Consociationalism, Elite Autocracy and Electoral Reform in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

Lebanese politics is often, if not exclusively, articulated through the concept of "consociational" democracy. While most observers agree that this system has been inadequate in containing instability and violence, there is little questioning of its basis. Arguments fall into two categories: either the country is seen as prone to instability and conflict because the consociational model doesn’t work well enough, or the consociational model itself is flawed. I argue that the consociational model is not, and has not historically been, an appropriate analytical guide to understanding Lebanese politics. That is, where consociationalism might serve as an aspiration, it provides minimal utility in analysing and understanding the dynamics of Lebanese politics. Specifically, this paper will highlight how key features of consociationalism are missing in Lebanon; namely, institutional constraints on elite decision making, a proportional electoral system, severe regulation of and exclusion from political participation for the majority of the population, and dysfunctional government and coalition structures. This can be most starkly seen in the debate over electoral-law reform. An analysis of the inertia surrounding political reform in Lebanon, typified by failed efforts at reforming the electoral system, reveals a subtle but critical mutual dependency between political elites and the confessional system in which they operate and which sustains their dominance.

Keywords: Lebanon, electoral reform, consociationalism, elite autocracy