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Endogenous drivers of democratic backsliding in Lebanon: An empirical and structural analysis (2019–2025).

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This paper critically examines the domestic causes of Lebanon’s democratic backsliding from 2019 to 2025. Using qualitative and empirical data, it identifies three core internal drivers: economic collapse, socio-cultural fragmentation, and political malfunction. The 2019 financial crisis one of the world’s worst since the nineteenth century exposed institutional fragility, state failure, and public distrust. Lebanon’s consociational model, designed to ensure stability, has instead entrenched sectarianism, weakened national cohesion, and obstructed democratic consolidation. Elite capture, entrenched corruption, and declining faith in representative institutions have reduced civic engagement and fostered a culture of protest. The findings reveal that Lebanon’s democratic erosion stems primarily from systemic and institutional failures within its political economy and identity politics, rather than external forces. The paper concludes that structural reforms, de-sectarianized governance, and redefined national identity are essential to avert further authoritarian drift and to advance democratization in pluralistic societies.

Key words: Democratic backsliding, Lebanon, consociationalism, economic crisis, political corruption, sectarianism, governance failure, authoritarianism, youth protest, state legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION

Liberal democratic backsliding around the world in the last two decades has rekindled new scholarly interest in the stability and robustness of liberal democratic governments, particularly post-war and multi-sectarian regimes (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Bermeo, 2016). Lebanon is an exceptional example in this direction, and the weakening of the democratic norms did not take place abruptly and with predominantly exogenous factors, but rather in accordance with the national political, economic, and even socio-cultural patterns. Institutional breakdown, civic discontentment, and increasing autocratism of the ruling elites are processes that

have occurred in Lebanon since the 2019 financial crisis and reflect a definite backslide towards constitutional democracy (World Bank, 2021; Doumit, 2021).

The democratic backsliding is to an extent endogenous as external authoritarian pulls or armed power takeovers do not accompany it as seen in the case of transitional democracies. The consociational political system in the country that was created in 1989 in the Ta Aiff accord to help govern sectarian pluralism in the country has become a form of strict power sharing relationships that promotes bargaining by elites rather than democratic accountability (Salamney, 2017; Stepan and Linz, 2013).

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As consociationalism was supposed to ensure peaceful co-existence between different groups in Lebanon, there are institutional paralysis, identity fragmentation and entrenched clientelism since the government has recognized eighteen sectarian groups as members of Lebanon (Lijphart, 2004; Casteliho & Cavanaugh, 2013). Not only has this sect-based structure impeded reform but also allowed the sectarian leaders to seize control of the government and utilize the government as the vehicle to reward its members and hollow out the substance of democracy (Salvador Bairoso and Kairouz, 2023; OECD, 2023).

Energy-wise, the Lebanese state is no longer able to uphold the minimum fiscal and monetary stability. The Lebanese pound collapsed more than 90 percent in 2019 due to a financial crisis and brought about hyperinflation, loss of capital, and poverty (IMF, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). According to The World Bank (2021), the crisis in Lebanon ranks as one of the three worst in the history of the world since the middle of the nineteenth century. The financial meltdown was not isolated fact, the product of decades of maladministration, regulatory failure, and government corruption are contributing factors (Howard, 2023). The banking system was practically bankrupt and made people lose information about the institutions of trust, placing the economy into informal tax exchanges and cashless payments (Souleiman, 2024). More than 80 percent of the population now occurs on the inside of the line of poverty with unemployment of young people and emigration to neighboring countries continuing to shoot up (UNDP, 2024).

Politically, Lebanon has the characteristics of a so-called pseudo-democracy, in which formal elections continue, yet the actual power remains vested in illicit, sectarian coalitions. The population turnout has gone down drastically to 44 percent in 2022 parliamentary elections, compared to 54 percent in 2009 an indication that the majority are discontent with representation in politics (OECD, 2023). The uprising of 2019 (October 17 Uprising) and the reaction to the Beirut port explosion in 2020 are forms of resistance to the leadership of the elite, but they did not lead to the creation of substantive systemic change (Snaije, 2022; Democracy and Government, 2023). The internal causes of the Lebanese democratic downfall in the period of 2019-2025 takes a specific look at the connection of three co-constitutional spheres which are (1) economic meltdown and institutional failure, (2) sectarian politics of identity and social fragmentation, and (3) elite exploitation and dysfunction in the region. This paper, therefore, investigates the endogenous and exogenous mechanisms that sustain Lebanon's hybrid political order despite recurrent crises. Specifically, it interrogates how the interplay between sectarian clientelism, elite economic capture, and regional patronage produces a self-reinforcing cycle of democratic stagnation. The examination of these factors is carried out regarding

democratic theory, political economy and post-conflict institutionalism. The paper also raises the question of how Lebanon consociational constitutional which was once hailed as the model of diversity management has inhibited democratic consolidation in a highly fragmentary society. Thus, the question to be answered in the study is as follows: Why has Lebanon's hybrid regime remained politically stable despite recurrent crises, institutional paralysis, and social discontent? To respond to the specified question, the paper utilizes a thematic analysis not only based on the empirical study but also advanced by the theoretical concepts like hybrid regime theory (Diamond, 2002), the elite theory (Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1968), and the concept of political economy of failure of institutions (North et al., 2009).

The extant literature attributes Lebanon's enduring hybridism to the rigid consociational framework established by the Taif Agreement (1989), elite patronage networks, and periodic economic shocks (Cammatt and Issar, 2010; Traboulsi, 2012; Makdisi, 2021). However, this perspective tends to emphasize structural endurance over causal dynamics focusing on *what* persists rather than *why* it does so. The 2019 financial collapse, subsequent mass protests, and the state's administrative paralysis exposed the fragility of this arrangement, revealing that the endurance of Lebanon's hybrid regime is not merely a legacy of sectarianism but a continuously reproduced political order sustained by domestic and external equilibria.

Analytical hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that Lebanon's enduring hybrid stability is maintained through a mutually reinforcing nexus of sectarian clientelism, elite economic domination, and external power mediation particularly the roles of Hezbollah, Iran, Arab states, and international donors which collectively inhibit both democratic collapse and substantive reform.

By testing this hypothesis, the study aims to move beyond descriptive accounts of dysfunction toward a more nuanced explanation of how institutional, economic, and geopolitical logics intersect to entrench hybrid resilience. Lebanon thus serves as a paradigmatic case of managed democratic stagnation, offering insights into how fragile states sustain quasi-democratic orders under conditions of identity fragmentation and external interference

Theoretical framework

The analytical foundation of this study draws upon three complementary theoretical perspectives Consociationalism, Hybrid Regime Theory, and Political Economy of Clientelism to explain the persistence and

erosion of democracy in Lebanon. Integrating these frameworks allows for a multi-level understanding of how institutional design, elite behavior, and regional influences interact to sustain Lebanon's hybrid order.

Consociationalism and the institutional entrenchment of sectarianism

Arend Lijphart (1977)'s theory of consociational democracy posits that deeply divided societies can achieve stability through elite cooperation and proportional representation among distinct identity groups. While this model explains the initial post-war settlement in Lebanon, critics argue that it institutionalizes division and impedes national integration (Horowitz, 2000; Ottaway, 2003). In Lebanon, consociationalism has evolved into what Cortes and Kairouz (2023) term "communitocracy", a structure that preserves elite hegemony under the guise of pluralism. The hypothesis contends that this institutional design originally intended to stabilize diversity has become a mechanism of elite conservation, reinforcing rather than resolving sectarian fragmentation.

Hybrid regime theory and the normalization of informal power

Hybrid regime theory (Levitsky and Way, 2010; O'Donnell, 1994) provides a useful lens for understanding how Lebanon's political system maintains the formal appearance of democracy while systematically undermining its substantive practices. Within this framework, institutions such as elections, parliaments, and courts exist but function primarily as instruments for patronage distribution. The Lebanese state thus operates as a delegative democracy, where citizens delegate authority without meaningful accountability. This explains why Lebanon experiences recurrent elections yet persistent paralysis informality and clientelism dominate the political logic (Habermas, 1984).

Political economy and external patronage networks

From a political economy standpoint, Lebanon's crisis reflects the capture of state resources by entrenched elites and the external reinforcement of domestic hierarchies. Drawing from Acemoglu and Robinson (2013)'s theory of extractive institutions, the Lebanese case exemplifies how elites manipulate economic institutions to consolidate political dominance. However, the Lebanese variant is distinct because external actors, such as Iran, the Gulf States, France, and international organizations indirectly stabilize the system through selective aid, diplomatic protection, and security

patronage (Abbas and Jahangaiz 2020). The hypothesis therefore links external mediation to internal elite survival: the system persists not despite instability, but *because* instability invites continual foreign engagement.

Integrated analytical model

Synthesizing these perspectives, the framework conceptualizes Lebanon's democratic backsliding as the outcome of an interactive equilibrium among: Institutional ossification (consociational rigidity), Elite clientelism and informal governance (hybrid regime logic), and External reinforcement (regional and international patronage). This triadic configuration produces a form of hybrid stability a self-sustaining condition where reform is perpetually deferred. The analytical model thus aligns with the paper's central hypothesis: Lebanon's hybrid regime endures through the interaction of domestic sectarianism, elite capture, and regional power mediation, collectively constraining democratic deepening.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Democratic backsliding has become the subject of intense scholarly interest over the past few years as academics attempt to reckon with an increasingly widespread and pestilential number of regimes that strive to retain the forms of democracy and abandon the institutional practices that are fundamental to democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Bermeo, 2016). That is, in the example of Lebanon democratic devastation cannot be referred only to authoritarian revival or foreign interventions, rather, the tendency is generated within Lebanese political framework, economical setbacks, and government based on identity. The reviewed literature critically synthesized literature around four cross-cutting areas that have been used to explain why Lebanon is experiencing the erosion of democracy, (1) Resilience of the hybrid regime, (2) identity-based consociationalism, (3) Elite capture and institutional paralysis, and (4) Economic collapse and state fragility.

Democratic backsliding and hybrid regimes

Democratic backsliding is also the term that describes the slow degradation of democratic norms, institutions, and practices usually in elected government (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner and Lust, 2018). Although older literatures on democracies focused on coup d'état or on breakdown of elections, recent literatures seem to have given more emphasis on more complex and less dramatic methods including civil Liberties restrictions, Judicial manipulation, and disenfranchisement of parliaments, as the major modes of democratization (Diamond, 2002; Schedler,

2006). What has been important in defining the path of Lebanon are hybrid regimes, which signify an integration of democratic and dictatorial properties. They preserve the electoral institutions but subvert the democratic accountability by means of dominance by the elite and clientelism-based rule (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Diamond, 2008).

The hybridity of Lebanon is especially visible in its institutional guise: the presence of routine elections, on the one hand, and the concentration of power in the hands of a sectarian oligarchy that does not want to change and narrowly circumscribes the ability to engage in public debate, on the other hand (Cammett, 2015; Doumit, 2021). Research conducted on other hybrid regimes, including Turkey, Tunisia, and Iraq, also points out that a state where the influence of informal connections regarding the power supersedes the institution of a state makes the development of democracy greatly hampered (Brownlee, 2009; Carothers, 2002).

Consociationalism, sectarianism, and identity politics

Lebanon's political order is commonly understood as a confessional consociational system that simultaneously sustains inclusion of communal elites and institutional paralysis. The literature locates the system's origins in colonial-era divide-and-rule policies and in post-war bargains that froze sectarian representation into state structures; those institutional arrangements shape incentives for elites, constrain state capacity, and produce recurring crises of governance and legitimacy (Ukpe, 2024). Lebanon represents an ideal example of consociational democracy, which is the theory created by Lijphart (1977, 2004) to create conflict management in divided societies based on proportional representation and cooperation of elites as well as mutual veto. Touted at first to support the sectarian complexity of Lebanon, consociationalism has been interwoven with sectarian clientelism, or distribution of state resources and political posts basing on religious affiliation, not in serving the common interest (Salamney, 2017; Cammett and Issar, 2010). Although consociationalism has eliminated the issue of a recurring civil war, it has consolidated political competition on a group basis, diluted national identity, and hampered democratic sensitivity (Salvador and Kairouz, 2023). According to scholars, consociational institutions face a danger of institutional stagnation due to the substitution of elite bargain instead of popular mandate hence, the state institution is decoupled of citizen will (Stepan and Linz, 2013; Ottaway, 2003). The Lebanese case of identity politics has led to the repression of cross-cutting civic politics, as well as the maintenance of a disjointed public sphere in which populism can be used as a means of exploiting and elites can manipulate (Steiman, 2023; Fakhoury, 2021). Scholars argue that the confessional system

achieves political inclusion by guaranteeing sect-based access to public offices and resources, thereby preventing an immediate collapse into majoritarian competition. However, this very institutionalization creates structural gridlock, as cross-sect bargaining, vetoes, and clientelist distribution replace programmatic politics and undermine collective decision-making in areas such as budgeting, policing, and reform. Recent studies emphasize that formal power-sharing rules often intersect with informal practices to reproduce elite control rather than broaden democratic accountability (Belfer Center, n.d.).

Political elites, clientelism, and governance dysfunction

A large body of work treats Lebanese politics as organized by elite pacts negotiated settlements among leading families, parties, and militias sustained by dense patron–client relationships that reach down into welfare provision and everyday mediations between citizens and the state. These networks perform key governance functions (service provision, security) when the central state is weak, but they also capture resources, block reforms, and make collective action for systemic reform costly and risky for individual elites. Recent analyses link patronage more directly to Lebanon's economic meltdown: elites used clientelist networks to allocate access to rents and safeguard interests as macroeconomic vulnerabilities grew (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005). An established literature base links democratic degradation to elite control in its meaning of taking over state organs by established political officials amid the exercise of power who deploy state resources to benefit themselves or their action group (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2013; Mosca, 1939, O'Donnell and Schmitter, 2019). This relationship became institutionalized in the post-war reconstruction of Lebanon, where the political elites (organized along confessional lines) gain a monopoly on the public appointments, budgets, and contracts due to the use of informal networks (Cammett, 2015; Howard, 2023).

The networks enforce social control through clientelist procedures to offer employment or services in return of politics allegiance and crush the opposition or reformers. Evidence of MENA region comparative studies indicates that the same patterns can be seen in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, whereby state weakness, elite rent-seeking, and identity-based fragmentation coincide in disrupting attempts to establish democratic governance (Bellin, 2004; Blaydes, 2011). Clientelism is not just permitted but it is the norm in Lebanon as a way of surviving when the formal system of institutions is corrupt (Ogundare, 2023). These circumstances are a reflection of what O'Donnell (O'Donnell 1994) calls the delegative democracy in which elected authorities work without any form of restrictions

and in which the institutions of the people are not related to the control of the civic state.

Political economy of crisis and institutional breakdown

Developmentally, the political economy literature attributes the failure of democracy to unsustainable economic models, poor institutional performance as well as the presence of public finance that burgeons into a crisis (North et al., 2009; Fukuyama, 2011). The recent financial meltdown in 2019 witnessed by Lebanon, a country that had been built following decades of debt-driven policies, mismanagement of currency, and neglect in fiscal policies, is a textbook example of institutional breakdown under limited-access order (World Bank, 2021; IMF, 2023). Di John (2010) and Khan (2005) among other scholars point out that economic dysfunction is a major mode of authoritarian rule in fragile states where elites accumulate their resources and prevent institutional change. It is observed in Lebanon, making up a post-crisis situation: the banking system has failed to operate, governmental revenues decreased by a quarter (Souleiman, 2024), and more than 80 percent of the population is now in the state of poverty (UNDP, 2024). Economic decay has led to the mass actions, youth exodus, and the illegitimation of the political establishment, which are indicators that severely limit democratic revival opportunities.

External influences and proxy dynamics: Hezbollah and Iran's strategic alignment

A robust strand of the literature examines Hezbollah as both a political actor inside Lebanon and as an armed non-state actor integrated into Iran's regional posture. Many scholars frame the relationship as a strategic alignment: Hezbollah serves as an Iranian partner extending Tehran's deterrence and influence in the Levant, while retaining local political stakes in Lebanon's institutions. However, newer scholarship complicates a simple "proxy" label, emphasizing shared identities, historical ties, and local political calculations that give Hezbollah operational autonomy even as it coordinates with Tehran on strategic priorities (Wahab, 2019)

The balancing role of Arab states, Western donors, and international institutions

External actors Gulf states, France, the EU, the United States, multilateral institutions, and international financial institutions have repeatedly attempted to shape Lebanon's politics through aid, diplomatic pressure, and conditionality. The literature shows their interventions

have mixed effects: donor conditionality can push reform agendas but also strengthen technocratic and short-term fixes; Gulf States and regional patrons pursue selective engagement shaped by strategic competition with Iran; and international financial institutions' interactions with Lebanon have long-term implications for debt, austerity, and the social contract (International Political Science Abstracts 2025). Scholars highlight how external actors sometimes shore up the status quo (by propping elites or offering bailouts with limited structural reform) and at other times add leverage for change (when conditionality is credible).

Social fragmentation, civil society, and state weakness

Scholars argue that sectarian segmentation undermines a unified national public sphere and erodes horizontal legitimacy: citizens view the state as an arena for sectarian distribution rather than impartial governance. Social fragmentation reduces trust across groups, making cross-cutting coalitions and programmatic party formation difficult; it also feeds competing narratives of victimhood and entitlement that elites exploit. As a result, legitimacy deficits are deep and chronic, amplifying the state's weakness during economic and security shocks. This is in line with the analysis of Askovén (2023) on the inequality roots of weak partisan attachment: Evidence from Denmark.

The 2019 mass protests (the *Thawra*) are widely treated in the literature as a turning point: they were notable for immediately transcending sectarian slogans and for mobilizing a largely issue-based, cross-sectarian public around corruption, economic collapse, and state failure (El Kak and Atallah, 2022). Research on the *Thawra* finds important but mixed effects: while it demonstrated latent cross-community solidarity and generated new civil society networks, it struggled to convert mobilization into durable institutional change because entrenched elites (and external actors) reinforced the old bargains; sectarian political brokers also managed to co-opt, suppress, or fragment parts of the movement. Media and framing studies show that domestic and sectarian media, as well as violence/attack incidents against protest sites, affected the movement's cohesion and outcomes.

Gaps in the literature and justification for study

Although consociationalism literature has often discoursed Lebanon (Lijphart, 2004; Horowitz, 2000), little or no empirical evidence has been incorporated with respect to how consociational design, elite rule, and an economic breakdown came to play in long-term processes of democratic setbacks. In the majority of analyses, the dimensions are considered separately. The

present research fills this gap by providing a multisided interpretation, which draws a line between identity-driven institutional design and the economic and political malfunction. Furthermore, empirical research remains scarce which follows the process of post-2019 destabilization in Lebanon as a part of the authoritarian reversals process in the region, with other examples of fragile democracies in the global south being in a similar situation. Synthesizing theory with data on a country, this report presents a regionalized as well as systemic explanation of the democratic backslide in Lebanon, with the view of both indigenous forces and comparing players

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, theory-informed analytical design to examine the mechanisms underpinning Lebanon's democratic backsliding between 2019 and 2025. Rather than a merely descriptive account, it adopts a conceptual triangulation approach, integrating evidence from institutional analysis, elite political behavior, and external power dynamics to test the central hypothesis that Lebanon's hybrid stability is maintained through the interplay of sectarian clientelism, elite capture, and regional patronage. Data are drawn from over seventy scholarly and policy sources including reports from Transparency International, IMF, UNDP, Arab Barometer, and domestic political accounts supplemented by interpretive synthesis of secondary datasets on governance, participation, and corruption. The research applies deductive logic anchored in hybrid regime theory, consociationalism, and political economy perspectives to interpret patterns of institutional degradation, economic decline, and civic disengagement as interconnected outcomes rather than discrete variables. Analytical rigor is ensured through qualitative triangulation, allowing for cross-validation of evidence across institutional, socioeconomic, and geopolitical dimensions (Creswell, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Yin, 2018). The methodological focus, therefore, is not on enumeration but on causal interpretation clarifying how internal and external forces co-produce Lebanon's enduring hybrid regime and inhibit democratic deepening.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hybrid stability and the logic of managed stagnation

Empirical evidence from governance indicators and qualitative assessments (Transparency International, 2023; Arab Barometer, 2022) reveal that despite systemic failures economic collapse, fiscal insolvency, and repeated political deadlock Lebanon's regime has avoided total breakdown. This paradox aligns with the central hypothesis: the country's hybrid order persists not through institutional strength, but through a self-reinforcing equilibrium between sectarian patronage and external mediation. Elite factions, bound by mutual dependence and the distribution of state rents, maintain a fragile balance that prevents both democratic transformation and full authoritarian consolidation. Political paralysis thus becomes a survival strategy preserving elite interests under the veneer of democratic

continuity.

The enduring power of sectarian clientelism

Findings from electoral trends (2018–2022) and political party financing reveal that sectarian affiliation continues to outweigh ideological alignment in voter behavior (Makdisi, 2021; Salloukh, 2022). This demonstrates the persistence of clientelist loyalty networks that bind citizens to sectarian patrons through welfare, employment, and symbolic protection. The phenomenon reinforces Lijphart's (1977) argument on elite cooperation but diverges from its democratic intent: rather than promoting inter-communal stability, Lebanon's consociationalism entrenches dependency and prevents cross-sectarian accountability. The endurance of these networks validates the first causal strand of the hypothesis that internal sectarianism functions as a stabilizing mechanism masking democratic stagnation.

Elite capture and institutional paralysis

Data from IMF (2023) and domestic fiscal reports show that elite capture of financial institutions directly contributed to the 2019–2020 economic implosion. Yet, no substantial political realignment followed. Instead, the same political elites restructured patronage through control of reconstruction funds, banking reforms, and donor mediation. This pattern illustrates a second causal mechanism: institutional decay sustains elite survival. Political elites exploit the weakness of state institutions as leverage in negotiation with international donors, thereby converting crisis into political capital. Such adaptive clientelism sustains a *delegative democracy* (O'Donnell, 1994), confirming the hybrid regime thesis that formal elections coexist with informal elite governance.

External mediation and the regional reinforcement cycle

Regional and international actors play a decisive role in maintaining Lebanon's equilibrium. Iran's support for Hezbollah ensures military deterrence and political leverage within the domestic system; Gulf states intermittently finance reconstruction and political campaigns; France and international institutions sustain diplomatic legitimacy through conditional aid (Blanford, 2020; Diwan, 2023. Nicolas, 2021). Rather than resolving crisis, these interventions perpetuate it: Each external actor sustains its local allies to prevent systemic collapse that could threaten regional interests. This dynamic supports the third element of the analytical model external reinforcement where instability itself becomes an asset that attracts continual engagement. The result is what can be termed *geopolitical clientelism*: domestic

elites sustain instability to secure foreign backing.

The 2019 uprising and the limits of civic mobilization

The October 2019 protests briefly disrupted sectarian alignments, signaling potential for civic reawakening. Protestors unified under the slogan “All of them means all of them,” rejecting sectarian leaders across the board. However, within months, the movement fragmented along confessional lines, and elite networks reabsorbed discontent through selective concessions. The failure of this civic moment illustrates how deeply entrenched sectarian patronage structures co-opt reformist pressures. It refines the hypothesis by showing that civic mobilization without institutional restructuring cannot dismantle hybrid equilibrium. The uprising’s suppression reinforced elite dominance while creating an illusion of participatory pluralism.

Economic crisis as a mechanism of political continuity

While the financial collapse decimated living standards and eroded trust in governance, it paradoxically consolidated the regime’s hybrid resilience. The collapse weakened public institutions, increasing citizen reliance on sectarian and religious organizations for welfare, food, and employment. This dynamic mirrors Acemoglu and Robinson (2013)’s “extractive institutions” logic where economic dependency reinforces political subjugation. Lebanon’s elites thus exploit economic decay to deepen clientelism, maintaining control even amid societal suffering. The economy’s dysfunction becomes part of the stability mechanism: crisis redistributes dependency rather than authority.

External shocks and the elasticity of the hybrid system

Events such as the Beirut Port explosion (2020) and the Syrian refugee influx tested Lebanon’s political elasticity. Yet, neither event produced systemic reform. Instead, the hybrid regime adjusted through external relief and domestic bargaining. Donor fatigue and humanitarian interventions became substitutes for governance, sustaining the illusion of statehood (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This supports the argument that Lebanon’s hybridism is *adaptive rather than fragile* its resilience stems from the capacity of elites to redirect external flows toward self-preservation.

The external shocks therefore validate the triadic model of hybrid stability: crisis generates foreign aid; aid reinforces elite capture; elite capture reproduces sectarian dependency.

Hybrid peace: Stability without reform

Lebanon’s decades-long avoidance of large-scale conflict is frequently cited as a sign of resilience, yet it represents what this study terms *hybrid peace*: stability built on transactional coexistence rather than social cohesion. The armed coexistence of factions, informal power-sharing, and external deterrence (particularly via Hezbollah’s military capacity) sustain negative peace a state of “non-collapse” without reform. This finding extends hybrid regime theory by demonstrating that peace and stagnation can coexist as mutually reinforcing outcomes. Lebanon’s “managed stagnation” thus becomes a model of how hybrid regimes endure under permanent crisis.

Synthesis: Testing the hypothesis

The results confirm the paper’s analytical hypothesis: Lebanon’s enduring hybrid stability arises from the triadic interaction between sectarian clientelism, elite capture, and external mediation. Each mechanism compensates for the weakness of the others, creating a dynamic equilibrium that prevents both democratic deepening and systemic breakdown.

1. Sectarian clientelism sustains local legitimacy.
2. Elite capture converts institutional failure into political leverage.
3. External mediation provides continuous resources that reinforce domestic hierarchies.

Together, these mechanisms generate a *self-reinforcing loop of managed stagnation*, explaining why Lebanon’s hybrid regime remains durable despite persistent crises. This analysis thus contributes to hybrid regime literature by identifying *external reinforcement* as a distinct causal dimension missing in most existing models of democratic backsliding.

Conclusion

This study set out to interrogate a central question: *Why has Lebanon’s hybrid regime remained politically stable despite recurrent crises, institutional paralysis, and social discontent?* The analysis proposed that Lebanon’s enduring hybrid stability is not evidence of democratic resilience but rather the outcome of a deliberate equilibrium between sectarian clientelism, elite capture, and external power mediation. Findings from institutional analysis, governance data, and interpretive synthesis strongly support this hypothesis. The results demonstrate that Lebanon’s political system survives by continuously reproducing its dysfunctions. Sectarian clientelism ensures citizen dependence on confessional leaders; elite capture transforms crisis into a mechanism for political reproduction; and external mediation provides

the diplomatic and financial lifelines that prevent systemic collapse. These three forces coalesce into what this study terms “managed stagnation” a political condition where neither reform nor collapse is allowed to materialize. Theoretically, this analysis refines hybrid regime theory by introducing external reinforcement as a causal variable in sustaining hybrid equilibrium. Unlike most hybrid regimes that decay from within, Lebanon’s durability depends on a recursive relationship between internal weakness and external engagement. It also extends the critique of consociationalism by showing how institutional design, once intended for pluralistic stability, evolves into an instrument of elite conservation. Empirically, the findings reveal that Lebanon’s democratic backsliding is not linear but cyclical. Each crisis financial collapse, civil unrest, or regional intervention reinforces the hybrid order rather than dismantles it. The study thus answers its central research question: Lebanon’s political order persists because instability itself has become the foundation of governance. In essence, Lebanon’s hybrid peace is one of survival, not progress. Its apparent stability conceals a deeper pathology where crisis management replaces institution-building, and external mediation substitutes for domestic consensus. Until the symbiotic relationship among sectarianism, elite capture, and external patronage is disrupted, Lebanon will remain in a perpetual state of suspended reform. The study concludes that Lebanon’s democratic future hinges on confronting not accommodating the structural equilibrium that has sustained its hybrid regime for over three decades. Reform cannot succeed without breaking the circular dependency between domestic elites and foreign patrons. The transformation of Lebanon’s political order requires both internal renewal and external recalibration: citizens must reclaim governance as a civic right, and international actors must shift from preserving stability to fostering accountability. In doing so, Lebanon’s experience offers a broader lesson for comparative politics: hybrid regimes may endure not despite crisis, but because of it and breaking that cycle demands political imagination as much as institutional reform.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To transform Lebanon’s managed stagnation into sustainable democratic governance, reform efforts must target the mechanisms that reproduce the hybrid equilibrium rather than its symptoms. Recommendations are thus organized around the causal pillars identified in this study.

A. Reducing sectarian clientelism and revitalizing citizenship

1) Electoral and administrative reforms

Introduce a unified civil electoral law designed to weaken

confessional quotas in both parliamentary and municipal elections. This would gradually replace identity-based representation with issue-based political competition, encouraging programmatic rather than sectarian politics.

2) Civic education and cross-sectarian engagement

Strengthen civic education curricula and expand community-based dialogue programs to promote a shared national identity beyond sectarian affiliation. Such initiatives can be coordinated through the UNDP and civil society coalitions that have previously facilitated interfaith and cross-community initiatives.

3) Transparent service delivery mechanisms

Decentralize public service delivery under technocratic oversight to reduce citizens’ dependence on sectarian intermediaries for access to welfare and basic services. The ultimate goal is to shift the citizen-state relationship from one based on patronage to one grounded in rights and entitlements.

B. Dismantling Elite Capture and Institutionalizing Accountability

1) Independent oversight bodies

Strengthen existing anti-corruption and financial regulatory institutions by providing constitutional guarantees of independence and establishing partnerships for international monitoring. Donor aid should be made conditional upon tangible progress in institutional reform and accountability.

2) Public finance reform

Redirect donor assistance away from elite-controlled ministries toward transparent, sector-based budget support mechanisms. This would disrupt elite rent-seeking behavior and channel resources into inclusive recovery and development program

3) Judicial autonomy and meritocracy

Reform judicial appointments and civil service recruitment through transparent, merit-based procedures monitored by mixed domestic–international panels. Such reforms would curtail elite patronage and enhance professionalism within state institutions.

C. Reframing external engagement for structural reform

1) Conditional diplomatic support

Regional and international actors should align diplomatic

and financial support with clear governance and accountability benchmarks rather than political alliances. Aid conditionality should promote institutional capacity-building rather than reinforce elite entrenchment.

2) Inclusive regional mediation framework

Replace ad hoc foreign interventions with a structured multilateral stabilization mechanism under the auspices of the Arab League or the United Nations that prioritizes economic restructuring and national reconciliation over sectarian or factional balancing.

3) Reducing humanitarian dependency

Gradually transition from relief-based aid to development-oriented programs focused on energy, infrastructure, and education. This shift would help reduce external leverage over domestic politics while promoting long-term economic sovereignty.

D. Strengthening civic resilience and political innovation

1) Support for independent media and civil society

Promote and protect investigative journalism, local watchdog organizations, and advocacy networks that monitor elite behavior, expose corruption, and ensure citizen access to reliable information.

2) Institutionalizing youth and diaspora participation

Empower Lebanon's youth and diaspora as agents of reform by integrating them into institutional consultative platforms for policy innovation, monitoring, and public sector oversight.

3) Digital governance and transparency

Adopt digital governance tools such as open budget portals, e-procurement systems, and citizen reporting platforms to enhance transparency and limit the opacity that sustains clientelist exchange.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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