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The Consolidation of Shi'a Politics in Lebanon: An assessment of Amal and Hezbollah's Role

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ABSTRACT

Lebanon is a small territorial state having an area of about 10400 square kilometers. When it comes to the political experiences and its metamorphoses, Lebanon has been one of the most conflict-ridden states in the world. It witnessed continuous political turmoil in its 83 years of independence at an exorbitant cost of men and material. It has been a theater for intense regional politics and conflicts. From time to time, France, US, Palestinians, Syria, Israel, Iran and other Arab countries had direct or indirect intervention in Lebanon to advance their own interests. The sectarian nature of the state and internal strife for power among the groups provided a fertile ground for external intervention in to its domestic affairs. In this paper, an attempt is made to understand the consolidation of Shi'a politics from marginalization to mainstay in Lebanon. In the process, the political developments such as: sidelining of Shi'as in the government system by Sunni Muslims and Maronite Christians, the factors for their underdevelopment, Zuama system and the reasons for political awakening of Shi'as are analyzed. In the later half of the paper, the origin and the role of the two political parties, Amal and Hezbollah in 1970s and 1980s in the consolidation of Shi'a politics is examined.

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Introduction

Lebanon, as an independent republic, commenced its journey with two founding documents: a formal constitution and a sectarian accord called *Mithaq al-Watani*, the National Pact, in 1943. The pact was an unwritten compromise, agreed upon by the leaders of influential communities of that time, the Sunni Muslims and the Maronite Christians (Norton 2007). The terms of reference to acquire the independence of Lebanon from France were agreed upon in the national pact.

The system of governance that came into being from the national pact was to ensure sectarian representation in the politics and administration of Lebanon. The seventeen recognised sectarian communities were allocated privileged positions, in proportion to their population (Bieber 2000). But the top three posts were reserved for demographically dominant sects by excluding all the other sects. The Presidency was taken by Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims got the Prime-Ministry, and Shi'as got the post of Speaker of Parliament, which is considered weak in terms of political power (Arsan 2018). The basis for the allocation of power was the 1932 census conducted under the Mandate Rule of France, which was considered of dubious nature; therefore, the census had reliability issues (Faour 1991). The French always acted in a biased manner, favouring Maronite Christians, so that Maronite dominance and the Christian character of the Lebanese state were retained. Moreover, the reliability of the census is further questionable because it is the last official census conducted in Lebanon.

The various reliable estimates from time to time on the demography of Lebanon indicate the drastic change in the demographic configuration of various communities (Norton 2007). The various estimates state that the population growth of Shi'as is more than other communities (Shanahan 2005). Hence, the National Pact of Lebanon has made the Shi'as underrepresented in politics, government jobs, and allocation of financial resources for development. In fact, the social and economic status of Shi'as at the time of independence was the poorest. They were least educated, hence, they were less likely to take advantage of the services such as health or public amenities provided by the government (Norton 2007).

As it is stated above, political power in Lebanon is distributed based on sectarian identity. In the case of Shi'as, the share of power was held by the *za'im* (traditional local leader), who often enjoyed the privilege of office with cursory accountability to their constituents. In such a system, citizens did not seek political rewards as their legal right, but as a favour granted by the *za'im*, who in return, expected his clients to reciprocate his favour in electoral support and payment, in the form of labour (Norton 1985).

The Roots of Political Awakening among Shi'as

The emergence of the Shi'as as a political force can be traced to the 1950s, when the traditional structure of politics began to break due to modernisation pressures. The state experienced rapid social and economic changes. The Shi'as continued to lag behind Lebanon's other sects in terms of socio-economic status. They, nonetheless, were greatly affected by the changes that marked the country. The Shi'a villager's isolation was being broken by a growing exposure to facets of modernity, such as improved access to education, enhancement in transportation facilities, and phenomenal increase in news and entertainment media availability (Traboulsi 2007).

The result of this connectivity was internal and external migration among Shi'as, which contributed to a steady growth in their population in the Beirut suburbs, as well as in the Gulf and West Africa. Initially, the most important factor for migration was the prospect of gainful employment. But after the displacement of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) from Jordan to south Lebanon in 1970, the security in the region and economic deterioration compelled the Shi'as to migrate (Norton 1985). The migration had several ramifications for the Shi'a community, reducing the power of the *za'ims*. The Shi'as who left their villages, whether to urban localities of Beirut or abroad, had complex requirements that could not be instantaneously fulfilled by the *za'ims*.

While most of the Shi'a migrants to the cities lived in miserable poverty, those who moved out of Lebanon with the hope that they would return in the future, accumulated modest wealth. The well-to-do Shi'as funded political movements that challenged the *za'ims'* power and leadership (Shanahan 2005: 59-87).

The Role of Musa al-Sadr

The Shi'as were in need of a community organiser because all the parties in Lebanon were making sectarian identity the centre of their politics, whereas the Shi'as were depending on secular political parties without much political and administrative success. This requirement of the Shi'as was largely fulfilled by Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, an Iranian cleric. At the age of 31, al-Sadr became the mufti (religious judge) in the southern port city of Tyre in Lebanon. Although Iranian by birth, al-Sadr was a Lebanese by descent. In fact, his grandfather's tomb was in Maraka, a south Lebanon village that was an important centre of resistance, both to the PLO, prior to the 1982 invasion, and to the Israel Defence Force (IDF) subsequently (Norton 1985: 113-114). He quickly proved to be a skilful and charismatic leader shaping the growing political consciousness of the Shi'as in Lebanon.

Al-Sadr used the core symbols of Shi'asm like the martyrdom of Hussein (the grandson of Prophet Muhammad) to mobilise the Shi'a population (Shaery-Eisenlohr 2008). He proved himself capable of

shifting alliance partners at opportune moments. Initially, he aligned with a coalition of Palestinian organisations and various Muslim reform-oriented and radical parties. He broke with his allies in June 1976, when the Syrian army intervened to prevent the defeat of the Maronite militia forces, during the civil war in Lebanon (Traboulsi 2007). Thus, by using his pragmatism, he changed his stand as the time warranted and successfully brought a large number of Shi'as on a common platform, which led to the formation of a political party for Shi'as, "Amal".

The Origin and Political Consolidation of Amal

Amal is an offshoot of al-Sadr, who started *Harakat al-Mahrumin* (Movement of the Deprived) in 1974. Harakat al-Mahrumin was a mass movement which exerted pressure on Lebanon's government to deliver economic and social services to the Shi'a-dominated areas. Although the speeches delivered by the leaders of the movement were not typically sectarian in nature. The religious background of al-Sadr and the movement was founded in a rally organised in Ba'albak, a Shi'a bastion, making it amply clear that the "deprived" term in the movement was used for Shi'as (Shanahan 2005: 107). This was the first attempt made by the Shi'as to organise themselves on the lines of sectarian identity in Lebanon.

Amal was initially a Shi'a militia that was mobilised in 1975. In its early stage, the fighters of Amal were trained by the Fatah movement, a Palestinian resistance organisation. Soon, Amal amalgamated the Movement of the Deprived, that was founded by al-Sadr, into its organisational setup and became political, along with its military organisation. But it was slow to capture the mass support among Shi'as. Three events unfolded in a short time in the late 1970s, swiftly increased Amal's legitimacy within the Shi'a community and catapulted it as a significant force in the fractious politics of Lebanon. First, the invasion of Lebanon by the IDF in 1978. The incursion caused massive military losses for various Palestinian militias located within the Lebanese territories and for the National Movement of Lebanon. Amal took advantage of this situation and provided a security umbrella for Shi'as of South Lebanon, which generated positive support for the party and contributed to its foothold for recruitment in the future (Norton 1985).

Second, the sudden disappearance of al-Sadr during his transit via Tripoli to Rome in August 1978 (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002). For Shi'as of Lebanon, the disappearance of al-Sadr "resonated with the occultation of the Twelfth Imam" (Shanahan 2005: 107). Amal, al-Sadr's conception, took advantage of his disappearance to emotionally appeal to the Shi'a population for support. Third, the Islamic revolution in Iran in January 1979 successfully ousted the monarchical regime. This event provided an example for Shi'as to emulate in Lebanon, to replace the discriminatory political regime through popular mobilisation (Shaery-Eisenlohr

2008). These three events unfolding within a short span of one year played a vital role in providing Amal an opportunity to emerge as a political alternative for Shi'as in Lebanon's political system.

The noteworthy aspect of Amal's Charter and its contradictory practice is the identification of Amal as essentially a nationalist movement, which is firmly in support of Lebanese territorial and political sovereignty. The Charter states, "Our movement is completely devoted to national sovereignty", "It rejects any foreign mandate over the motherland and works towards preserving its territory and borders" (quoted in Shanahan 2005: 108). The active involvement of Syria in Lebanon's internal matters, and the growing affinity between Amal's top leadership and the Syrian regime, means the commitments made in its Charter by Amal related to the sovereignty of Lebanon were not credible (Ehteshami and Hinnebusch 1997).

As it is already argued in the paper, at the time of sectarian-based allocation of political and administrative positions, the Shi'as did not have any patron who could ensure fair representation in Lebanon. Considering the precarious situation of Shi'as in Lebanon and to attain political and military favours from Syria, al-Sadr gave his consent to Alawites being considered one of the sects of Islam and provided them legitimacy as Muslims. Hafiz al-Assad, the ruler of the predominantly Muslim population, was from the Alawites sect, which is regarded by many Muslims as "heretic". For this gesture, the Syrian regime supplied weapons and trained Amal's militia, which was an immediate requirement to remain a potent force in the Lebanese civil war (Traboulsi 2007). Al-Sadr's strategy of Amal's alliance with Syria was continued even after his disappearance. Nabih Berri (chief of Amal), in a speech delivered in Ba'albak in 1985, stated: "There must be integration with Syria, by means of actual agreements in the economic, security, political, information, and educational fields. Let them not be afraid of Lebanon's sovereignty" (Quoted in Shanahan 2005: 110).

Very soon, the returns of this policy were visible; the members of Amal got positions in the government. For example, in 1984, Husayn Husayni got elected as the speaker of the Lebanese parliament, replacing the *Za'im*, Kamil al-Asad. This was a symbolic moment of change of the official power of the Shi'as and the decline of the Zuama system. In 1991, an additional parliamentary seat for Shi'as in the Saida district was carved out, in which Nabih Berri was appointed. Amal got these two high-profile political accomplishments because of direct or indirect pressure exerted by the Syrian government on the Lebanese state (Abukhalil 1990).

In spite of these political achievements, Amal was partially successful in politically unifying the Shi'a population under its banner. Its political growth confronted the challenge from prevailing localised loyalties and subsequent disunity among the militia groups. It had class divisions in its organisational setup. The educated elite among Shi'as controlled the political wing, whereas the peasant class were part of the

executive committee, who were more inclined towards religion. Besides class division, Amal also faced ideological differences within the organisation, primarily associated with expressing their allegiance to the Iranian-style Islamic Revolution in Lebanon (Shanahan 2005). Though the Islamic Revolution of Iran was appealing to most of the Lebanese Shi'a population, yet al-Sadr and Nabih Berri gave importance to geopolitics and continued to ally Amal with Syria instead of Iran.

The tilt of Amal's leadership towards Syria was a reflection of reality within Lebanese territorial limits, because from 1976 to 1990, Lebanon had a massive Syrian military presence. This was a strong reason to nurture close relations with the Syrian regime. Moreover, the geopolitical interests of the Syrian government in Lebanon were also responsible for maintaining the close relations with the emerging Shi'a political movement in Lebanon.

The Origin and Political Consolidation of Hezbollah

Hezbollah is the second Shi'a political party in Lebanon that commenced its journey as a militia. Amal, as a political movement, has largely tried to represent the Shi'a community within the framework of the Lebanese political system, whereas Hezbollah adopted a sectarian route to ensure political representation, social empowerment, and economic development of Shi'as. It attained prominence as an organised movement after it aggressively responded to the 1982 Israeli military incursion into Lebanese territory. In its initial days, Hezbollah was an umbrella organisation. Groups like Islamic Amal and the Dawa Party were part of its structure (Norton 2007).

After the withdrawal of the Israeli military from Beirut in 1983, Hezbollah commenced its expansion plans. It actively recruited new members from Shi'a-dominant areas of southern suburbs in Beirut and south Lebanon, which already had a strong presence of Amal (Beydoun 1992). The primary focus of Hezbollah, in its initial days, was to shape itself as a competent military force. As Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah said in 1996, "There was no plan other than to resist the occupation. We were thinking at first: Let us restore the homeland and then we will think of the political system" (Quoted in Shanahan 2005: 114).

The profile of Hezbollah's first recruits was young, into their 20s and 30s. They had a commitment to the Islamic revolution (Norton 2007). Iran particularly played a leading role in sponsoring these young revolutionaries. It viewed Hezbollah's creation as the means to realise its aim of exporting the Islamic revolution to other parts of the West Asian region (Harik 1996). In 1982-83, there were several attacks against the Multinational Force in Lebanon (MNF) and the occupying Israeli army in Beirut, which are alleged to have been launched by Hezbollah. These attacks resulted in large casualties for the invading

militaries. As a result, France and the United States (US) were compelled to pull out their forces from Lebanon in 1983 (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002). In the same year, Israel also withdrew its forces from the Lebanese capital to south Lebanon. Even in south Lebanon, the Israeli forces came under constant attacks by Hezbollah's guerrilla forces (Beydoun 1992). Thus, the military invasion of Israel into the Lebanese territories turned out to be the trigger for the consequent emergence of Shi'a resistance.

On 16th February 1985, Hezbollah articulated its views on political system and its role in Lebanese politics, in a document known as 'Hezbollah's Open Letter to the Downtrodden of Lebanon and the World' (Alagha 2011: 39). This was a political manifesto which enunciated the following objectives of Hezbollah:

"1 To expel Israel (IDF) for good from Lebanon, as a prelude to its total annihilation, and the liberation of Jerusalem and its holy cites from the occupation; 2 To expel the Americans, the French, and their allies from Lebanon for good, thus rooting out any influence of any colonial power on Lebanon; 3 To submit the Phalangists to just rule23, and make them stand trial for the crimes they have committed against Muslims and Christians, through encouragement from America and Israel; 4 To allow our populace the right of self-determination; to freely choose the political system that they aspire to. We do not hide our commitment to (the rule of) Islam, and we invite everybody to choose the Islamic system (of government/governance), which alone is capable of guaranteeing justice and dignity to everyone, thus preventing any colonial attempt to invade our country again" (Alagha 2011: 43-44).

The open letter of Hezbollah could successfully announce its existence as a political movement in Lebanon (Norton 2007: 37-40). Other than this, the open letter was not more than rhetoric, which was enough to say to the civil war-affected Shi'as of Lebanon that Hezbollah has different strands from that of Amal. However, the implementation of the manifesto was not practical; therefore, all the major points were breached in the later years by Hezbollah's leaders (Harik 1996).

Apart from the open letter, Shi'as in Lebanon joined Hezbollah due to several other reasons. At the time of Israeli occupation, Hezbollah's radical posture attained popularity. The infighting within Amal, and its participation in the National Salvation Committee, caused disappointment to a large number of Shi'as, who started seeing Hezbollah as a political alternative to Amal. Hezbollah's explicit position against the political system in Lebanon and the occupation of Lebanese territories by Israel also eroded the support of Amal, and helped it in increasing its support base within the Shi'a community. The presence of two Shi'a parties, following different methods to expand their influence and competing to garner the backing from the same community, led to clashes. Only after the active intervention by both Syria and Iran, the fight stopped (Norton 2007).

In the second half of the 1980s, the Western influence in Lebanon and its citizens came under regular attacks. The groups associated with Hezbollah hijacked an airplane in 1985 to Beirut, abducting foreign citizens and using them for exchange to get the imprisoned Lebanese citizens released from Kuwaiti and Israeli jails. During the negotiations, the kidnapers also gave importance to the interests of Iran. Therefore, they made Iran a party to the complex negotiations that were carried out to release the captives. As a result, the release of Iranian assets that were frozen by the US after the Islamic Revolution, the freeing of Lebanese prisoners from Israel, and putting an end to the hostage crisis were achieved (Traboulsi 2007).

The 1989 Taif Accord, facilitated by Saudi Arabia, directed Amal and Hezbollah to eschew the use of militias against each other and focus on making an alliance. The accord encouraged both groups to behave like political parties and participate in the parliamentary system. The accord put an end to the 15-year-long civil war which affected all the communities in Lebanon. It also neutralised the power of party militias; only Hezbollah was allowed to have a military wing to focus on Israeli forces, rather than other militias within Lebanon (Arsan 2018). Hezbollah contested the 1992 elections and won 12 parliamentary seats (Norton 2007: 101). Thus, Hezbollah, since its origin in 1982, advanced steadily and created a strong position for itself in the quagmire of sectarian politics in Lebanon.

Conclusion

The division of power under the National Pact was done without taking Shi'as into confidence. Factors such as inadequate agricultural produce for supporting the growing needs of life, which resulted in alternative employment; the Shi'a immigration to foreign countries for a better life; and the availability of cheap labour in the form of Palestinian refugees in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the change in thinking of Shi'as. In this backdrop, the civil war in Lebanon which started in 1975; the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 1978; the disappearance of influential leader Musa al-Sadr from Libya in 1978; and the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, contributed to the strengthening of Amal and weakening of the traditional Za'im system.

After 1982, Hezbollah evolved as one of the major political players for Shi'as along with Amal. The main task of Hezbollah after its foundation was to end the direct external intervention in Lebanon. It resorted to violence and attacked American and French marine headquarters that were located in Beirut and compelled them to withdraw their forces. It also attacked the occupying forces of Israel in south Lebanon repeatedly, and forced Israel to withdraw unilaterally from Lebanon in 2000. The rise of Hezbollah as a multifaceted organisation has resulted in the virtual creation of a state within the state. In the south-east part of Lebanon, Hezbollah has a very strong military presence. The Lebanese military has very little control in that part of

Lebanon. To sum up, in the 1970s and 1980s, Amal and Hezbollah had played an instrumental role in bringing Shi'as from marginalisation to a mainstay in Lebanese politics.

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