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Negotiating civic space in Lebanon: The potential of non-sectarian movements

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ABSTRACT
Shrinking civic space is a global trend in governance impeding citizens' enjoyment of the fundamental freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly. While deeply affected by this phenomenon, civil society organizations and collectives in Lebanon have cultivated a series of non-sectarian opposition movements that warrant an assessment of how these may contribute to reconciling deeply divided identities. The authors examine the specific challenges imposed on civil society in Lebanon's hybrid democratic setting, where power and resources are allocated along confession-based cleavages. Additionally, they discuss the strategies through which Lebanese civil society collectives push back against government pressures and defend, as well as expand, their available room for manoeuvre. The strategies of two recent opposition movements are analysed: (i) the coalition 'Kollouna Watani', a crossover into politics for the 2018 Lebanese elections by actors originally associated with civil society organizations, and (ii) the mass protest movement starting in October 2019. The findings highlight these non-sectarian movements' potential to promote cooperation among the fragmented realms of civil society, as well as the hardships of challenging well-established elites and their interests via formal politicization. In doing so, they also show the potential and agency of civil society to counter the phenomenon of shrinking civic space.

KEYWORDS
Civic space; Lebanon; protest movements; consociationalism; hybrid democracy; power-sharing

Introduction

Lebanon's legal system is saluted for providing the most enabling environment for civil society initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa region. However, recent years have revealed a pattern of increasing pressure on citizens' rights to organize and express themselves collectively. From 2015 onwards, a growing number of activists suffered abuse by the armed forces in Lebanon when they got arrested during anti-government demonstrations (Amnesty International, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Journalists also experienced a crackdown, as defamation investigations into their online articles and social media comments rose by 81% during 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

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Furthermore, as the 2019 anti-establishment protests escalated, the police authorities neglected to take necessary measures to safeguard protesters from the attacks of government supporters and Hezbollah motorbike gangs (UN OHCHR, 2019). These are but a few examples illustrating the pressures on movements that, directly or indirectly, question the elites' balance of power.

The clampdown on citizens and civil society organizations negatively affects the physical and online spheres in which Lebanese citizens can exercise their fundamental freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly. These three human rights are the key to what the scholarship collectively denotes as civic space. The term conceptualizes the fundamental rights related to organizing collectively and articulating opinions on physical, as well as on cyber platforms without interference by authorities. Civic space is the realm that is essential for the functioning of civil society – the 'non-state, not-for-profit, voluntary entities […] separate from the state and the market' (United Nations, 2018). This understanding of civil society includes both formal organizations and more broadly, partly informal collectives.

Civic space can be challenged or threatened in different ways and by different actors. State authorities themselves can deny or challenge civic space and they are crucial in understanding what constitutes and shrinks civic space. As the gatekeepers of civic space, they may seek to delegitimize or exercise arbitrary control over those organizations which they regard as threats or as competition (Buyse, 2018; Hayes et al., 2017). Governments may also fail to correct or stop non-state actors that do not respect human rights.

While authoritarian regimes are usually open about the limits on civic space, the challenges for civic space in partial democracies – a type of regime that falls between autocracies and 'full' liberal democracies (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014), are often more ambivalent or 'under the radar'. In these regimes, the struggle for civic space and human rights can become particularly fierce as a result of the prevalence of informal practices outside of the written legislation. A tendency to squeeze fundamental freedoms in practice while maintaining an image of de jure respect for them in a country's constitution, highlights the complex threats on civic space that are specific to hybridity. This tendency is particularly strong when vested elite interests are affected (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014). The Lebanese government's conduct towards opposition movements fits very much in this broader global pattern: the practice of factually tightening civic space in order to defend the status quo. To shed light on these threats, this article problematizes the shrinking of civic space in a context that not only can be characterized as 'partly democratic', but also as hybrid as 'diverse and competing authority structures, sets of rules, logics of order, and claims to power [that] co-exist, overlap, interact, and intertwine' (Boege et al., 2009, p. 17). In the case of Lebanon this leads to a 'dispersed' (Migdal, 1994, p. 9) yet 'omnipresent' (Stel, 2020, p. 36) state, whose involvement in public affairs – including in countering or influencing protest movements – can be invisible but simultaneously pervasive (Stel, 2020). In such a context, interactions between government and civil society can take both formal and informal shapes. All of these are referred to as instances of 'negotiation' in our work. That is to convey that delineating civic space is not a one-way street of government pressures, as associations and other citizen groups have a capacity to respond to pressures (Baldus et al., 2019). Instead, we observe it as a mutual dynamism through which various actors within the 'state' and 'civil society' manoeuvre to control civic space.

Thus, Lebanon is a case of a hybrid order, where the line at which 'state' power ends and 'civil society' territory begins is uniquely blurred (see e.g., Baumann, 2016; Fakhoury, 2014; Stel & van der Borgh, 2017). In addition, the consociational nature of its governance makes for multiple channels between civil society actors, political parties and state agents, which have consequences on the potential to weigh in on negotiating their civic space. Lebanon accommodates 18 officially recognized religious communities in a consociational arrangement. Reinstated by the Taif Accord in 1989, the system was envisaged to promote stability between the various confessional groups after a 15-years long internal conflict, guaranteeing them proportional representation. However, the practical implementation of the power-sharing agreement has been criticized for directing citizens' individual loyalties from shared state institutions towards the patronage of powerful sectarian elites (Salloukh et al., 2015). Instead of sharing, elites have been *dividing* political power among themselves, using their accumulated resources to bolster a system of clientelism within their respective constituencies (Nagle & Clancy, 2019).

The consociational state setup also impacts upon the morphology of Lebanese civil society: a fragmented civic landscape has been part and parcel of the country for decades. Until recently, Lebanese civil society organizations were seen as heavily intertwined with their communal constituents' interests and thus, achieving cross-confessional cooperation between them was deemed unlikely (Assi, 2006; Clark & Salloukh, 2013). However, from 2015 onwards a new wave of social and political contention has been observable in Lebanon, in which protesters overwhelmingly emphasize national unity in their discourse. It is accompanied by a 'national introspection' process (Schenker, 2016, p. 42) which identifies the fabric of the consociational setup as inherently divisive, and leads considerable numbers of citizens to unite in non-sectarian protests to abolish it. In addition, the use of digital platforms allows organizers to mature their collective strategies and to enhance the continuity of the movements by transferring mobilizing discourse composed in previous protests into new demonstrations (Geha, 2019a). These new dynamics in the movements' struggles against the government may bring, as a side-product, the reconciliation of various communal visions of belonging which have so far fragmented civic space in Lebanon.

It is from the conceptual vantage point of civic space in hybrid democracies that this article addresses the following question: What are the main characteristics of civic space in Lebanon's hybrid and sectarian political order, and how did civil society movements manoeuvre, broaden and renegotiate civil space in the 2018 general elections and the 2019 protests? To answer these questions, an analysis of secondary literature was conducted, paying particular attention to the civil society regulatory regime in Lebanon. In addition, our argumentation builds on other, open access sources such as reports published by civil society associations, election reports and human rights defender portals.

The following section will introduce the academic debate around, and practical consequences of consociationalism on civil society. Subsequently, this article will discuss what potential and available resources civil society organizations possess to counter challenges and to broaden civic space. Of particular interest are the dynamics of negotiation that take place in the formal political arena, and the claim-making that happens through street protests. The case studies were selected to analyse two of the most visible recent examples of cross-confessional civil society initiatives. First, the electoral list formation by a civil society coalition entitled *Kollouna Watani*, and its subsequent participation

in the 2018 Lebanese general elections. Second, the strategies of the latest anti-establishment protests will be explored, focusing on the movement's physical and symbolic strategies of reclaiming space. Both display relative continuity, despite a clientelist civic environment where joint mobilization is predicted to be short-lived. These particular angles aim to demonstrate how the wider global trend of shrinking and reshaping civic space plays out in a hybrid, consociational context. We conclude with an assessment of the challenges and opportunities of civil society organizations in Lebanon's consociational context.

Structural Constraints of Consociationalism in Theory and in Practice

Most of the economic grievances fuelling the protests in Lebanon in recent years can be directly attributed to how the consociational political system functions locally. In order to understand how negotiation of civic space takes place, we will now discuss the antecedents and structure of Lebanon's power-sharing arrangement, as well as the controversies about this system and the factors which undermine its effectiveness.

Consociationalism refers to a power-sharing design which relies on an arrangement that accommodates multiple (religious) communities by guaranteeing them political representation (Lijphart, 1977). Such a design was adopted in numerous multi-confessional states to achieve democratic stability, including Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Lebanon (Nagle, 2018). In the latter case, the confession-based system roots back to the era of Ottoman, then later French rule, and it remained a prime consideration in the National Pact of 1943 which marked Lebanon's post-colonial independence. The pact became the basis for its political order, granting a 6:5 proportional representation to the Christian and Muslim communities respectively (Diss & Steffen, 2017). It was also *implied* in the pact that various governmental posts, such as that of the president, prime minister, speaker of parliament and head of the military should be assigned to representatives of particular confessional groups. The fact that this unwritten convention still persists today exemplifies the importance of informal agreements over written legislation in the Lebanese political context (Bahout, 2016).

The pillarizing effect and the outcomes of this political model continue to spark debates. Those scholars recognizing consociationalism as a feasible practice emphasize its institutional potential to reduce opposition between communal identities which may otherwise lead to conflict. In their view, the confession-based political system's strengths include allocating significant autonomy to the sub-national communities (Kettley, 2001), and better protecting the interests of ethnic minorities (Nagle, 2018). Regarding Lebanon, however, even a chief proponent of power-sharing, Lijphart (2002) professed that there are several drawbacks in the system's local implementation. Notably, the prearrangement of the highest government positions to specific confessions permits them to dominate certain policy areas, while limiting the influence of other communities in them. Similarly, the proportional representation system – even after being readjusted to a 5:5 ratio by the Taif Accords of 1989 – yields discrimination of the Muslim communities, whose size has long exceeded that of the Christian population due to a higher demographic growth and the influx of displaced persons from neighbouring states (Szekely, 2015).

Despite Lijphart's critique on the workings of consociational power-sharing, he has argued that the power-sharing model itself was the core contributor to the country's stability both before the escalation of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 and after the hostilities ended in 1990. Rather than replacing the model, Lijphart (2002, p. 42) argued that it needed to be 'repaired'. However, there exist major counter-arguments to consociationalism, which pertain to its tendency to reiterate and deepen divides, thus perpetuating higher inter-communal tensions in the long run (Dixon, 2012). According to Donald Horowitz's institutionalist approach, allocating political power along communal lines contributes to the politicization of sub-national identities and likely undermines political cooperation in a multi-confessional setting (Horowitz, 1985). To some, consociationalism in Lebanon is a residue of the colonial powers' 'divide and rule' approach, along which societal fragmentations became solidified (Cammett, 2019). A pressing concern in this constructivist angle is that citizens are continuously reminded of, and addressed based on their confessional belonging when seeking to use public services or casting their vote in the elections. As a result – it is presumed – their communal identity becomes inflated and gives way to 'cultural entrepreneurs' to instrumentalize it for their own political and economic purposes (Varshney, 2007). In sum, those opposing consociationalism caution us against assessing it merely as an institutional ideal. Instead, they urge to judge the model based on its implementation in a local context, as that is considered the real indicator of its success.

The implementation of the sectarian power-sharing model following the 1990 signing of the Taif Accords formally ended the civil war. The Accords put into legislation the proportional representation and confession-based power allocation system that had been informally practiced since 1943 (Bahout, 2016). The terms 'political sectarianism' and 'sectarian political system' are often used to describe the resulting power-sharing arrangement which placed sectarian identities at the core of political claims. Although intended as a temporary setup until the country would complete its post-war recovery, the Taif Accords are still in effect today. In fact, the new system enabled former military officials of the internal conflict to reinvent their power in high government ranks and start solidifying an elite network based on 'juggling communal grievances' at the expense of consolidating democracy (Fakhoury, 2014). Three main areas of criticism emerge from the literature discussing Lebanon's political sectarianism in the post-1990 era. These identify the failures of the contemporary arrangement in the country's (i) mislaid post-war transition, (ii) negligent neoliberal reconstruction and (iii) parliamentary decision-making inertia.

Firstly, the agreement is criticized for avoiding the judicial and societal measures necessary for restoring accountability and trust among its communities after the civil war ended. The 1990 Taif accords merely formalized the gaping cross-communal divides without addressing the tensions which had led to the escalation of internal struggles in the first place (Szekely, 2015). Only 'cosmetic changes' were implemented in terms of transitional justice, which avoided confronting the atrocities committed during the war. Instead, a blanket amnesty guaranteed the impunity of former warlords, which resulted in wide-spread mistrust towards government institutions (Ghosn & Khoury, 2011). The societal cost of the failed transition was that inter-confessional relations remained tense and also resulted in growing political apathy among citizens.

Secondly, upon emerging from the civil war, Lebanon became incorporated in the neoliberal regional and global economy, giving way to mass privatizations and foreign direct investment flowing in primarily from the Gulf region (Baumann, 2016). Economic elites in Lebanon – who show strong overlaps with, and tight connections to the political elites – became dependent on a rentier capitalist scheme, where continuous short-term efforts to stabilize the Lebanese currency on foreign deposits led to the accumulation of surging national debt (Baumann, 2019). Participating in rent-seeking activities was out of reach for most citizens in the country, which resulted in their increasing dependence on their communal elites who became their primary providers, in other words, patrons, for services such as education and health care. Since there is scarce centralized public provision for these services, Lebanese citizens are severely tied by their 'loyalties' in the cemented oligarchic structure, and limited in their liberties to demand political accountability or transparency from their leaders (El Kak, 2019). This clientelist dependence also enabled extreme wealth inequalities, and restructured the Lebanese society into a rentier capitalist class with strong transnational networks, an unstable middle class, and a large, impoverished segment of society (Baumann, 2019).

The third weakness of consociationalism in Lebanon concerns the parliament's incapacity to reach cross-confessional compromises on vital issues such as how elections should be organized. Six general elections have been held in Lebanon since 1990, and each of them was preceded by the adjustment of electoral laws in ways which would secure that the sectarian status quo of the parliament remained intact (El Kak, 2019). When elites failed to find consensus on how to redesign the system before the elections planned for 2013, they simply extended the term until they were able to reach an agreement to hold the elections in 2018 (Calfat, 2018). This was not an isolated case of political deadlock in Lebanon's consociational structure. When waste management company Sukleen's contract expired in 2015, the government was unable to decide on a new contracting formula for waste management. The resulting crisis was – and continues to be – underpinned by worsened hygiene in public spaces, which drove crowds to the streets to protest (Baumann, 2019).

These recurring crises led Stel (2020, p. 30) to observe Lebanon's framework through the lens of 'institutional ambiguity', whereby the state, or rather the 'mediated assemblage' that is understood as the state in Lebanon, intentionally leaves certain areas of legislation grey to programme deadlocks into their development. On the other hand, these ambiguities within the hybrid order, be they deliberate or not, have a flipside that may be advantageous for civil society; they create 'opportunities for more open-ended processes of political bargaining' (Kingston, 2013, p. 14).

The garbage crisis certainly seems to have brought such a turning point, along with more assertive civic negotiation behaviour than ever in the post-war history of Lebanon. It has led to the expression of large-scale dissatisfaction with more than only the waste management issue. In fact, both opposition movements studied in this article originate from that very crisis and its non-sectarian momentum. Before discussing the characteristics and achievements of these subsequent movements, we will examine the characteristics of civil society associations within the system introduced above.

Lebanese Civil Society in the Grip of Political Sectarianism

Lebanon has a vibrant civil society. In fact, the inefficiencies resulting from Lebanon's decentralized and hybrid statehood explicitly contributed to a mushrooming of organizations whose missions filled in for the state across multiple policy areas. These frequently undertook substitutive roles in public goods provision and humanitarian care, primarily refugee assistance (Karam, 2018). The laws regulating the functioning of the formally registered organizations in Lebanon are considered the most enabling in the region (AbiYaghi et al., 2019; El Daif, 2014).

However, civil society in Lebanon is no less fragmented than the political sphere. This is observed as a common feature among states where clientelist structures dominate public affairs; in such settings, civil society actors are likely to break into fragments that echo their own communal interests, instead of promoting cross-communal dialogue and cooperation (Warren, 2011). As has been noted also for other countries, civil society's embeddedness in sectarian socio-political contexts directly affects how organizations and movements function (Saeki, 2011).

It is important to unpack what civil society means in Lebanon, as the term conceals a vastly heterogeneous group of actors. Civil society organizations not only differ along their aims and functions or religious constituencies, but also in their level of amity and proximity towards the government (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014). Consequently, the degree to which their fundamental freedoms and institutional room for manoeuvre is targeted by government pressure also varies (Hayes et al., 2017). Associations favoured by major political patrons can embed themselves in the hybrid assemblages that constitute the state and thus 'reproduce sectarianism' (Kingston, 2013, p. 14). These assemblages entail political parties, militant groups, religious clans as well as business clienteles, many of whom might theoretically fit under the blanket concept of 'civil society'. But in hybrid settings, where the boundaries between state and non-state are blurred, a binary representation of state versus civil society adds little to our understanding (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2014). Instead, we are urged to recognize that actors in Lebanon may be nominally separate of the state, but they may simultaneously 'resemble it, collaborate with it, or overpower it' (Fregonese, 2012, p. 631).

This creates a crucial complication for the assessment of civic space in Lebanon and in the wider range of hybrid states. It requires us to abandon the understanding of civil society as only one that promotes 'generalised trust and tolerance across different political communities and […] a genuine sense of the common or public interests' (Edwards, 2004, p. 35), and recognize that its constituents may also act explicitly as 'spoilers' for civic space. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the main assemblages along which the public sphere is divided in Lebanon.

Broadly speaking, one frontline can be drawn around the Shia communities along with their Christian allies, who together constitute a political coalition named March 8 bloc. This alliance entails two of the largest political parties, Amal and Hezbollah, and currently holds 78 seats out of 128 in the Lebanese Parliament. In addition to 8 March, another overarching pattern of partnerships can be traced in the public sphere; that of mainly the Sunni community and their Christian supporters who stand under an alliance called March 14 bloc. With 47 seats in parliament, the most important

political parties that belong here are the Future Movement and the Lebanese Forces (Atallah & Zoughaib, 2019; Stel, 2020). Although we introduce these 'frontlines' along their parliamentary significance, their affiliations are present in all aspects of the public sphere too, including communal elites and many civil society groups that are directly or indirectly associated with them (Baumann, 2019). The fact that armed groups are also embedded in the country's politics reinforces the hybrid state of governance.

The already complex political palette is further complicated by cross-border ties. There is a laissez-faire approach in Lebanon's regulatory regime towards the influx of foreign funding for civil society actors (Aoun & Zahar, 2017), which barely limits the influence of regional strongmen to seep into local Lebanese affairs (Szekely, 2015). Today, the Lebanese Sunni community – which permanently holds the prime minister position – is entangled with Saudi interests, while Iran exerts its influence over the Shia confession by funding the militant group and political party Hezbollah (Fakhoury, 2019).

Apart from increasing its susceptibility to becoming a battleground for regional conflicts, the laissez-faire approach practiced by Lebanese elites towards civil society organizations yielded one further outcome. The political elites' lack of capacity and willingness to communicate with civil society organizations at large led the latter to become increasingly detached from the *formal* avenues of decision-making (Haddad, 2017). A parallel structure began to form in recent years, where the majority of civil society actors define themselves outside of, and against the sectarian political framework, several of them opting for 'inclusionary politics' on their own terms. This process has been enabled and enhanced by the wide-spread use of social media, through which citizens can engage in alternative modes of collective participation (Khneisser, 2018).

While the effects of cyberspace on civil society are still heavily debated (Montalvan Castilla & Pursiainen, 2019), in Lebanon, using online tools and resources have been key tactics in the past few years. Particularly, the year 2015 brought an increase in online activism, when the garbage crisis unfolded and the elites' decision-making inertia became exposed to the public in the form of waste piling up in Beirut's streets (El-Helou, 2018). Two collectives emerged; *YouStink* and *We Want Accountability*, which jointly mobilized 100,000 protesters, demanding the resignation of the Ministers of environmental affairs and of internal affairs. What was remarkable about this movement was its capacity to bring together participants of all communal and political belongings (Schenker, 2016), by framing the events as a crisis of political corruption and of corrupt sectarian leaders (Geha, 2019a).

The more the protest movement's non-sectarian narrative crystallized, the more brutal the security forces' crackdown became. In order to maintain its grip of control over these protests, the government first introduced measures to intimidate protesters – particularly leading organizers – and to weaken the movement (Andersen, 2017). As a turning point in Lebanon's opposition culture, 2015 also became a watershed moment in the influential political actors' strategy to drown 'confrontational' movements which might threaten their status quo. It is commonly seen in settings where civic space is threatened that the authorities impose excessive fines or detention on the basis of vaguely worded legislation (Buyse, 2018). Behind such pressures lies a combination of confidence and paranoia from ruling elites, in that they simultaneously feel affirmed enough in their power to

avoid serious negotiations with protesters, and yet compelled to defend their position by repressive means (Youngs & Echagüe, 2017).

Activists were arbitrarily detained, and the frames of the protests which emphasized a united identity over the communal ones were met by a counter-narrative by the elites which reiterated sectarian belonging and criminalized the protesters (Geha, 2019a). No formal restrictions were introduced to tighten civil society's room for manoeuver – instead, prosecutions took place based on the arbitrary application of existing laws. Several protesters were arrested for 'rioting' during the garbage demonstrations, as the Lebanese Public Assemblies Law allows the prosecution of those violating the '*regular and normal course of public interests*' (ICNL, 2020). Instead of by regular police, protesters were detained by the military. Beatings and coerced confessions occurred routinely. Multiple activists reported abuses, but the armed forces refused to submit these claims for further investigation (Human Rights Watch, 2017). While no cases have been reported where protesters faced a prison sentence after their trials, the lengthy court procedures and personal threats received by the security forces turned many away from participating in future protests (Geha, 2019b).

However, some level of negotiation was forced out by the pressures of the 2015 Lebanese protests. The issue of waste disposal became transferred from the much-criticized Ministry of Environment to the Agriculture Ministry. In addition, protesters achieved accountability for the violations on their right to peaceful assembly, as some members of the security forces were prosecuted for using excessive force against protesters (Schenker, 2016). And the movement did not stop there. The social networks which evolved from its online communities led to the founding of the organization *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut, My City). This organization continued to advocate for environmental causes, but in addition also took a more general stance against the communally divided status quo and the elites' careless profiteering of the privatized public service contracts, of which the garbage mismanagement was seen as symbolic. Having an established supporter base and a dense network among civil society organizations, the protest-born association ran in the 2016 Beirut municipal elections and was able to secure 32% of the votes (Rizkallah, 2019). Due to a majoritarian electoral design and the fact that the established parties united in one list to decrease Beirut Madinati's chance for winning (Haidar, 2017), the movement did not manage to gain any mandates in the election. Nonetheless, it demonstrated Lebanese civil society's capacity to engage in cross-sectarian cooperation and set up a 'technocratic' or pragmatic alternative that is able to compete against established parties (Waterschoot, 2018).

The garbage protests and the Beirut Madinati movement are considered remarkable for their capacity to mobilize citizens regardless of their communal affiliations. The above section outlined the fragmented setting of Lebanon where sectarian identities are highly reinforced both in the political and in the civic sphere. Navigating across the lines of fragmentation, the 2015 protest movement laid the groundwork for a series of anti-sectarian negotiations in subsequent years. The next sections discuss two examples of such movements and their potential to foster systemic change in spite of the elites' resistance and even retaliation.

(Re)Claiming Civic Space from the Sectarian Elites

This section discusses initiatives of Lebanese collectives and activists to defend civic space from the current squeeze by actors associated with the state, and to carve out new room for manoeuvre. Taking the case of Kollouna Watani (KW), an election coalition born partially out of the legacy of Beirut Madinati, and the 2019 October 'revolution', the focus turns towards the longer-term struggles for civic space and political change. The sudden resonance of Beirut Madinati's claim for government reforms and accountability revealed the long-standing discontent and grievances of Lebanese citizens. Despite its defeat in the 2016 municipal election, the movement's participation was celebrated as a political victory in its own right, as it opened a new chapter in Lebanon's culture of opposition.

The discussion above highlighted that the sectarian political system hinders civil society from functioning as a separate and independent entity from the state. Yet, civic movements from 2015 onwards reveal patterns of collective action aiming for societal change both outside of, and lately also from within the political sphere. A number of characteristics of these new movements in their repertoires and discourses set them apart from established civic and political movements.

First of all, many of the current collectives define their identity, aims and motivation beyond the sectarian political system, and emphasize their distinction from the existing elite (El-Helou, 2018). This is not necessarily seen as strength of these movements, as the emphasis of a non-sectarian identity may fail to address the very real differences in the backgrounds and social milieus (Kastrissianakis et al., 2021). As a result, many movements are unable to sustain a coherent long-term strategy and could fragment in the long run (Vohra, 2020).

Secondly, they represent a rights-based discourse which condemns the corrupt practices of clientelism (Rønn, 2020). Eliminating the clientelist networks that entrench confession-based divides in Lebanon is seen as the entry point to economic transformation and the reconciliation of religious communities (El Kak, 2019). In the 2018 general elections where multiple independent figures appeared on the political scene, 'drastic economic reforms' and 'reinforcing social safety nets' were among the top issues that emerging candidates campaigned for (El-Helou, 2018). By demanding accountability (an overarching claim of the past years' movements), protesters and activists also targeted the essence of Lebanon's hybrid order; the state's disguise as a 'decentralized' entity to evade responsibility for the political-economic malfunctions.

Thirdly, Lebanese civil society collectives in the post-2015 era primarily promote patriotic sentiments, and stress their independence from any regional or international affiliations (El-Helou, 2018). This rhetoric by itself exemplifies the new movements' outright rejection of the divisive sectarian political scheme, where family and confessional connections dictate the rules of the game (Rønn, 2020). On the other hand, the 'us versus the elites' dichotomy implied by it reflects a higher sense of cohesion which seems to challenge the fragmented structure that civic space in Lebanon is mostly confined to (Wheeler & Zawk, 2019).

Civil Society Politicization – the Case of Kollouna Watani

After eight years of political deadlock over the next general elections, the Lebanese coalition government reached consensus on a new electoral law in 2017 and set the election for May 2018. The new law brought the promise of favouring smaller constituencies and new candidates, as it abandoned the previous majoritarian electoral framework for a proportional one (El Kak, 2019). Encouraged by the reforms, many independent movements submitted candidate lists, making up 21 out of the 77 electoral lists in total (Atallah & Zoughaib, 2019). During this time, Beirut Madinati – although not managing to win seats in Beirut's municipal elections of 2016 (despite gaining a high share of the votes) had remained active as an umbrella movement for civil society collectives pursuing environmental development on the local level. The announcement of the new elections led to debate within Beirut Madinati on the questions whether to keep focusing on their specific environmental agenda, or to broaden their aims to the root causes of the problematic issue and to adopt a political approach to resolve it (Waterschoot, 2018).

Eventually, twelve movements that split from Beirut Madinati, and a variety of other civil society organizations (all known volunteer organizations with established outreach to citizens) formed a coalition under the name *Kollouna Watani* ('We Are All the Nation') (Karam, 2018). What brought Kollouna Watani (KW) to life was the fact that the new electoral law did not allow candidates to compete independently. Therefore, organizations had to join a list in order to enter the political arena (Waterschoot, 2018). Although not the only list formed, KW was by far the largest civil society nominee with 66 candidates present in 9 out of 15 districts (Ghaddar, 2018). As a diverse patchwork of candidates, KW struggled to find consensus on multiple policy areas while drafting its electoral programme. While maintaining a focus on environmental sustainability and tax reforms, it had to settle for compromises on these issues which led KW to be accused of 'programmatic vagueness' (Khneisser, 2020).

Among the main topics which hindered consensus within KW was the fact that some coalition members were rooted in civil society organizations that nurtured relations with Hezbollah, while others were of the opinion that having connections with any of the established political parties brings the risk of co-optation – not to mention decrease their crowd of progressive sympathizers (Ghaddar, 2018). In the view of these critics, change within the sectarian political system can only be fostered by outsiders. This was the primary reason for Beirut Madinati's schism too, and it sparked debate over the opportunities and limitations of the electoral strategy: is there a point in such a strategy in the Lebanese political context where the real power lies not even within the formal state institutions, but in the hands of sectarian elites (Majed, 2017)?

As a new electoral list, KW also faced serious limitations and challenges. Firstly, the new electoral law did not place a limit on the campaign spending of candidates, which clearly favoured established parties. All the while, KW as a newcomer candidate was confined to scarce resources. Following Beirut Madinati's practices, the coalition had experience in disseminating a movement's campaign via social media platforms, but this did not compensate for the fact that it was not able to afford media coverage on the primarily elite-owned mainstream channels (El Kak, 2019). Obstacles to mainstream advertising also highlight that it is not merely a novel or revolutionary preference of the 'Facebook generation' to seek alternative platforms for recruiting supporters, contrary to

how such movements were framed during and after the Arab Spring. Rather, it appears to be a necessary strategic response from those joining the political race in Lebanon to the regime's exclusionary electoral regulations (Khneisser, 2018). On the other hand, this strategic necessity did lead to novel methods of campaigning on KW's part, even beyond the digital sphere. It purposefully organized their announcements and gatherings in public spaces, unused buildings or unfinished construction projects which are seen as symbols of the corrupted way in which the regime handles urban development tenders (Stoughton, 2018). Thus, the movement aimed to symbolically reclaim physical space from the mismanagement of the political elites. These campaign actions appealed particularly to young voters disillusioned with the clientelist political structure (Waterschoot, 2018).

Secondly, the new proportional electoral framework turned out to be more disadvantageous for the new coalition of civil society candidates than expected, in that it redrew the electoral districts. While previously districts were determined based on provinces, now they were designed to accommodate the established parties' supporter bases (Elghossain, 2017). Particularly noticeable were these changes in Beirut's two electoral districts, with one being centred overwhelmingly around Muslim constituencies and the other around the Christian communities, which brought back memories of the city's civil war-era divisions to many (El Kak, 2019): gerrymandering at its finest, or worst.

Thirdly, the established political parties detected the coalition as a potential challenger, and employed a wide range of tactics to undermine its campaign. One of these was the fact that despite the civil society coalition's efforts to maintain a non-sectarian image, established parties' elites waged a counter-campaign against them on a sectarian basis. For example, KW found itself criticized by candidates who claimed that the coalition would not be able to properly represent the interests of Christian communities (El Kak, 2019). Furthermore, out of the thousands of election violations reported by monitoring civil society organizations such as the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections and the Lebanese Transparency Association, several were linked to (the representatives of) established parties (Chamoun, 2018).

While it is unclear how these instances affected KW's success, they reflect the illiberal condition of Lebanese politics where – in addition to citizens' own political convictions – often a mixture of fear and communal dependence govern voting behaviour. Traditional Lebanese parties are known to sway voters by two prominent tactics: through direct payments or, worse, by threatening to withhold basic services from them, such as medical treatments, until the recipients agree to vote for them (El Kak, 2019). The political sectarian elites in many cases hold entire districts under their control based on their populations' confessional belonging, which deprives many from freely deciding whom to support (Rizkallah, 2016). KW members' experience in such districts also depicts a deeply polarized image: citizens often showed adverse attitudes towards KW candidates and prevented them from placing campaign posters or holding gatherings (Waterschoot, 2018).

In the end, 47% of citizens participated in the elections (Chulov, 2018), which both reaffirmed the power of the ruling elite, and did not bring a considerable victory to KW. Overall, it managed to win around 5% of the total number of votes, with 16% support in its 'stronghold' district of Beirut I (Atallah & Zoughaib, 2019). It was

announced on the same day based on preliminary results that it had secured two seats in Parliament (out of 128 in total). However, the next day the counting was corrected, leaving KW with only one parliamentary seat. The coalition was critical about these results on the basis that some representatives of KW reported to have been sent out of the rooms where votes were being counted (where legally, all candidates' representatives should have been present) (Chamoun, 2018). Some small-scale protests followed the announcement of the election results, but they did not persist and did not lead to a serious investigation into the reported or alleged violations (NDI, 2018).

In the grand scheme of events, both the less than 50% voter turnout and the single-mandate victory on KW's part appear to be underwhelming results. Nevertheless, the fact that a group of organizations which emerged over a single issue was able to maintain a coalition and raise its agenda to the national level can be considered a milestone for Lebanon's non-sectarian oppositional culture. While the disappointing electoral outcomes of KW show how difficult it is for new political parties to challenge the established political parties, this does not imply that Lebanese citizens endorse the existing political structures – as would become clear in the 'revolution' of late 2019.

Negotiating Public Space Online and Offline in the 'Revolution' of Late 2019 and Early 2020

An overarching trend characterizing the new wave of movements is their reliance on social media platforms to disseminate alternative forms of campaign (Khneisser, 2018). Online platforms have been the powerhouse for Lebanese activists for over a decade. The appeal of such channels of communication is their seemingly leaderless and non-hierarchical structure, which allows civil society organizations and collectives to recruit fellow citizens and engage in collective action (Khneisser, 2018). In addition, participants connecting on online platforms enjoy relative anonymity, which boosts users' courage to express their political opinion. Despite their heavy reliance on social media spaces, Lebanese users are only able to access very low-quality internet, ranking the 130th out of 133 examined countries (McKinsey & Company, 2018). It is no surprise therefore that the government's 2019 October 17 announcement of a new monthly tax on internet phone calls (including those on WhatsApp and Facebook) was seen by discontent users as an insult on a basic need (Atallah, 2019). Coupled with the rapidly rising prices of other everyday commodities such as fuel and bread, citizens' brewing socio-economic grievances rose to the surface. Mass protests ensued on the same day, addressing the country's ongoing liquidity crisis, unemployment and corruption. The government's attempts to extinguish the protests by first revoking the planned taxes and then having the prime minister resign were in vain. By the end of October, the movement spread from Beirut to the entire country (Azhari, 2019a). Between the beginning of the protests and the end of February 2020, nearly 3000 episodes of collective actions took place (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2020) and the size and duration of the movement inspired many to refer to it as the *thawra* (revolution).

It is beyond this article's scope to draw conclusions about its achievements, since the dynamics of the protests stretched into, and have been changed by Covid-19 and the blast of Beirut's port in August 2020 (which brought the question of the ruling elite's accountability to the fore again). Instead, it takes a snapshot of the repertoire of actions taken by

protesters to express themselves collectively and reclaim values considered appropriated by the sectarian elites at the expense of citizens' rights. The focus of the analysis is on the frames deployed by its organizers and participants, leading and sustaining the protests, through which they interpreted, contested, and disseminated their grievances in order to 'inspire and legitimate contentious action' (Snow et al., 2014). These frames showed continuity with previous years' movements in their (i) emphasis on the protesters' non-sectarian, national identity, (ii) the development of an 'us' versus 'them' rhetoric between the protesters and the elites, and (iii) a fundamental denouncement of the post-civil war status quo and the elites (Rønn, 2020). All of these discursive frames were enacted via different physical actions throughout the movement.

In 2019, civil society organizations again organized collective actions and public debates. This often meant that the same associations that were also active in the 2015 garbage crisis protests continued or resumed their role as organizers in 2019. By claiming the fundamental restructuring of the post-1990 status quo, they cast blame on the elites for the failed transition after the civil war, and provided a platform to participants to voice their own visions for reconciliation in their gatherings (Marsi, 2019). The protest movement even became identified as 'the beginning of the end of the civil war' (Wheeler & Zawk, 2019), signifying its aim to face and repair the long-standing grievances which the movement recognized as impediments to building a unified post-conflict nation. Protest supporters were invited to take part in seminars to map out the main problems that should be addressed in the envisioned transition of the political system (Khneisser, 2019). Organizers placed an emphasis on collaborating with social researchers on these occasions to merge the voice of civil society and academic expertise towards the government.

By focusing on the above-mentioned topics the protestors challenged the dominant 'confessional group versus confessional group' narrative, replacing it for a 'citizens-versus-elite' discourse. In this process, they continued the 'all of us means all of us' frame (MacShane, 2019), a discursive strategy that has accompanied Lebanese protest movements since the peak of the garbage crisis in 2016, to signify their internal unity and distinction from the elites (Rønn, 2020). Such rhetoric establishes a dichotomy in which Lebanese citizens are portrayed as collective victims of crimes perpetrated by the government. This framing strategy legitimizes citizens to make rights-based claims towards the government, for instance in terms of accessing physical spaces deemed as public by the protesters. For it is not only the content of the public debates which mark Lebanese civil society's readiness for structural change, but also their choice of venues. Just like KW's campaign, the latest protests made use of abandoned and half-finished buildings which they regard as symbols and evidence for corrupted and unregulated urban development. They emphasized Lebanese citizens' rights to use and enjoy these spaces, and adopted the hashtag #ReclaimingThePublicSpace (Sinno, 2020).

Sit-in methods and blocking roads became by far the most common form of collective action during the protests, with over 2000 episodes of participants occupying major squares and forming human chains between October 2019 and February 2020 (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2020). By doing so, the protestors also took issue with the law which stipulates that Lebanese citizens' rights to peaceful assembly are limited by prohibitions to hold public gatherings in areas designated for traffic. Not for the first time, 'place making' became the protesters' tool for contesting privatization and reclaiming

the right to shape public realms and express their cultural and social identities through them (Fregonese, 2020). Protesters also filled in symbolically for the state in terms of providing public services, by organizing mass waste collection actions in response to the garbage situation which still has not been resolved (Sinno, 2020). This latter action reflects the movement's emphasis on portraying civil society as the real driver of development while mocking the government's inactions in solving the garbage crisis.

The government's response to these episodes of contestation showed little willingness for negotiation with the movement's leading figures or organizations. Temporary concrete blockades and barbwire fences were erected to seal public buildings that could become targets for the protesters, including the parliament (Fregonese, 2020). Seeing these as restrictions to their right to assembly and as the dismissal of their claims, protesters opted for a more radical strategy and called for a new government comprised of independent technocrats. After two months of failure to contain the movement, the government sought to appeal to the protesters by appointing Hassan Diab, a professor and former Minister of Education as Prime Minister (Azhari, 2019b). However, this did not meet the movement's demands, so public actions continued in January 2020.

At this stage, violent clashes became regular between the anti-sectarian protesters and the supporters of larger parties such as Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, which the security forces did not seek to stop or prevent (UN OHCHR, 2019). The number of protesters decreased and larger anti-government actions died down towards mid-February (Vohra, 2020). Until then, the Internal Security Forces and Lebanese Armed Forces used an unprecedented amount of force against protesters on multiple occasions. Often live ammunition, rubber bullets and large quantities of tear gas were employed to disperse protesters, with the most violent event taking place on 14 January 2020 when nearly 400 protesters were wounded and 34 detained (Rose & Haines-Young, 2020). To protest against, and raise awareness about the cases of security forces' brutality, citizens started a solidarity campaign on social media for those protesters who got injured by rubber bullets (Osman, 2020).

Through a salient social media campaign and offline collective actions, civil society collectives were able to sustain a coherent mass protest movement for several months (CIVICUS, 2020). It is too early to assess the outcomes of the 'revolution' which may regain its strength after the dangers of the Covid-19 pandemic will have waned. However, from the perspective of civic space, the movement was already able to make considerable gains. Firstly, it was able to prevent the government from imposing taxes on their primary platforms of community building and political expression. Secondly, it materialized protesters' claims to physical urban locations which the elites withheld from public usage and neglected to renovate or maintain after they were damaged during the civil war. The public awareness enhanced through the practices of civil society-organized public debates may lay the foundation for further non-sectarian civic actions, through which citizens can channel their discontent into peaceful and constructive forms of contestation.

Conclusion

The economic recession and deteriorating environmental conditions over the past decade have exposed the frailties of Lebanon's post-civil war, hybrid power-sharing

setup, and provoked a new wave of civic contestation from 2015 onwards, whose main aim is to fundamentally transform the sectarian political system. Disproportionate and forceful government responses showed the limits of the room for manoeuvre that is available for civil society in Lebanon's sectarian political system. In this political context, respect for the fundamental freedoms of association, expression, and peaceful assembly is often restricted or undermined via informal and arbitrary practices. These informal practices originate from, and reaffirm a hybrid order in which communal elites play a dominant role, leading to a blurring of 'state' and 'non-state' spheres. Civil society organizations' dependence on, and frequent affiliation to these actors deeply affects the nature of civic space in this hybrid setting.

Our findings demonstrate that civic space in Lebanon is cluttered by the presence of civil society actors that may in fact seek to shrink it for citizens outside their own spheres of influence. This shows that at least in hybrid political settings, and specifically consociational ones, we need to go beyond the widely shared frame in most shrinking civic space literature of civil society positioned against formal state institutions. In Lebanon, though elites compose a fragmented rather than a unitary structure, they have a common stake in maintaining confessional divides to limit civil society's capacity to protest (in particular where civil society challenges elite practices that are key to the working of consociational democracy). Limiting and shaping civic space thus becomes a tool in the sectarian elites' hand to pressure the physical and discursive avenues through which citizens challenge the status quo.

However, the two non-sectarian opposition movements' resilience in the post-2015 era discussed in this article show that in a hybrid, consociational democracy it is possible to mobilize for reform which challenges the logic of the existing political structures. Both through participation in the electoral realm and urban mobilization, civil society collectives in Lebanon demonstrated their potential to navigate through, and demand accountability in a fraught democratic environment. The issues of corruption and sectarian pillarization that protesters brought to the fore reflect a shared expectation towards the state to assume a central (not dispersed) role as a provider to citizens on the basis of citizenship rights rather than sectarian interests. A recurring theme in both the KW movement and the much more loosely organized protest movement that started in October 2019 is the symbolic reclaiming of public spaces, and the carving out of alternative spaces for public debate. Social media platforms prove to be particularly potent vehicles for maintaining, expanding and transferring to offline collective action their discourse which promotes cross-confessional unity.

While in terms of systemic reforms both movements thus far only achieved marginal results, their importance must not be understated in challenging the government for the first time in Lebanon's 2018 general elections, and achieving the appointment of a new government in January 2020. It is, however, fair to say that achieving lasting results will be difficult. While the 'anti-sectarian' frame that was developed over the past years counted on considerable support during the popular protests in 2015 and 2019, it appeared to be more difficult for a new political list using this frame to challenge the deeply entrenched elites' politics. The shift from the streets to the ballot-boxes has proven to be very challenging. While there seems to be considerable support for fundamental change in Lebanon, it should be stressed that 'changing or reforming the system'

will be extremely testing, and the stronger opposition movements become, the more virulent the backlash might be.

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