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Political Development & Democratization: The Ambiguity of Lebanon's Regime

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Located in the Middle East between Israel and Syria, Lebanon is the smallest country in continental Asia with an estimated population of 5.5 million people (CIA World Factbook). Lebanon appears to resemble a democracy, though one with instability, that experienced democratization when colonialism ended and Lebanon gained independence. While there are regular and reasonably fair competitive elections and near-universal suffrage, Lebanon is distinctively characterized by “a system of proportional representation by a religious sect in parliament and administration” (Hudson 173). The president of Lebanon is required to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the National Assembly must be a Shiite Muslim (Freedom House). This distinction is one element that challenges the idea that political office is open to most adult citizens, as specific governmental roles are reserved for those of specific religions. In this paper, I will classify and detail the regime type and political development of Lebanon. This paper will explore the political set-up and experience of Lebanon, as well as evaluate Lebanon's ambiguous democracy to provide a broad understanding of Lebanon's political development and democratization.

Following August's massive explosion in a Beirut port, contemporary Lebanon has continued to endure political and economic challenges. Primary minister Hassan Diab's announcement of his government's resignation, a collapse in Lebanese currency, and unprecedented uprisings condemning corruption, thoroughly challenged the Lebanese government, plunging its politics into deeper turmoil. Many desire a credible and more transparent government that listens to public opinion and distributes power away from the ruling class. Classifying Lebanon's regime type has thus been challenging. Following Przeworski et al.'s principles, Lebanon would resemble a democratic system of government. Given recent

events and threats to the legitimacy of its government, however, Lebanon's regime type can best be classified as an ambiguous democracy.

Przeworski et. al's *Democracies and Dictatorships* lays out principles to identify a regime as democratic. Following these principles, Lebanon's government appears to be a democratic regime, though far from a maximal one. Przeworski et. al (2000) defines democracy, as a "regime in which those who govern are selected through contested elections" (15), and names four rules for democracy: "The chief executive must be elected... The legislature must be elected... There must be more than one party." (15), and an additional rule of alternation that disqualifies authoritarian regimes by preventing incumbents from continually holding office by virtue of election for over two terms (27). Lebanon aligns with Przeworski et. al's definition and four rules for democracy establishing itself to have elements of a democracy.

Przeworski et al.'s rules of democracy are all followed by Lebanon through its governmental structure where presidential and legislative roles are selected through an electoral process. The president of Lebanon is elected by an assembly for a single six-year term and then appoints a prime minister and cabinet. The Lebanese government, however, is structured differently than a conventional democracy with religious affiliations being a requirement for specific political roles. The president of Lebanon is required to be a Maronite Catholic Christian, the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the national assembly a Shi'a Muslim (The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia). In the Lebanese legislative system, a national assembly is elected by universal suffrage, through "a party list system of proportional representation using 12 electoral constituencies." (The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia). Most recently, Lebanon held an election in May 2018 that was regarded by Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassemi as "a big achievement in the democratic trend for all

Lebanese people,” (PressTV). Given the establishment of a current electoral process and a term system for political office, Lebanon passes Przeworski et al.’s first, second, and fourth rules for democracy.

Przeworski et al.’s third rule for democracy: “There must be more than one party” is met through Lebanon’s proportional representation system and the existence of powerful political groups such as Hezbollah (Hizbullah). Within Lebanon’s system, there are numerous political parties, some of the foremost being: The Free Patriotic Movement. The Kataeb Party, Hezbollah, and the Future Movement. Hezbollah is a Shia Islamist political party and militant group described by Joseph Alagha (2011) in *Hizbullah's Identity Construction*. Alagha acknowledges the existence of many political parties and describes some of Hezbollah’s influence, writing,—“Hizbullah has confronted major developments in Lebanon: most prominently, the emergence of a pluralist public sphere and increasing openness towards other communities, political parties, and interest groups in the Lebanese myriad.” (21). By Alagha acknowledging Hezbollah’s influence towards other political parties, Alagha confirms Przeworski et al.’s third rule for democracy: “There must be more than one party”. Following all four of Przeworski et al.’s rules, Lebanon has been a democracy ever since a chief executive and legislature were elected through the establishment of electoral rules and contested elections consisting of more than one party.

It is especially important to note, however, that recent events may challenge whether or not Lebanon is truly a democracy. From the national outrage of citizens, it appears that there may not be sufficient information to guarantee that the election process is professional and authentic. This contests the legitimacy of Lebanon’s democracy and has become even more complicated following Hassan Diab’s statement in his resignation speech, “the system of corruption is deeply

rooted in all the functions of the state; nevertheless, I discovered that the corrupt system is bigger than the State and that the latter is constrained by this system and cannot confront it or get rid of it” (Al Arabiya English). The claims made by the prime minister of Lebanon acknowledged the rooted corruption of the state, further contesting the legitimacy of Lebanon’s democracy and supporting efforts to define Lebanon as an ambiguous regime.

If Lebanese governmental corruption is found to have altered the electoral process in unjust ways, then whether or not Lebanon can be defined as a democracy becomes more complicated. Corruption within the Lebanese government could challenge and contradict democratic ideas if altered in a way that does not listen to public opinion and elect a chief executive and legislature honestly. The acknowledged existence of corruption heavily challenges the ability to deem Lebanon as democratic and distances itself far from the maximal definition of a democracy.

Given Lebanon’s political conditions and Diab’s assertion of the rooted corruption, Lebanon can be classified by what Diamond termed, an ambiguous case. With so many Lebanese citizens protesting the deep-rooted governmental corruption, the political state becomes significantly tenser. Regarding countries that are ambiguous cases of regime type, Diamond (2000) discusses regime ambiguity writing,

“At best Ukraine, Nigeria, and Venezuela are ambiguous cases. We may not have enough information now to know whether electoral administration will be sufficiently autonomous and professional, and whether contending parties and candidates will be sufficiently free to campaign, so as to give the political opposition a fair chance to defeat the government in the next elections.” (22).

Lebanon falls into a similar situation as it is not apparent whether or not the electoral administration would provide a fair chance for the public opinion to have a legitimate influence on the government. As a result of the rooted corruption acknowledged by Diab, there does not seem to be sufficient information to know whether the electoral administration will be professional and autonomous, distancing the country from the democracy that Przeworski et al. described. In contemporary Lebanon, the regime appears to have developed into an ambiguous democracy. Under Lebanon's constitution, it is a democracy, though noting the public disapproval and state corruption Lebanon appears to best be classified as an ambiguous case with the potential to develop in a more truly democratic direction.

Using Polity IV's graph summaries and Freedom House's country analysis to measure regime conditions, the classification of Lebanon as an ambiguous democracy is reasonable. From 2005 to the time of the graph's publication in 2013, the Polity IV graph representing authority trends in Lebanon depicts Lebanon to be in a period of factionalism that is problematic for the durability of established regime authority patterns. Additionally, the graph shows Lebanon to have a Polity score of 6. Polity scores +6 and above indicate a vertical threshold for democracy, while -6 denotes autocracy. Though last updated in 2013, a score of 6 still appears to be fitting for representing the ambiguous political atmosphere of Lebanon. Lebanon could either head in a more democratic or autocratic direction. Freedom House rates Lebanon with a Global Freedom Score of 44 consisting of a political rights score of 14 and a civil liberties score of 30. According to Freedom House, a score of 44 gives Lebanon the status of partly free. The continuous analysis by Polity IV and Freedom House places well concerning Lebanon as a democratic regime. The Polity IV analysis resembles more of a Przeworski et al analysis and showed Lebanon to be far from the maximal position of either a fully democratic or autocratic regime. Lebanon was placed

in an ambiguous position where it had the potential for either democratic or autocratic direction. Whether or not Lebanon can be considered a democracy is debatable. Lebanon passes Przeworski et al.'s requirements for democracy, though with recent events whether or Lebanon legitimately meets these requirements becomes a new question. Diab's official acknowledgment of governmental corruption places Lebanon in a good position to at least be considered an ambiguous case until further change. Lebanon has the potential to become fully democratic, but as of now can best be described as an ambiguous democratic regime.

Following the ending of World War I, France acquired a mandate over the Northern region of the former Ottoman Empire province of Syria. In 1920 the French set boundaries to this portion of Lebanon and later granted the area independence in 1943. Lebanon's liberation from the Ottoman Empire paved the way for Lebanese citizens to start making demands for greater civil and political rights, shifting towards democracy. In agreement with Lebanese authorities, French authorities included equal civil and political rights for all Lebanese citizens in the 1926 constitution (CIA World Factbook). Colonialism from the French, however, may have left behind socio-cultural and socio-political conditions that made it difficult for Lebanon to have an effective democracy. Lebanon experienced an unstable democracy beginning with its independence from France in 1943 until a 15-year civil war broke out in 1975. Lebanon's time of democratization began at the very beginning of Huntington's second wave in 1945, though it experienced a slight shift endangering its democracy while not sliding into authoritarianism at the end of Huntington's second reverse wave with a civil war breaking out in 1975.

Following Lebanon's independence, the country has been "marked by periods of political turmoil interspersed with prosperity built on its position as a regional center for finance and trade." (CIA World Factbook). Lebanon's civil war lasted from 1975-1990 and resulted in an

estimated 120,000 fatalities. The civil war was followed by years of social and political instability in Lebanon during the time period which Huntington described as a “third reverse wave”, where many countries historically transitioned to democracy. Notably, Syria has had a historic influence on Lebanon’s foreign and internal policies. The Syrian military occupied Lebanon from 1976 until 2005, risking the autonomy and democracy of Lebanon. Currently, Lebanon's borders with Syria and Israel continue to remain unresolved. The 1975-90 war largely damaged Lebanon's economic infrastructure and cut Lebanon’s national output by half (CIA World Factbook). Lebanon's position as a Middle Eastern banking hub had been dismantled, thus endangering the country's economy and political stature. After the ending of the civil war, Lebanon rebuilt much of its damaged infrastructure by borrowing heavily from domestic banks, which resulted in the Lebanese government having a substantial debt.

While the war ended following a 1989 peace agreement, Syria continued their military and intelligence presence which heavily influenced domestic politics and challenged Lebanese democracy until Syrian troops were withdrawn in 2005 (Khalaf 1). Heightened Syrian presence on Lebanese territory presented a challenge to Lebanon’s democracy, as the country remained under the reinforced patronage of Syria. The democracy of Lebanon’s government has thoroughly been challenged largely through civil war and Syrian military and intelligence presence, challenging Lebanon’s unstable and ambiguous democracy. The relationship between wealth and democracy suggests that democracy is directly a result of economic development. According to Dahl, democracy occurs when the costs of repression outweigh the costs of toleration. Similarly, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens observed a statistical relationship between democracy and the working class and claimed that capitalist development is related to democracy because it shifts balances of class power. Economic development leads to

industrialization which leads to larger working classes that desire democracy. Following this theory, it would make sense that Lebanon experienced setbacks in their political stability and democracy at the end of Huntington's second reverse wave when Lebanon burdened a large debt that came with the end of its civil war. This large debt significantly damaged Lebanon's economy, in return altering social aspects of the working class.

Lebanon's liberation from the Ottoman Empire allowed for Lebanese citizens to start making demands for larger civil and political rights, shifting towards the direction of democracy. Following this liberation, Lebanon democratized though never became entirely stable. From the time of its independence from France in 1943 until the civil war began in 1975, Lebanon experienced many challenges to its democracy. According to Haggard and Kaufman, most transitions that were distributive in nature occurred when there were high levels of inequality. Following Haggard and Kaufman's thoughts, high levels of inequality could have played a role in transitions towards democracy. Democratization in Lebanon started at the very beginning of Huntington's second wave in 1945, though experienced a slight shift that questioned the legitimacy of its democracy at the end of Huntington's second reverse wave in 1975. Reverse waves can be caused by economic setbacks that intensify social conflict which is representative of the damaged economy Lebanon experienced from having to heavily borrow from domestic banks resulting in large debt. The democracy of Lebanon's government has thoroughly been challenged through war and Syrian presence, leaving Lebanon with an unstable democracy with the potential to continue to democratize.

Lebanon's democracy could largely improve in the future if the Lebanese government finds ways to restore confidence in the public view of government. Given the deep-rooted governmental corruption acknowledged by Hassan Diab, increased transparency between the

government and the public could be promising to restore faith in the public view and improve the democracy in Lebanon. Currently, some argue that the Lebanese government makes indiscriminate use of vetoes much more frequently than it uses consensus and cooperation which is problematic for democracy. Additionally, it is possible that Lebanon's democracy could improve and strengthen through increased Western (or foreign) democratic linkage. Given Lebanon's current state of political and economic challenges, the country remains in a position where it can either slide further away from democracy or become more democratic in nature. Primary minister Hassan Diab's announcement of his government's resignation and a collapse in Lebanese currency is concerning for Lebanon's democracy, though the exposing of deep-rooted governmental corruption to the public is necessary to develop a stronger and more ideal democracy.

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