

The events that followed the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, on February 14, 2005, were unprecedented in Lebanese history. The Lebanese came to the streets in historical numbers with many, particularly the youth, demanding a break from the communal politics of the past, precisely those politics that lay at the heart of the 1975 civil war. The “Cedar Revolution”, to which the outpouring of political protest refers, ultimately brought about the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Most importantly, the Revolution triggered the rise of a new type of claims-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) -- those that share the goal of changing the communal or sectarian nature of the political system. These NGOs ignited new hope of building bridges across sectarian lines to build a more peaceful future. Indeed, the Revolution had all the makings of a critical juncture – an historical time period during which societal actors can extract themselves from the weight of social structures and break away from path dependency. Yet despite the rise of numerous “alternative” NGOs – the self-designated label of many NGOs seeking to change the sectarian political system (see below), a public that seemed ready for political change (Baladi et al, 2007), renewed donor interest in the democratization of Lebanon since 2005, and an influx of donor money to Lebanon following the 2006 war between Hizbullah and Israel, little has come of this historical juncture. Indeed, many alternative NGOs are now largely inactive. This paper questions why. Why were NGOs seeking to change the sectarian nature of the Lebanese political system unable to take advantage of this critical juncture? How can the experiences of these NGOs further inform us about ‘negative cases’, when change does not occur and there is a re-equilibrium of the status-quo? What can this case-study tell us about the role of power asymmetries during critical junctures?

Building on fieldwork conducted with NGO- and international donor representatives in Lebanon between 2007 and 2010, this is a case study of how a critical juncture became a missed

opportunity. We argue that the failure of alternative NGOs to affect change largely is due to two inter-related factors. First, sectarian political leaders viewed the Revolution as an opportunity to re-write the rules of the game by seizing power from their opponents. They thus chose to reproduce and reinforce the pre-critical juncture status quo. Consequently, the structural constraints within which “alternative NGOs” operate were maintained and even strengthened. Second, despite stated goals to the contrary, international donors did little to reduce the power asymmetry between “alternative NGOs” and sectarian leaders. Indeed, donors reinforced the sectarian power structures and centrally contributed to the passing of Lebanon’s critical juncture without any effective change. Thus, alternative NGOs were unable to break free from the logic of the sectarian system and the feedback mechanisms that sustain it. While struggling for an autonomous space from which they could affect change, alternative NGOs continued to reflect Lebanon’s communal divisions and, at times, support its sectarian structures.

Situated within the path-dependency literature, our analysis defines critical junctures as “... windows of opportunity within which fundamental restructuring (large-scale change) with enduring consequences is possible, though it does not necessarily happen” (Soifer, 2010, p.8) As Capoccia and Kelemen point out, “despite the theoretical and practical importance of critical junctures as the genetic moments for institutional equilibria, analyses of path dependence often devote little attention to them, focusing instead on the ‘reproductive’ phase launched after a path-dependent process is initiated” (2007, p.342) Few “microhistorical’ studies, such as analyses of the windows of opportunity that open briefly during post-war scenarios, have engaged the concept of critical junctures in a rigorous conceptual or methodological manner (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007, p.342). Macrohistorical studies tend to attribute large-scale change to “structural, antecedent conditions rather than from actions and decisions that occur during the

critical juncture itself” (Capoccia and Keleman, 2007, p.342). Yet, critical junctures are characterized by a situation in which the structural influences are significantly relaxed for a relatively short period of time and, as a result, the range of plausible choices open to political actors expands substantially. Contingency and choice both are integral to critical junctures. Therefore, “wide-ranging change is possible and even likely but [...] re-equilibration is not excluded. If an institution enters a critical juncture in which several options are possible, the outcome may involve the restoration of the pre-critical juncture status quo” (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007, p.352). This means that we need to take negative cases, generally ignored by the literature on critical junctures,¹ seriously as they can offer important insights into the conditions under which institutional change occurs. We also need to look more closely at power struggles, the actors who engage in them, including non-state actors, and the power asymmetries between them. As Capoccia and Kelemen note, missing from our studies of critical junctures is a deeper understanding of a key dimension of politics: power (2007, pp.353-354).

By examining the case of alternative NGOs in Lebanon, this article addresses three identified shortcomings in the literature. The first is the neglect of negative cases. The second is the general lack of literature on non-state actors, other than social classes. The third is the lack of attention to power asymmetries. The case study of Lebanon highlights the role international donors played in contributing to the power asymmetries confronting alternative NGOs and the pivotal role they played in restoring the pre-critical juncture status quo.

Alternative NGOs are a very small subset of the Lebanese NGO field. There are approximately two dozen of such NGOs; the majority are (or originally were) youth organizations with members usually under the age of 40 (Badine, 2008). Lebanon’s alternative NGOs provide a hard case for theories of agency. The literature on ethnic conflict and

¹ Capoccia (2001, 2007, 2010) is a notable exception.

peacebuilding does not expect civil society organizations (CSOs) which represent rather than overcome the lines of fracture in a society to act as agents for peace (Belloni, 2001; Jamal, 2009; Varshney, 2001). While many good studies document the limits of civil society as an instrument of change, the majority lump various CSOs, and particularly NGOs, together (Karam, 2006; Llamazares and Levy, 2003; Fagan, 2005; Evans-Kent and Bleiker, 2003). If communal society does not provide an appropriate locus for political change (Carrothers and Ottaway, 2000; Anderson, 2006; Finkel et al., 2007), it is methodologically important to isolate and examine those NGOs that seek to challenge the lines of fracture in their society. Lebanon's alternative NGOs, by explicitly seeking to challenge the sectarian nature of the political system, offer precisely such a hard case. While this single case-study may not provide sufficient basis for generalization, given the massive popular support to the Cedar Revolution, the popular mobilization during the summer 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, and the renewed donor interest in stabilizing peace in Lebanon, it serves as a useful probe of the conditions under which a critical juncture fails in transforming change into a durable political legacy.

Path Dependency and Critical Junctures

The notion of critical junctures is rooted in the literature on historical institutionalism and the path-dependency literature in particular. A long tradition of research notes the significance of critical historical junctures at which societal actors can extract themselves from the weight of social structures and break away from path dependency (Collier and Collier, 1991; Mahoney, 1999; Thelen, 1999). The notion of critical junctures has been used, most prominently, by analysts of regime change, specifically transitions to democracy (Collier and Collier, 1991, p.29; Thelen, 1999). As stated above, one of the most important defining characteristics of a critical

junction is the expansion of choices for powerful political actors. As Mahoney states, if there is no choice between alternatives, there is no critical juncture (2001, p.113). The peacebuilding literature implicitly identifies transitions from war to peace as precisely such junctures as they are marked both by local efforts to write anew the rules of the game and by intensive foreign intervention that, at least in terms of discourse, seeks to translate the window of opportunity into an effective break from past divisions and violence. In the transition from war to peace, windows of opportunity include such key moments as the signing of peace agreements or the holding of the first post-conflict elections; momentous political events such as the death of a prominent personality can also create similar windows of opportunity. During these periods of institutional fluidity, “[g]roups and individuals are not merely spectators as conditions change to favor or penalize them in the political balance of power, but rather strategic actors capable of acting on ‘openings’ provided by such shifting contextual conditions in order to enhance their own position.” (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992, p.17), As such, power struggles, and the power asymmetries between those actors engaged in these struggles, are crucial to understanding the success or failure of critical junctures.

As its name implies, historical institutionalism emphasizes historical processes in its understanding of institutional continuity and change. It views institutions as the product of concrete temporal processes. Institutions emerge from and are sustained by features of the broader political and social context (Thelen, 1999). In its broadest understanding, path dependency, one of the most important theoretical underpinnings of historical institutionalism (see Weir, Orloff and Skocpol, 1988; Skocpol, 1992), refers to “the causal relevance of preceding stages in a temporal sequence” (Pierson, 2000, p.252). Increasingly defined in a narrower sense, evoking the metaphor of a tree as opposed to a path, path dependency suggests

that once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. Paraphrasing Margaret Levi, there will be other choice points, but the entrenchment of certain institutional arrangements obstructs an easy reversal of the initial choice. “From the same tree trunk, there are many different branches and smaller branches. Although it is possible to turn around or to clamber from one to the other --and essential if the chosen branch dies- the branch on which a climber begins is the one she tends to follow” (1997, p.28).

The entrenchment of institutional arrangements has been the subject of much research. The public policy literature points to two broad types of feedback mechanisms that sustain institutional structures: incentive structure or coordination effects; and the distributional effects of institutions (Thelen, 1999, pp.392-396). The former refers to the fact that, once a set of institutions is in place, actors adapt their strategies in ways that reflect but also reinforce the logic of the system. The latter proposes that institutions are not neutral coordinating mechanisms but in fact “reflect, and also reproduce and magnify, particular patterns of power distribution in politics” (Thelen, 1999, p.394). This body of work emphasizes that “political arrangements and policy feedbacks actively facilitate the organization and empowerment of certain groups while actively disarticulating and marginalizing others” (Thelen, 1999, p.394).

Evoking Levi’s metaphor, critical junctures occur when the chosen branch weakens or dies. A critical juncture thus is defined by both structure and agency. While structural changes may cause the branch to weaken or die, actors’ choices determine whether or not to stay on the branch or clamber to a new one. More specifically, the decision as to whether and which branch to take is the result of a power struggle between powerful actors. As Thelen and Steinmo observe, “changes in the meaning and functioning of institutions (associated with broader socioeconomic and political shifts) set in motion political struggles within but also over those

institutions that in fact drive their development forward” (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992, p.17). A deeper understanding of microhistorical events, such as Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution, requires a full examination of the power asymmetries that underlie these power struggles. Yet as Capoccia and Kelemen point out, one of the shortcomings of the literature on critical junctures is its general neglect of the power asymmetries between actors whose choices ultimately determine new institutional branches (2007, pp.347-348). Understanding these power asymmetries – and what actions can potentially alter them - is particularly important when one of the actors is a non-state actor. In explicitly comparative terms, scholars have shown how political struggles among classes located in broader historical and institutional contexts influenced these struggles and their outcomes. This scholarship takes into account the role conflict among social classes plays in political processes. However, the analysis does not extend to non-state actors.² The question of the conditions under which non-state actors can rectify the power asymmetry between them and state actors has generally not been addressed.

Path Dependency and Critical Junctures in Lebanon

How does path dependency work in Lebanon and how did the ‘Cedar Revolution’ constitute a critical juncture? To answer this question we discuss the politics of sectarianism in Lebanon.

Until the mid-1800s, the Mount Lebanon Imarah was a semi-autonomous Ottoman principality where the social order was organized around social rank and feudal ties, although the ruling class was primarily Druze and the peasants were mostly Maronite (Makdisi, 2000). Religion entered

² The peacebuilding literature pits scholars who see civil society as an agent of change against those who view CSOs as products, if not extensions of, existing socio-economic and political structures (Belloni, 2001; Krznaric, 1999; Jamal, 2005; Sardamov, 2005; Paffenholz, 2010). Little if any attention is given to the role of power struggles and power asymmetries in defining the realm of possibility for non-state actors.

into politics in 1820 when a peasant tax revolt received support from the powerful Maronite Church (Harik, 1991) and came to a head in 1858 when Maronite peasants openly rebelled against their lords. After two years of communal violence, major powers³ seeking to protect their strategic interests in the region negotiated the Règlement Organique of 1861 which organized political life around the principle of power-sharing among sects (Hourani, 1966, p.22).

Following World War I and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the French were given a mandate over Greater Lebanon. The Lebanese Representative Council that they established to assist the French High Commissioner similarly was based on “confessional representation in proportion to the size of each community” (Zamir, 1985, p.142). The council’s design reinforced sectarianism and increased the power of sectarian leaders (Zahar, 2006, p.225). When in 1926 the French established the Republic of Lebanon, the 1926 Constitution - particularly Article 95 which guaranteed sectarian representation - enshrined confessional politics and further strengthened the hold of notable families. According to Meir Zamir (2000, p.31),

... members of this dominant class ... used sectarianism more as a tool to exact privileges for themselves, their relatives and their clients than to protect the interests of the communities to which they belonged. . . . Only politicians predisposed to these methods were able to succeed in the Lebanese political arena. Those who genuinely strove to transform Lebanon into a democratic, pluralistic and equitable society either had no influence or were forced out of the system altogether.

It would thus come as no surprise that, on the eve of independence, representatives of the largest Christian and Muslim communities (Maronites and Sunnis) hammered out a compromise based on sectarian power sharing to reconcile their interests and present the French with a united Lebanese front to demand an end to the mandate. The National Pact (*al-Mithaq al-Watani*) of

³ Ottoman Empire, France, Great Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia.

1943, an unwritten pact intended to supplement the formal constitution, notably enshrined the principles of segmental proportionality – proportional sectarian representation in government, and segmental autonomy– guaranteeing communal autonomy in the conduct of religious, educational and cultural affairs.

Post-independence, elites strengthened their control over the state by posing as guardians of their communities' rights. They established political parties that, for all intents and purposes, formalized the clientelistic links between themselves and their communal bases of support. Although Parliament was designed as an instrument of national integration and while the electoral law required candidates to build support across communities, traditional leaders used intimidation and patronage to secure the election of their lists (Salibi, 1988, p.189). “The legislature turned into a private club as leaders promoted their protégés” with elites almost securing a monopoly of representation (Zahar, 2006, p. 229). Recurrent crises, including two civil wars in 1958 and 1975-1990, failed to alter the basics of Lebanon's sectarian power sharing thus attesting to the stickiness of its institutions (Zahar, 2006).

In this context, the Cedar Revolution of 2005 appeared as a qualitatively different critical juncture. In spite of the Ta'if Agreement which brought the 1975-1990 civil war to an end, little had changed in the politics of Lebanon. Ta'if maintained the broad outlines of power sharing but it recalibrated the powers of the various communities. As was the case in 1926 and 1943, the agreement “emphasized confessional compromise and intercommunal cooperation as temporary measures to facilitate transition to an integrated, nonconfessional democracy” (Zahar, 2006, p.233). As was also the case in earlier instances, confessionalism deepened in practice as sectarian leaders at the top formed a ‘troika’ whose members used customary practice to challenge the spirit of the Ta'if Agreement and of the 1991 Constitution in an attempt to push the

interests of their respective communities (Krayem, 1997; Mansur, 1993). Post-war stability owed much to Syria's sponsorship of the Ta'if Agreement. However, Syria's protectorate affected the dynamics of the Lebanese political games, strengthening the hand of allies and weakening adversaries, particularly among Christians, as well as skewing implementation of the agreement to fit the priorities and strategic interests of Damascus (Zahar, 2002). Thus, when in 2005, a million Lebanese descended onto Martyrs' square in downtown Beirut to protest the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, demand (and obtain) Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, and publicly criticize the sectarian political system, this was a potential turning point. The first cross-confessional mass mobilization of Lebanese citizens ever held the prospect of weakening the hold of sectarian politics.

The Rise of 'Alternative NGOs'

Lebanese civil society historically has witnessed a steady progression from identity-based associations to more interest-based CSOs spanning cultural, social, economic and professional realms. Communal society, also known as *al-mujtama` al-ahli*, is composed of all familial, tribal, clannish, confessional or religiously-based organizations. Its continued relevance and vibrancy is partially the result of the Lebanese confessional system, particularly of the National Pact guarantees concerning segmental autonomy (Baladi et al., 2007). Encapsulated in the Personal Status Regime (*nizham al-ahwal al-shakhsiyya*), this social confessionalism gives religious tribunals legislative, executive, and judiciary authority over the personal status of their respective co-religionists. Identity-based associations extend the path-dependent impact of sectarianism deep into the social realm.

Civil society, also known as *al mujtama' al-madani*, refers in Lebanon to the sum of those voluntary-based associations to which citizens adhere freely. Before the war, civil society was mostly interest-based and multi-confessional. With the outbreak of war, many associations were rendered inoperative (Baroudi, 2001, p.86). Identity-based associations naturally stepped in providing an array of social services to citizens (Kingston, 2000, p.2). While the conflict did not spell the end of civil society, old interest-based associations now have to contend with these new competitors. For example, the powerful Beirut Traders Association has lost its monopoly over the representation of Beirut merchants as Christian traders formed the Rassemblement des commerçants libanais (RDCL) in 1989 with their Sunni counterparts establishing *al-Nadwah al-Iqtisadiyya* (Baroudi, 2001, p.78).

Analyses suggest that, in spite of plethora new interest-based organizations in the post-war era, many NGOs lack professionalism, secure financing and a strong membership base. Consequently, they have been vulnerable to control by political forces through patronage and clientelistic practices. This was further deepened by the limited space that the authoritarian practices of the *Pax Syriana* (peace implementation by Syria and its local Lebanese allies) have carved since 1991.

With Lebanon's "Cedar Revolution", numerous new NGOs sprang up in response to the changing political field. Multiple NGOs, such as *Aman05*,⁴ demanded not only Syrian withdrawal, the resignation of the Lebanese government, and the trial of the four generals accused of assassinating former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri but free and fair elections in Lebanon. Lebanon experienced a similar revitalization of the NGO sector during and in

⁴ *Aman05* spontaneously formed during the demonstrations. It presently campaigns against extreme sectarianism.

response the Israel-Hizballah war of 2006. Groups, such as *Samidoon*,⁵ spontaneously formed to address the needs of southern (Shi'a) refugees fleeing to Beirut. These alternative NGOs joined some of the post-war interest-based NGOs and the leftist secular NGOs established in the 1970s that shared the objective of challenging sectarian politics and that were reinvigorated with the 2005 Syrian withdrawal.⁶

Alternative NGOs argue quite vigorously that they are promoting a vision of a sectarian-free Lebanon and their activities largely support this. In this regard they must be considered as an important break from other interest-based NGOs both past and present. Alternative NGOs seek to change the sectarian system itself and not simply a particular policy, such as environmental or health policy.

Alternative NGOs are overwhelmingly concentrated in Beirut and while their larger events tend also to be in Beirut, their activities are commonly held throughout the country.⁷ While their numbers are relatively small, their memberships can be quite large ranging from those with 10 active members to those with 1,000 members. Most rely exclusively on a volunteer base with some organizations accessing as many as 800 volunteers for specific events but a minority are sufficiently institutionalized to pay full-time employees and/or hire consultants.

Most alternative NGOs focus on activities dealing with awareness-raising and cross-sectarian dialogue and may offer activities ranging from discussion groups or “democratic spaces” where youth can come and discuss politically sensitive issues and “practice democracy”,

⁵ Samidoon, a relief network of individuals and NGOs, mobilized and distributed aid to Shi'a refugees. Samidoon brought, sometimes for the first time, Christians in relatively deep contact with Shi'a and specifically Hizballah members. See Raymond (2007).

⁶ For an authoritative study of Lebanese NGOs, see Karam (2006).

youth events whereby youth from different sects are brought together for sports or other joint activities, dialogue summer camps, to larger political grassroots campaigns and sit-ins. The majority of these activities seeks to break down the barriers between sects and encourage people to work together. Some groups/NGOs offer workshops (often in villages where massacres occurred during the civil war) on negotiating skills and still others focus on activities aimed towards fostering a new understanding or conception of citizenship based on rights and duties. A limited number concentrate on lobbying and/or on monitoring MPs. While alternative NGOs generally conduct their activities independently from one another, they regularly engage in joint events or campaigns. In 2007, for example, ten or more alternative NGOs mounted the *Ou3a* (Watch Out! Be careful!) campaign in which participants left white handprints on a black wall as an expression of civil peace and against political irresponsibility and violence. Similar events can attract anywhere from 30 to 2,000 supporters.⁸

To be sure, the label of alternative NGO and the joint events mask important differences between NGOs in terms of the extent to which they are demanding systemic change and the type of change they seek. Alternative NGOs can be roughly divided into three different categories.⁹ The first category comprises NGOs of leftist political origins whose primary goal is to promote a secular political system. These differ quite substantially from NGOs that do not support a secular political system and do not, in fact, seek to challenge the sectarian structure per se. Alternative NGOs in this second category oppose and warn against the pitfalls of extreme sectarianism (including the leaders who manipulate and fan the flames of sectarianism) to avoid future violence. Finally, a third category of NGOs includes those NGOs working towards a more democratic political system in general. The most famous of these groups would be the

⁸ The Samidoon network estimates that it was able to attract over 10,000 volunteers in Beirut through all of its NGO-members.

⁹ These categories are presented in no particular order.

Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) which focuses on electoral reform and human rights.¹⁰

That a NGO community is divided in its goals and vision is not unusual. The differences between NGOs and their conceptualization of political change do not negate the real break alternative NGOs represent from previous interest-based NGOs. Communal politics in Lebanon mold and shape community members' identities and loyalties creating a highly fragmented society with few to no horizontal ties bonding individuals together across communal boundaries. Through their activities, alternative NGOs represent a challenge to the psychological, social and political barriers between communities and one of the few attempts to create ties across communities.

The Critical Juncture That Was Not: Sectarianism, Power Asymmetries and the Fate of Alternative NGOs

Today, as stated above, despite the initial exuberance, alternative NGOs' numbers remain small having ebbed and flowed with some NGOs dissolving and re-establishing and others simply becoming inactive. They have not succeeded in capitalizing on the huge outpouring of support following the assassination of Hariri and again during and following the war with Israel. To understand this missed opportunity, we analyze the balance of power between proponents and opponents of political sectarianism in Lebanon. We argue that the failure of alternative NGOs to bring about change is due to two interrelated factors: the power asymmetry between them and sectarian leaders and the politics of foreign donors who, wittingly or unwittingly, deepened this

¹⁰ A fourth, numerically insignificant, category includes non-leftist NGOs focusing on "politics without sectarianism" and promoting, for example, independent electoral candidates.

power asymmetry and thus sealed the fate of the alternative NGO attempting to bring about a new kind of politics in Lebanon.

Sectarianism Redux: The Politics of March 8th vs. March 14th

While the events of 2005 and 2006 offered a critical juncture or window of opportunity for political change in Lebanon, the consequent realignment of the country's political parties into two opposing broad political coalitions, March 8th and March 14th, ultimately exacerbated and intensified the country's communal and political divisions. This was not preordained. The two coalitions that emerged following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri bore the signs of change that one expects at critical junctures. For the first time in Lebanon's politics, the major political coalitions of the day were multi-confessional. March 8th, whose name refers to the demonstration on 8 March 2005 in support for Syria's role in Lebanon, initially consisted of the two main Shi'a parties, Hizballah and AMAL, the mainly Maronite Marada movement and the small secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party. March 14th, whose name refers to the demonstration on 14 March 2005 against Syria's presence in Lebanon, was initially composed of the Sunni Future Movement led by Saad Hariri, son of the assassinated former premier, the Christian members of the Qornet Chehwan Gathering,¹¹ the mostly-Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and the mostly-Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). That sectarian politics were not fatality was underlined when the FPM stunned many in February 2006 by signing a memorandum of understanding with Hizballah and shifting sides to the March 8th coalition. Likewise, the PSP would also ultimately switch sides. However, instead of ushering in a new kind of politics, the

¹¹ Including the traditional Christian Maronite political forces and parties active during the civil war, Lebanese Forces, the Kataeb Party, the National Liberal Party and the Maronite League, two other Christian political groupings, the Democratic Renewal Movement and the Independence Movement, and a number of independent Christian (but not necessarily Maronite) members.

new political fault lines exacerbated communal dynamics particularly as internal political squabbles became intertwined with broader rifts between the West, on the one hand, and Syria and Iran on the other. To illustrate, following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, March 14th politicians framed Shi'a dissatisfaction with the power-sharing formula as no more than Syrian/Iranian machinations to destabilize Lebanon. For its part, the March 8th coalition sought the resignation of then-PM Fuad Siniora in 2006 by accusing his government of collusion with Israel during the summer 2006 war in an effort to rid Lebanon of Hizballah. In this increasing intertwining of local and international politics, Lebanese political actors were active agents. Several diaspora organizations linked to Christian political parties actively lobbied the US government to highlight the danger posed by Hizballah, its ties to Iran and its 'terrorist' nature. Likewise, the Israel-Hizballah war was not initiated by Tel Aviv but it followed a daring Hizballah attack across the border on 12 July 2006. However, as members of each coalition perceived the other as attempting to exclude them from the Lebanese political landscape, they could not count on state institutions to protect them. The limited ability and willingness of the Lebanese state to play the role of arbiter was highlighted in May 2008 when the Lebanese Army refused to intervene in the armed 48-hour confrontation between supporters of the two coalitions on the streets of Beirut (Nerguizian and Cordesman, 2009, p.19). As protagonists jockeyed for dominance on the Lebanese political scene, their foreign allies did not only lend political or military support; they also directly or indirectly contributed to twisting the rules of the political game to fit the imperatives of the day. This ultimately exacerbated political confessionalism and it increased confessional expressions in society. This retribalisation of politics (Makdisi) is nowhere more evident than in the politics of Hizballah who, once labelled Lebanon's only truly national community, "are now embracing the country's confessional system, seeking to assert

their role and protect themselves against elimination by carving out a place for themselves in this system” (Zahar, 2009).¹²

The reassertion of Lebanon’s sectarian politics had an important and detrimental impact upon alternative NGOs, not the least of which was that this bipolarization of the political landscape infused the alternative NGO community, preventing alternative NGOs from working as one and thus fragmenting their transformative potential. In particular, this division expressed itself in alternative-NGO membership and politics. In spite of a lack of membership criteria, most alternative NGOs have unspoken (self-) selection rules. As a consequence, there are clear networks to which alternative NGOs do or do not “belong”.

Most alternative NGOs have no conditions upon membership, at least in theory. Those that do specify membership conditions generally state that members cannot simultaneously be a member of a political party and/or (in one case) run for political office (in some cases, these stipulations only apply to the leadership). The vast majority of alternative NGOs have members from a multiplicity of sects. Due either to their location or the political leadership to which they have reached out for political support (see below), only a small minority of alternative NGOs tend to attract one sect. However, there is a great degree of membership self-screening. Some of this has little to do with the sectarian politics of Lebanon. Non-leftists, for example, are unlikely to join leftist organizations.

The most widely prevalent self-selection rule is political and follows March 8th and March 14th lines. Despite specifying no political affiliation, some NGOs readily admit that their membership is divided between the two coalitions. In other NGOs, there is an unspoken condition that members must support March 14th as the NGO has an acknowledged or unacknowledged policy of not working with Hizbullah or with NGOs that work with or support

Hizbullah. This bias also was readily admitted by NGO leaders. Conversely, “March 8th NGOs” are those that by default work with Hizbullah and do not attract March 14th supporters. Thus, despite a degree of overlapping, alternative NGOs can have quite different membership bases which reflect the political divisions within Lebanese society. These differences also mean that while alternative NGOs work jointly on many events, clear networks exist that divide the community. Again, the most important dividing line is that between NGOs that take a pro-March 8th or pro-March 14th stance.¹³

Other challenges, such as differences over goals, strategies and tactics, common to any NGO community, further exacerbate the divisions within and between networks and, as a consequence, the ability of the alternative NGO community to work together. NGO leaders also agree that personality clashes (and egos) played an important role in terms of which NGOs cooperate with which others.¹⁴ Frustrated by the amount of time NGOs leaders spend discussing, debating and negotiating the goals and details of an event, NGOs often drop out of jointly-hosted events making them smaller and less impactful. Many NGO leaders increasingly focus on events/projects that their NGO host alone or strictly in conjunction with NGOs in their network. Ultimately, these divisions also discourage new volunteers as they question the ability of alternative NGOs to accomplish anything.¹⁵

Feedback Mechanisms and Sectarian Tactics: The Entrapment of Alternative NGOs

¹³ Interview with Aman05, Beirut, April 9 2008.

¹⁴ Interviews with Nahwa al-Muwatiniya, Beirut, April 3 2008 and May 20, 2009; Pamela Chrabieh Badine, Beirut, April 4 2008; Nahnoo, Beirut, April 5 2008; LADE, Beirut, April 7 2008 and May 23 2009; Aman05, Beirut, April 9 2008; Union of Lebanese Democratic Youth, Beirut, April 9 2008.

¹⁵ Most commonly, alternative NGOs collapse with their founders’ departure or their first change-over of power as a result of internal elections. NGO members do not always adjust well to the changes in leadership and the resultant potential change in goals, vision, purpose and strategy. Interviews with Nahwa al Muwatiniya, Beirut, May 20 2009; LADE Policy Analyst, Beirut, May 23 2009.,

In their efforts to carve out an autonomous space for themselves, alternative NGOs were further hindered (and continue to be) by the tactics employed by sectarian leaders and parties to cripple their effectiveness. Stated differently, the intensification of the power struggle between sectarian groups/parties as a result of the critical juncture meant that despite an opening for alternative NGOs and much of the Lebanese public to rise up and demand structural change, the feedback mechanisms, particularly, as discussed below, the incentive effects, sustaining sectarianism remained firmly in place.

Foremost, alternative NGOs confronted tactics aimed at blocking their entry into sectarian strongholds, such as the regions, villages or municipalities that they control. As a LADE policy analyst stated, parties resist independent NGO initiatives in regions under their control, even if the NGO is not opposed to the party's policies.¹⁶ In 2006, for example, *Samidoon* volunteers encountered resistance when attempting to deliver aid to refugees housed in schools in areas controlled by the Shi'a AMAL party.¹⁷ Other NGO leaders complained that Beirut-based NGOs trying to establish in the south after the 2006 invasion were drowned with supporters of the dominant parties who then used internal elections to take the NGOs over.

These efforts to marginalize alternative NGOs extend to university campuses. *Nahnoo*, originally a Lebanese University student club and now a NGO dedicated "... to develop society and pull it out of the sectarian ignorance ..."¹⁸ repeatedly encountered resistance from Hizbullah which dominated the student council, usually in the form of attempts to prevent or disrupt *Nahnoo* events. According to *Nahnoo*, only events that fit with the "ruling party's" standards and values escaped resistance.¹⁹ When harassment failed, political parties attempted cooptation.

¹⁶ Interview with LADE, Beirut, May 23 2009.

¹⁷ Interview with Samidoon members, Beirut, May 25 2009.

¹⁸ <http://www.nahnoo.org/aboutusen.html>

¹⁹ Research Assistant on behalf of author, Interview with Nahnoo, Beirut, March 14 2009.

At student election times, several parties sought (unsuccessfully) to “incorporate” *Nahnoo* by seeking to build electoral alliances in exchange for seats on the council.²⁰

Political parties furthermore employ tactics to isolate alternative NGOs and to starve them of funds. Political parties boycott alternative NGO events and thereby guarantee that these receive little media attention; they also use their own media to attack NGOs.²¹ In other instances, political parties made their displeasure felt by calling or emailing a NGO’s partners and/or donors.²²

However, the greatest challenges facing alternative NGOs are what the feedback literature calls the incentive effects. As alternative NGOs struggled to be free of the very web of sectarianism they sought to alter or eliminate, they found themselves caught in a paradox. If they want to have a large scale impact, they simply need the sectarian leaders they ultimately are criticizing. Those NGOs that do not maintain good relations with or court sectarian leaders find themselves ineffective and struggling to be seen or heard. Yet, by engaging sectarian leaders, they not only uphold the communal logics they seek to alter but undermine their own goals of accomplishing systemic change.

Alternative NGOs simply cannot avoid the state as they require at least the consent of state officials to conduct their activities. Lebanon’s Law of Associations is relatively liberal; it simply requires all NGOs, upon their creation, to submit an Information Letter to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) including basic data regarding the NGO and its founders and that it be signed

²⁰ Interview with Nahnoo, Beirut, April 5 2008; Research Assistant on behalf of author, Interview with Nahnoo, Beirut, March 14 2009. On the American University of Beirut campus, the university club, *Watan*, (formerly the Student Activism Club) faced similar challenges. *Watan*, which seeks to increase students’ political awareness and participation and to encourage independent candidates in student elections, faced its greatest resistance from the largest political parties on campus. Interview with *Watan*, Beirut, April 11 2008

²¹ Interview with Nahwa al-Muwatiniya, Beirut, May 20 2009.

²² Interview with LADE, Beirut, May 23 2009.

by the founding members (Moukheiber, 2009a, 2009b). An association is incorporated from the moment of the notification date stated on the Information Letter (Moukheiber, 2009a, 2009b). Furthermore, the law does not restrict the scope of a NGOs' advocacy activities; nor does it seek to limit critical stances towards the government (Abou Assi, 2006, p.74).

There is however a large gap between theory and practice (Moukheiber, 2009a, 2009b). “Political” associations –including NGOs working in the fields of human rights, corruption, or minority rights (Abou Assi, 2006, p.73) — are required to apply for a prior license from the Council of Ministers (Moukheiber 2009b). NGOs can be dissolved if MOI delegates are not present at general assemblies when NGOs vote on amendments or elect boards (Moukheiber, 2009a, 2009b; Abou Assi, 2006, p.77). Some associations also have been dissolved with no legal or factual basis (Moukheiber 2009a, 2009b). Other strategies to neutralize associations include: politicizing internal elections of NGOs; encouraging the establishment of similar NGOs; coopting NGO leaders; and imposing the membership of the government's allies in NGOs (Abou Assi, 2006, p.75).²³

As a CIVICUS study confirms, much of this discrimination is done for political purposes to protect the interests of the specific minister (and, by extension, his/her sect) involved (Abou Assi, 2006, p.73).²⁴ This form of so-called state control is repeated at every level of government, particularly in areas where one sect dominates all local institutions through elections or through family ties.

²³ For a discussion of how ministers and politicians penetrate the NGO community through the creation of their own NGOs and patron-cliental ties, see Kingston (2008).

²⁴ Kingston (2008, p.67) notes that efforts by environmental groups to create an official national environmental coalitions were blocked by the then MOI who was heavily involved in the quarry business and had connections to environmental NGOs.

Given the permeated nature of the Lebanese state to sectarian leaders, this means that alternative NGOs cannot avoid and may even need to foster relations with sectarian elites.²⁵ Without cultivating these ties, NGOs cannot impact the laws or the system; because of them, NGOs often “pull back” when they upset political leaders.²⁶ When hosting events, says a leading member of *Intizarat al-Shabab* (Expectations of Youth), the golden rule is to avoid doing anything that would upset the local party.²⁷ Echoing this comment, one of the founders of *Tayyar al-Mujtama al-Madani*, a NGO dedicated to secularism, stated that his organization purposefully avoids using the term secularism and sensitive topics when holding events in areas politically controlled by a sect.²⁸ The founder of *Beit Bil-Jnoub* (BBJ), a NGO committed to rebuilding homes in the south, partially credits his success to his personal connection to the dominant party in the area in which his NGO was working.²⁹ NGO activists argue that they have little choice but to be deferential towards state and party leaders when operating in areas dominated by one party; access and survival often depend on this deference.

To attract members, secure funds, have an impact and, sometimes, survive, NGOs need media coverage of their activities. The attendance of party leaders who also double as Lebanon’s media barons therefore is critical to this coverage. Alternative NGOs thus have tried to develop good ties with politicians. As one NGO founder succinctly stated upon discussing an April 13th – the anniversary of Lebanon’s civil war – anti-war event mounted by a coalition of NGOs, the frustration and irony was that all the politicians invited to the event, who even applauded the various NGOs initiatives, were those who started or perpetuated Lebanon’s conflict, the very

²⁵ Conversely, they may also be persuaded by resources or favors a minister may bestow upon them. Kingston’s study notes that NGO relations with the state quickly develop into ties of patronage (Kingston, forthcoming).

²⁶ Interview with Nahwa al-Muwataniya, Beirut, May 20 2009.

²⁷ Interview with Intizarat al-Shaabab, Beirut, April 9 2008.

²⁸ Interview with Tayyar al-Mujtama al-Madani, Beirut, April 8 2008

²⁹ Interview with BBJ, Beirut, April 2 2008.

people the event was indirectly warning against.³⁰ Smaller alternative NGOs bemoan the amount of work required to attract a handful of politicians while more established, often identity-based NGOs require less effort (or get regular access to talk shows).³¹

The fact that Lebanon is a small country with a tight network of personal ties compounds the general unwillingness of NGOs to confront politicians as the lines between individuals' personal and professional relations become blurred. As one NGO founder stated, the phrase "it was a personal request not to do that" is often heard in many NGOs to justify the decision not to mount a particular event or to express a criticism publicly. NGO activists complain that the lines between advising and cooptation and between professional and personal relations were especially blurred under the former MOI, Ziad Baround. They claim that NGO leaders were less willing to pressure or openly confront the minister who was the former secretary general of LADE and thus "one of us". Those who do are sometimes criticized by other alternative NGOs leaders.

Speaking most loudly to the strength of Lebanon's communal logics is the fact that some, albeit a very small number, of alternative NGOs seek to change the political system while continuing to espouse communal loyalty. Some alternative NGOs thus make an untenable distinction (albeit unconsciously) between the political system and communal affiliation and loyalty. They see no contradiction in proclaiming that they support a sectarian-free political system whilst inviting an "inspirational" religious leader to open their events. To people belonging to a different sect than the religious leader in question, including those who share the NGO's political views, the leader's presence would most likely be perceived as a religious statement and they would therefore not feel wholly welcome. Just as importantly, given the

³⁰ Interview with *Mustaqelloun*, Jounieh, April 11 2008.

³¹ Conversely, once a NGO has regular access to the media, such as a talk show, it is reluctant to jeopardize this connection.

intertwined nature of religious affiliation and political positions the invited religious leader not only symbolizes a religion but the political vision of his sect for the future of Lebanon.

From Windows of Opportunity to Missed Opportunities: Foreign Donors and Power Asymmetries in Lebanon

The preceding section documented the manner in which sectarian structures constrained and, sometimes captured, alternative NGOs. However, we also detailed the manner in which these actors of change sought to maneuver the ever narrowing space provided by the critical juncture of the “Cedar Revolution”. Ultimately, the power asymmetry between alternative NGOs and established sectarian leaders/factions was too great to overcome. No analysis of this failure is complete without an account of the role played by foreign donors. Indeed, rather than support those alternative NGOs which were seeking to challenge the sectarian system, Western donors who claimed to support democracy promotion in Lebanon have actually contributed to weakening them further. Thus, the explanation for the alternative NGOs’ failure to become effective agents of change cannot be simply limited to either the weight of structures or the unwillingness of leaders to clamber to a different branch. It must also account for conjunctural factors that contributed to narrowing the window for change and ultimately transforming a critical juncture into a missed opportunity.

In comparison with communal organizations or issue-based NGOs, theories of post-conflict peace building and democratization suggest that Lebanon’s alternative NGOs belong in a category of civil society actors that ought be identified and supported as potential levers for democratic change and sustainable peace. At such critical junctures as the signing of a peace agreement or, in the case of Lebanon, the “Cedar Revolution”, the literature expects donors to

play a key role in producing and reproducing the mechanisms that transform a window of opportunity into the beginning of a new era of sustainable peace. One such mechanism is the promotion of democracy, through support to the reform of electoral systems and the holding of free and fair elections, and support for and reinvigoration of a strong civil society.

Analysis of the relationship between Lebanese alternative NGOs and foreign donors in post-2005 Lebanon yields starkly different conclusions. Alternative NGOs faced a paradox in their relationship to donors similar to the one that they faced in their relationship to the state and sectarian forces in Lebanese society. In a country with no culture of fundraising or tax-incentive laws to get people to donate, NGOs depend on access to foreign funds to survive (Abou Assi, 2006). However, for reasons that will be detailed below, these funds have not been forthcoming. Further, when the funds have been made available, accepting donor money entrapped NGOs further in the web of Lebanon's politics.

In spite of the hopes pinned on the relationship between donors and alternative NGOs as a way for these organizations to achieve political autonomy from the state and the political forces within their society, such is not the case in Lebanon. In terms of actual funding, international donors consistently prioritize policy-based and communally-based NGOs over alternative NGOs. This results in part from the Law of Associations which allows the MOI to set requirements and restrictions on internationally-funded bilateral projects. By so doing, the MOI can exclude or include NGOs at its discretion (Zahar 2009, p.78). When interviewed about their work in Lebanon, a number of donors highlighted the primacy of the State and the priority that their governments put on fostering their relationship with the Lebanese authorities. The UNDP clearly identified ministries such as social affairs and education as the main partners in its efforts to

promote pro-poor, local development, local governance and empowerment projects.³² The Italian Development Cooperation Office insisted on the strength of its partnerships with local authorities and line ministries. A spokesperson for the program highlighted that the identification of CSO partners involved prior consultation with concerned ministries. In certain instances, specific CSOs, including communal organizations, are in fact the privileged partners of the State on specific issues.³³ Thus, policy-based NGOs and communal organizations, such as those working respectively in the fields of the environment or social services, are more likely to be identified as partners than alternative NGOs. This is all the more true when alternative NGOs are perceived by state officials (who are also communal leaders) as infringing on their turf.

Equally significant are the primary concerns that underpin donor selection of NGO partners. Most Western donor representatives put a premium on the issue of efficiency, ability to deliver and report, as well as sustainability and representation. Japan's Katsuaki Takahashi acknowledged the difference between civil and communal society only to underline that his government took a pragmatic approach to the question and selected partners based on field visits to assess the sustainability of the partner and of its programs.³⁴ Irene Bernabéu of the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (AECI) stressed that the AECI worked only with "institutions that offer guarantees of professionalism and project delivery" adding that, "from a donor perspective, capacity is key".³⁵ This was echoed by UNDP's Manal Fouani who summed

³² Interview with Manal Fouani, Program Associate, Poverty and Social Development Portfolio, United Nations Development Programme, Beirut, May 2009.

³³ Interview with Sawsan Mehdi, Program Officer, Development Cooperation Office, Italian Embassy in Beirut, Beirut, May 2009.

³⁴ Interview with Katsuaki Takahashi, Economic and Social Development Advisor, Economic Cooperation Division, Embassy of Japan in Lebanon, Beirut, May 2009.

³⁵ Interview with Irene Bernabéu, Programmes Coordinator, Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (AECI), Beirut, May 2009.

up the situation saying “since NGOs (Western-style) are few, especially efficient and operational ones, then empirically we have to deal with whoever is on the ground”.³⁶

When local NGOs do not provide sufficient assurances that they will be credible partners, foreign donors tend to rely on international NGOs to carry out their projects. By so doing, they do not contribute to capacity-building in the NGO sector; rather, they perpetuate and contribute to deepening the gap between communal society and civil society, with alternative NGOs falling behind policy and issue-based NGOs in this second category. This has a particularly detrimental effect on the capacity of alternative NGOs.

Donor concerns over alternative NGOs’ efficiency and ability to deliver affect the ability of these NGOs to access international funding. However, without seed money, NGOs face quasi-insurmountable challenges in their attempts to institutionalize and increase their operational capacity. Smaller, newer, and less institutionalized than their communal counterparts, alternative NGOs do not for the most part have the credibility that comes from a longer engagement with and experience of cooperation with foreign donors. It is therefore hard to get money at the early stages when it is most needed. In addition, donors do not provide core funding. NGOs get money for projects, not for overhead and administrative/institutional things. Moreover, the funds are mostly paid upon delivery. Says UNDP’s Hassan Krayyem, “There are misunderstandings from NGOs that think the UN will give away money in advance. The UN does not give money ahead of time; it keeps the funds, monitors the agreed-upon activities, approves payments and only then draws checks.”³⁷ Donor funding criteria and rules make it particularly difficult for alternative NGOs to institutionalize and develop administratively.

³⁶ Interview with Manal Fouani, Program Associate, Poverty and Social Development Portfolio, United Nations Development Programme, Beirut, May 2009.

³⁷ Interview with Hassan Krayyem, Policy Specialist, United Nations Development Program, Beirut, August 1, 2009.

This raises broader questions about the ability of alternative NGOs to survive and develop into a “third-way” with a societal transformation potential. When asked about the greatest challenges that they face, almost all alternative NGOs started with a discussion of internal problems - power struggles and the like, but their main problem is to sustain themselves both financially and institutionally. Many NGOs cannot make the transition from spontaneous organization to an institution.

Beyond power struggles, there is a real challenge with capacity – many alternative NGOs don’t know how to institutionalize and, without financial support, they eventually collapse . The lack of external funding increases the vulnerability of alternative NGOs; it stands in the way of their institutionalization and weakens their transformative potential. It also makes alternative NGOs more vulnerable to cooptation attempts by sectarian leaders and forces thus deepening the power asymmetry between the actors who seek to maintain the status quo and the actors of change. Access to donor money, though it might be expected to increase the alternative NGOs’ political autonomy, is in fact perceived as another way of entangling these NGOs in the web of Lebanese communal politics.

For alternative NGOs, seeking donor money, though theoretically important to increase capacity, promote institutionalization, and even sometimes secure survival, is not problem-free. In the polarized environment of post-2005 Lebanon, foreign donors, especially Western countries, are clearly identified as supporters of March 14th. Though Western governments rushed to assist reconstruction efforts in Lebanon, following the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hizballah, this assistance aimed at strengthening the state as against societal forces identified as destabilizing agents of foreign powers (Iran, Syria). Concerned about their political autonomy, alternative NGO leaders have therefore assessed their relationship to donors very carefully. In

interviews, some NGOs leaders indicate that their decision to accept or refuse foreign money are based on whether or not they agree with the donor's international foreign policy in general – hence some refuse USAID money because US anti-terrorism laws target Hizballah. This is not limited to the alternative NGOs studied here; policy NGOs also frame access to donor money in terms of a struggle for political autonomy not just from the donors but also from the local politicians associated with and likely to have clout over specific granting agencies.³⁸

In the struggle that alternative NGOs seeking change mount against the weight of Lebanon's sectarian politics, foreign donors were expected to seize the opportunity of the "Cedar Revolution" to foster democratic agents and contribute to building sustainable peace. Contrary to these expectations, our findings suggest that by denying alternative NGOs access to funding foreign donors weaken the transformative potential of these agents of change and deepen the power imbalance between them and the agents of the status quo. Further, the politics of the donor countries compound the problem in those rare instances where alternative NGOs get financial support. Indeed, the perceived bias of Western donors against Hizballah (and by extension the Shi'a community), means that those alternative NGOs that do get outside funding become identified with one camp over the other, and therefore more likely to be the target of attacks intended to limit their eventual impact. Far from supporting the autonomy of alternative NGOs, this deepens their entrapment in the sectarian web of Lebanon's politics and plays into the hands of sectarian forces. The fate of LADE in the lead-up to the 2009 parliamentary election is a case in point. An issue-based NGO, LADE works (and very successfully) to monitor elections and electoral campaigns to hold them to international standards of transparency, accountability and fairness. Yet, even LADE seems to have succumbed to the centrifugal forces of Lebanese sectarianism as its work in the 2009 election, which was aided by Western election monitoring

³⁸ This is one of the main conclusions of Kingston's research (2008) on environmental NGOs in Lebanon.

organizations such as the National Democratic Institute and the Carter Center, was marred with accusations of partiality in favor of March 14th.

Conclusions

The critical juncture that was the “Cedar Revolution” held the prospect of unshackling Lebanon from the web of its deeply divisive and destabilizing sectarian politics. Alternative NGOs emerged in this context as potential agents of change. Ultimately, the window of opportunity turned into yet another missed opportunity. Deeply divided by the politics of the moment and by their allegiances to two different political blocks, alternative NGOs could not present a united front against those sectarian and state leaders trying to weaken them. If their unity was torn asunder by the depth of political divisions in post-2005 Lebanon, the nail to the coffin of their efficiency was driven by Western donors who systematically neglected them and failed to acknowledge their potential as agents of change. Poorly funded, alternative NGOs experienced difficulties institutionalizing thus becoming even more vulnerable to the machinations of the sectarian and state elites. By 2008, many of them had become inactive.

Although a single-case study is clearly insufficient as a basis for generalization, this article supports the contention that more research is needed on negative cases in the literature on critical junctures. The case study of Lebanon’s alternative NGOs highlighted the role of power asymmetries in ultimately sealing the fate of agents of change. However, whereas historical institutionalism would have singled out the weight of structures in reproducing these power asymmetries, our focus on the impact of foreign donors underlines the role that agency can play in determining the ultimate outcome. Thus, the Lebanese case-study holds lessons for policy-makers as well. If donors really want to further democracy as a means of securing a durable

peace in divided societies, they should question the manner in which their politics either broaden or narrow windows of opportunity for the actors of change.

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