for the stability of Northern Ireland's consociational system today (ibid.). In this respect, Kerr (2013) has argued that the cordial Anglo-Irish relations, as well as the democratic and stabilizing environment of the EU highly boosted the success of consociationalism in Northern Ireland.

However, in the case of Lebanon, hegemonic Syria had no democratic constraints for imposing its own terms in Ta'if and promoted an agreement that reflected its own interests. The Ta'if Agreement, hence, remains highly undemocratic, since it was not based on equal citizenship and established a system that remained exclusively managed by ruling families of each confessions (Bishari 2018).

Once the consociational agreement was signed and enforced, the nature of the influence of external dynamics and actors remained relevant to explain the continental drift between the Northern Irish and Lebanese experiences. In the case of Northern Ireland, external actors such as EU institutions and some governments have remained instrumental in ensuring the sustainability of the consociational agreement in its operation phase, as, in its early operationalization, a Monitoring Body including members from the UK, the Irish and the US governments, as well as Northern Ireland's, successfully ensured the surveillance and prevention of paramilitary activities.

The EU also played a vital role in ensuring the sustainability of the GFA. First, the European Court of Human Rights was paramount in guaranteeing the protection of human rights in Northern Ireland. Second, the European Union exerted a positive influence in the stabilization of peace through the establishment of a special Commission Task Force first approved in 1995 and continued under the names Peace II in 1999 and Peace III until 2015, with the objective to implement cross-border cooperation between Ireland and the UK. The EU's PEACE program was thus highly instrumental in strengthening the cohesion between communities involved in the conflict and contributed to economic and social stability.

In the case of Lebanon, the operation of the agreement remained highly subjected to the turbulent environment of the Middle East, based on regional balances of power. The

Arab-Israeli conflict, especially, has influenced the stability of consociationalism in Lebanon. As Dekmejian (1978, 261) puts it:

“The problem which most sharply differentiated Lebanon from consociationalism in theory and practice is its turbulent environment and the related Palestinian issue. Since World War II, partly due to the American defense umbrella, the small West European states [such as Northern Ireland in the late 20th Century] have developed in a remarkably stable milieu, free of outside interference. None of these states is burdened with the flow of Palestinian refugees, who are frequently used as pawns by outside powers to disturb the country’s communal balance. This aspect is further reinforced by the legal restraints imposed on Palestinians locking them into the status of refugee and a permanent non-assimilated community within the country. The survival of some form of consociational democracy in Lebanon is closely linked to the ultimate settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict”.

This is best exemplified by the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, which fostered deeper sectarian conflict in Lebanon. Furthermore, the former tensions between Syria and Saudi Arabia, as well as Saudi-Iranian tensions today, have played a large role in activating sectarian Sunni-Shia divides inside of Lebanon (Saouli 2006).

Based on this comparative analysis, I argue that the positive nature of external dynamics, environments and actors in both the promotion and operation of consociational agreements has facilitated political stability in Northern Ireland, whereas the negative nature of external influences caused further destabilization in the case of Lebanon.

Additional Factors for Consideration

Certain authors have argued that the presence of a long-standing “culture of coexistence” is crucial for the success of a consociational system (Lijphart 1981). However, in the cases of Lebanon and Northern Ireland, this factor proves irrelevant. In fact, Lebanon, since its independence, experienced a long period of coexistence based on the shared grievances of Muslim, Christian and Druze communities – stemming from colonialism. In contrast, Northern Irish parties lacked these shared grievances, and only engaged in reconciliation in 1998, while largely relying on exogenous forces in the operation of this political transition. In Lebanon, however, one can observe that this shared experience of colonialism and grievances did not prevent communities from cultivating links with foreign patrons in order to strengthen their own domestic strength (Kerr 2013).

Furthermore, the presence of external threats – by promoting internal unity – was considered by some literature as conducive to a successful consociational system (Siaroff 2000, 321). One can, however, observe that, while Lebanon experienced external threats

stemming from its highly turbulent regional environment (Saouli 2006), no real external threat is to be observed in the case of Northern Ireland. The presence of external threats as conducive to internal unity is, hence, highly irrelevant as a singular explanatory factor to account for the success of the consociational system in Northern Ireland and its failure in Lebanon.

Inferring causation

This comparison between Northern Ireland and Lebanon has limitations in proving the causality between the positive nature of external influence and the stability of the consociational system. However, Dekmejian (1978, 251) has pointed to how communal conflicts have often been exacerbated by their immediate environment and neighboring states, as well as great powers which have “made intervention in ethnic problems part of their national policies”. Furthermore, there is support from other comparative research that exogenous action has facilitated power-sharing agreements in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia through the positive democratic influence of the EU and the willingness of these countries to strive to meet the ascension requirements of the *acquis communautaire* in order to obtain EU membership and its benefits (McEvoy 2015) This, at least in terms of third party mediation, seems to corroborate this research note’s findings in Northern Ireland. In fact, consociational arrangements in Bosnia-Herzegovina were, to a large extent, presided over by external high representatives from the EU (Hays and Crosby 2006), and external EU representation was guaranteed in both Bosnia’s Supreme Court and Central Bank (Balázs 2008, 111-118). Hence, I suggest that the hypothesis revolving around the nature of exogenous factors is particularly applicable in this context of globalization – where countries’ interests become increasingly intertwined and where foreign meddling into the internal politics of these divided society takes place. In this respect, I argue that the impact of negative exogenous factors is most relevant in countries of strategic or economic relevance for its neighbors, such as Lebanon.

Rival Hypothesis: The Level of “Elite Consensus”

Several scholars have considered the level of elite consensus as the most important element to explain the success or failure of consociationalism. This literature was particularly influenced by the work of Arend Lijphart, for whom the success of consociationalism lies in the “disposition among elites towards collaborative or cooperative, rather than authoritative or majoritarian, modes of decision-making” (McRae 1979, 520). The study of Lijphart and Crepaz (1991) entitled “Corporatism and Consensus Democracy in Eighteen Countries: Conceptual and Empirical” is particularly illustrative of

this scholarship. However, I argue that, although consociational failure seems to originate from the cessation of elite consensus, exogenous factors in both cases treated in this study represent an illustration of “antecedent variables that contribute to elite dissension and ultimately regime collapse” (Seaver 2000, 249). Rather than emphasizing a proximate cause, this explanation revolving around exogenous factors aims to account for the deeper origins of elite fragmentation, and the instability of power-sharing arrangements and, thus, subsumes this rival hypothesis derived from Lijphart’s studies.

The Role of the Corporate/Liberal Nature of Consociational Systems and their Interaction with External Dynamics

Literature on the success of consociational systems (McGarry and O’Leary 2006) has pointed to the role of their corporate or liberal nature. In the case of Northern Ireland, a “liberal” consociational system laid down by the GFA created the foundation for the self-determination of the different groups, rather than their pre-determination. In the Northern Irish liberal consociational system, voters can select candidates from a common pool, with no specific number of seats attributed to specific groups. Similarly, the executive roles distributed among parties are solely based on their performance during elections. In this respect, the liberal consociational system, based upon the predicate of “parity of esteem”, grants equal recognition to different sectarian identity (Ruohomäki 2010). Easily adaptable to demographic and spatial changes, this system is the most flexible form of consociational politics.

The corporate consociational system established in Lebanon since the 1943 National Pact presents a sharp contrast. The aim of this special system lies in freezing group identities in order to maintain the power balance between different sectarian groups. The rigid quota system for the attribution of legislative and executive positions for each main group as well as the power of group veto granted for important issues decided by the cabinet have built a static edifice – incapable of adapting to its changing environment (Salamey 2015).

This inflexible system remains highly unresponsive in the face of demographic and spatial changes. The issue of rural-to-urban migration of the Shia – amplified by Israeli invasions in the South—has in fact not been properly tackled by the corporate consociational system. The Shia community—which had moved to Beirut—was demographically growing in urban centers while remaining politically deprived (Bogaards 2019). This inflexibility could therefore be considered as one of the causes of the growing sectarian tensions in West Beirut between Shia and Sunni Muslims in 2006.

This rigid system also led communities to implement new demographic strategies by purchasing real estate in strategic areas—such has been the Hezbollah’s strategy in the South. The corporate confessional state was unable to respond to sectarian geopolitical struggles – with the Shia asserting their hold in the South and providing the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) with a safe corridor to wage guerrilla warfare against Israel (Salamey 2015, 89). This corporate state structure—by enabling the close linkage between domestic competition and regional politics—constitutes hence a highly conflict-ridden solution in a context of regional turbulence.

In this respect, the downfall of the Lebanese system is attributed to the fluidity of population and space. Internal demographic and spatial changes in the country—combined with the inflexibility of the consociational agreement itself—can produce “a conflict-ridden form of power-sharing agreement” (Salamey 2015, 87).

Hence, while the nature of the system itself combined with demographic and spatial changes can impact the success of consociationalism, this factor is reinforced and made particularly salient in the context of an unstable and contested regional environment. Combined, external dynamics and the nature of corporate system have contributed to the downfall of the Lebanese consociational system.

Conclusion

To conclude, this comparative analysis has shown how external factors determine the prospects of successful power sharing in a consociational system. Northern Ireland experienced positive coercive and external pressures that contributed to the success of consociationalism. This experience highly contrasts with the negative nature of foreign agents in the case of Lebanon, who, through their constant involvement into the Lebanese balance of power, have caused tremendous tensions and conflicts among different sects.

In its European application, the consociational model originally developed by Lijphart assumes the absence of regional turmoil and turbulence in the regional environments – probably since this theory was framed in the Cold War period where “benign” interventions remained rare.

Considering the interaction between the consociational system and its external milieu is however of crucial importance in accounting for the success of consociationalism. In this respect, policymakers should give larger attention to extra-systemic influences in order to assess whether consociationalism is the best solution for a conflict-ridden and deeply divided society.

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