

## Alternatives for Lebanon Amid the Ongoing Crisis

*By Racha AWADA*

***Executive summary:*** Lebanon is facing a multi-dimensional crisis that is worsening by the day, therefore the need for a solution is crucial. Lebanon has long been suffering from the fragility of the state, limited administrative capabilities, and persistent social tensions. This analysis discusses suggested alternatives to alleviate the crisis. One of the proposed solutions comes from previous members of the political class, the second comes from a civil society group that was formed in 2016 to combat the foreseen economic crisis, and the third is a plan designated by the political class: form a government and wait for international aid.

The postwar realities of countries like Lebanon and Iraq led to consociational power sharing, which according to Bassel Salloukh “incentivize[s] sectarian and ethnic modes of political mobilization and identification, serve[s] elite political economic interests, and encourage[s] institutional dysfunction”<sup>1</sup>. In the case of Lebanon, the civil war ended by ushering in an elite power sharing scheme that assigned political office along sectarian lines, maintaining a parity between Christians and Muslims. Ibrahim Halawi<sup>2</sup> argues that the conflict did not end, instead it was imported into the state and turned into a conflict over how resources are

allocated, which allowed the political elite to avoid the creation of a state and the development of a real economy. The Lebanese power sharing model came at the expense of proper governance, and strong and accountable institutions. Instead of enforcing state building, it has institutionalized sectarianism and has put in place a clientelist postwar economic system that has helped the elite maintain a sectarian hegemony over the Lebanese society. This economic system has been expanding the elite’s gains while impoverishing lower and middle classes. Salloukh et al. describe the Lebanese sectarian system as a socioeconomic and

political power where the political elite employs clientelism, economic practices and sectarian discourse to maintain hegemony over their sectarian subjects.<sup>3</sup>

The World Bank Lebanon Economic Report (on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2021) was titled “Lebanon sinking into one of the most severe global crises, amidst deliberate inaction”<sup>4</sup>. The report revealed that there was no turning point on the horizon and described the political class’ policy response to the challenges as “inadequate”. The current crisis is rooted in an economic infrastructure that caters for the political elite and harms all sectors of the economy. Salloukh says “we are reaping what 30 years of postwar “zombie power sharing”<sup>5</sup> and its clientelist infrastructure has sown: A state stripped of the bare minimum of credibility, service delivery, and institutional capabilities”<sup>6</sup>.

In October 2019, protesters mobilized across Lebanon to demand an end to corruption and the sectarian power-sharing order. They stressed the need for reforms and structural changes. Protesters expressed their discontent at years of politicization of sectarian identity, and their desire for a civil state. The protests came as a result of increased popular dissent that brought together anti-sectarian movements. However, the uprising did not lead to any radical change in governance, instead, the political elite managed to

securitize it by portraying it as a security threat and blaming it on foreign interference. Additionally, Salloukh and Halawi argue that the “NGO-ization”<sup>7</sup> of civil society and the refusal to politically organize limited its effectiveness. Political organization is another aspect of Lebanese society that the sectarian elite controls by infiltrating civil society organizations and NGOs “denying them their natural role as agents of political and socioeconomic change”<sup>8</sup> and through decades of sectarianized political identity.

A year and a half post uprising and almost a year since the August 4 Beirut Port explosion, and amid crushing economic, political and health crises, no changes have been implemented. Lebanon now stands on the brink of collapse. In addition to its fundamental problems, Lebanon is still, inactively, facing the repercussions of both the Beirut Port explosion and COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and on the health sector. The international community promised to help Lebanon financially if a number of reforms were implemented, yet so far none of the conditions have been met.

In order for Lebanon to end this stalemate a series of fundamental and structural changes must be implemented to address all dimensions of the crisis. ***There are three suggested ways*** to accomplish those:

*engage in early parliamentary elections (as suggested by ex-members of parliament); a transitional government with exceptional legislative powers (as suggested by the civil society group Citizens in a state); and the formation of a new independent government (as suggested by the political class).*

### **Early Elections**

The first suggestion is referred to as “snap elections”, the purpose is to capitalize on unusual electoral opportunities, which in the case of Lebanon manifests in a change in the political landscape as a result of the uprising. In the aftermath of the port explosion, the Kataeb MPs, along with Paula Yacoubian (independent candidate) and Marwan Hamade (Progressive Socialist Party), resigned from office, hoping to create a snowball effect of opposition resignations. However, no additional MPs followed suit. According to some members of the opposition, no solution for Lebanon can be attained as long as the current political elite holds a majority of parliamentary seats. Proponents of early elections argue that this would be the only way to achieve real changes in the financial, economic, and political sectors. They rely on an increase in political awareness after the October 17 uprising. They argue that the

Lebanese realized that their politicization and lack of participation in elections helped the political elite to further entrench itself. They are also counting on a wider participation in the next elections that would certainly produce a new non-sectarian political class.

However, those who are proposing early elections do not present a political and economic roadmap for Lebanon. Opponents of this move argue that early elections are a trap due to tailor-made electoral laws and asymmetric media representation that favor the political elite, and that any hope for tangible changes will not materialize in the results.<sup>9</sup>

Charbel Nahas, secretary general of *Citizens in a State* (referred to as MMFD), expressed his skepticism towards early elections as a solution, based on the experience of the 2018 parliamentary elections that reproduced the same political parties. However, the current momentum, after the uprising and the Beirut Port explosion, is not comparable to that of 2018, yet the opposition’s chances of claiming a parliamentary majority is still far from certain.

### **Transitional Government**

Out of the October 17 protests emerged “conscious”<sup>10</sup> political alternatives, such as *Citizens in a State*, which is spearheading a rescue

plan as a way out of the stalemate. In early 2019, Nahas was among the first to warn that Lebanon is in a pre-crisis phase, and that the political class will not be able to avoid it. He also warned “that an uncontrolled crisis will have devastating effects on the country”.<sup>11</sup> *Citizens in a State* see that the only way to build an alternative system away from sectarian narratives and subjectification is through controlling the state where the sectarian resource allocation takes place and through putting an end to this postwar political economy (Halawi & Salloukh, 2020, p. 331). They rely on a peaceful transition of power through a transitional government with exceptional legislative power holding the cabinet for a period of 18 months, ultimately engaging in parliamentary elections. The goal is to eventually build a civil state. “The plan is set out in three phases, capturing reality, controlling the effects of bankruptcy and forming a cohesive society and an economy with defenses and balanced relations with respect to the outside”.<sup>12</sup> The old power-sharing system needs to be replaced and *Citizens in a State*’s road map presents a viable alternative, offering a complete and clear strategy and mode of action.

Nahas believes that under normal circumstances a peaceful transition of power would have been impossible, but that the political class failed, and that the system’s tools and methods

are collapsing and unsustainable. He argues that the political class is faced with two options; they either peacefully transition power, or they will have to deal with imminent chaos. He claims that it is in the political class’s benefit to concede if it wants to maintain some level of support among its supporters. He argues that if the sectarian elites were to stay in power in the heart of the crisis, they are likely to risk their support base because they no longer have the means to fund their clientelist network.

Some criticism of *Citizens in a State*’s plan is a strong belief that the political class will not give up their power to another entity. Others ask how will this government be enforced on the deep state and the sects? Traboulsi disagrees with *Citizens in a State*’s claim that the legitimacy of the state has collapsed. He believes that the state is still strong internally, has not lost control over security and institutions, and has not lost its legitimacy because it still has international support.<sup>13</sup>

The only way *Citizens in a State* will succeed in implementing their plan is in the case of a complete collapse of the state, then they could step in and take charge<sup>14</sup>. So far, the political elite is proving to be as resilient as ever. With the unlikely event of a peaceful transition of power, and the improbability of early parliamentary elections leading to any real change,

the only alternative remains in the hands of the political elite.

### **Independent cabinet**

The October 17 protests forced the resignation of then acting Prime Minister Saad Hariri, which led to the formation of a new government under the leadership of Hassan Diab. He, however, failed to implement any reforms that go against the political elite's wishes. His cabinet resigned after the Beirut port explosion, leaving the country under a caretaker government. Salloukh<sup>15</sup> argues that what happened with the Diab cabinet was a diversionary tactic by the political elite; quelling popular anger under the guise of appointing an independent and technocratic cabinet and ensuring that this cabinet's new fiscal policies do not interfere with their ability to satisfy the socioeconomic wellbeing of their network of clients. After his resignation, Mostafa Adib was named prime minister but failed to form a government due to quotas and disagreement within political parties on the distribution of some contested ministries. Hariri was then selected to form a cabinet able to enact the necessary reforms to unlock foreign aid, however his efforts have so far failed. One of the direct causes as to why a cabinet has not formed yet is a fundamental disagreement between

Hariri and Aoun over the designation of ministers and the assignment of ministries. In addition, Hariri is no longer Saudi Arabia's candidate of choice, and he does not have the international backing that he previously enjoyed.

The disagreements around the government's formation represent a fraction of Lebanon's power sharing problems. No one from the political class seems to be willing to take responsibility for what is happening and to deal with the crisis because every solution will have a negative impact on their ability to sustain their network of clients.

The cabinet that is to be formed is likely to maintain the current level of internal balance of power. Yet, it is unlikely to introduce fundamental structural reforms and overhaul the country's governance. It means that a new cabinet will buy the political class more time. Halawi argues that they are incapable of making any reform, because any reform poses an existential threat to their postwar political economy.<sup>16</sup>

It seems very difficult to determine what the prospects might be. With the current obstacles facing Hariri and unless he makes political concessions, it is likely that he would excuse himself from forming the cabinet, which might result in his parliamentary bloc resigning from

Parliament. As Hariri and Aoun do not seem to be able to reach an agreement the gridlock is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. The political class is currently betting on international aid, but at the same time delaying the implementation of the conditional reforms and consequently delaying the formation of a cabinet that can implement them. Moreover, Lebanon's dependence on foreign aid is concerning as the country has one of the world's largest national debt ratios, especially that the aid is never followed by austerity measures, instead it refuels the political class's sectarian political economy and reinforces their resilience. Nasser Yassin<sup>17</sup> describes Lebanon as being in a "low-intensity collapse" and believes that the political elite are going to adapt and force the population to adapt with them while

"they continue to gather what they can from the collapsing state".

With the government unlikely to be formed soon, and amid an economic crisis described as one of the worst global economic crises of the last 150 years, the possibility of social unrest and the eruption of violence seems high. The political class is likely to keep delaying the formation of government and keep evading responsibility.

*Racha AWADA is a junior researcher and associate fellow of MEPEI focusing on the Lebanon Domestic and Foreign Policies. She has a MA in Global Diplomacy at SOAS - University of London. Her dissertation examined how Iran was able to sustain both international and regional pressures using a defensive realist framework. She has a BA in Political Science from the Lebanese American University. Her specializations are in Middle East politics and security studies.*

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<sup>1</sup> Salloukh, Bassel. F., 2020, Consociational Power-Sharing in the Arab World: A Critical Stocktaking, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 20: 100– 108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12325>.

<sup>2</sup> Halawi, Ibrahim, 2021, "Building a lasting peace? Power sharing and sectarian identities in Lebanon" Foreign Policy Center, Zoom, January 26, 2021. <https://fpc.org.uk/events/building-a-lasting-peace-power-sharing-and-sectarian-identities-in-lebanon/>.

<sup>3</sup> Salloukh, Bassel F., Rabie, Barakat, Jinan S, Al-Habbal, Lara Khattab and Shoghig, Mikaelian, 2015, "The Politics of Sectarianism in Post-war Lebanon", Pluto Press.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank, Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>.

<sup>5</sup> John Nagle defines the Lebanese power sharing system as "Zombie power sharing". He uses the term zombie to indicate that power sharing is dead but is kept on life support. He argues that the system is not working anymore, and that such a system is impossible to reform. Nagle, John, 2020, "Consociationalism is Dead! Long Live Zombie Power-Sharing!", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 20: 137– 144. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12329>.

<sup>6</sup> Salloukh, Bassel F., 2020, "You Can't Imagine a More Perfect Storm", LCPS, <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=285>.

<sup>7</sup> Halawi, Ibrahim, and Salloukh, Bassel. F., "Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will after the 17 October Protests in Lebanon", *Middle East Law and Governance* 12, 3 (2020): 322-334, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-12030005>.

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<sup>8</sup> Clark, Janine A., and Salloukh, Bassel. F., 2013, "Elite Strategies, Civil Society, and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (4), Cambridge University Press: 731–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743813000883>.

<sup>9</sup> Le Commerce Du Levant, 2020, "Early Elections: Trap or Opportunity for Change?", <https://www.lecommercelevant.com/article/30009-early-elections-trap-or-opportunity-for-change>.

<sup>10</sup> Halawi, Ibrahim, and Salloukh, Bassel. F., "Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will after the 17 October Protests in Lebanon", *Middle East Law and Governance* 12, 3 (2020): 322-334, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-12030005>.

<sup>11</sup> Le Commerce Du Levant, 2019, "Charbel Nahas: Lebanon is in a pre-crisis phase", <https://www.lecommercelevant.com/article/28809-charbel-nahas-lebanon-is-in-a-pre-crisis-phase>.

<sup>12</sup> Le Commerce Du Levant, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Ghosn, Jad, "2 المؤرخ والكاتب فواز طرابلسي: واجب الذكرى وضرورة النسيان - الحلقة" ("Historian and writer Fawwaz Traboulsi: the duty of remembrance and the necessity of oblivion - episode 2"), April 8, 2021, video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-QIm9q8ERs&ab\\_channel=JadGhosn](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-QIm9q8ERs&ab_channel=JadGhosn).

<sup>14</sup> Holtmeier, Lauren, 2020, "Expecting the collapse: Meet Lebanon's young political party ready to take power", *Al Arabiya English*, [www.english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/06/05/Expecting-the-collapse-Meet-Lebanon-s-young-political-party-ready-to-take-power](http://www.english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/06/05/Expecting-the-collapse-Meet-Lebanon-s-young-political-party-ready-to-take-power).

<sup>15</sup> Salloukh, Bassel F., 2020, "You Can't Imagine a More Perfect Storm", LCPS, <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=285>.

<sup>16</sup> Halawi, Ibrahim, 2021, "Building a lasting peace? Power sharing and sectarian identities in Lebanon" *Foreign Policy Center*, Zoom, January 26, 2021. <https://fpc.org.uk/events/building-a-lasting-peace-power-sharing-and-sectarian-identities-in-lebanon/>.

<sup>17</sup> Lauren, Holtmeier, 2020, "Lebanon's unprecedented crisis, challenges and paths forward". <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2020/06/03/Lebanon-s-unprecedented-crisis-Challenges-and-paths-forward> (Nasser Yassin is the interim director at the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs).

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Address: Quadra Place, 47/B32 Fabricii Street  
Zip Code 060821, Sector 6, Bucharest, Romania  
Landline / Fax: + 40.213.698.070  
Mobile: + 40.722.304.923  
Email: [office@mepei.com](mailto:office@mepei.com)  
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