Populism, Identities and Social Movements in Lebanon: From a Sectarian Identity to a Popular One?

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Abstract: Populism is a major feature of our times. From western democracies to Asia to the Arab world, the rise of populist movements is characterized by the access to power of two types of populism. The first, known as identity populism and driven by nationalism, led to the emergence of radical right political parties, leaders and nationalists' movements. Another type of populism is the protest populism, a leftwing populism rallying the people against the establishment. Identified by the outburst of popular protest movements mobilizing millions of people in the streets, protest populism caused the appearance of new leftwing populist parties and leaders with populist and anti-elitist rhetoric forging a popular identity crystallized around the people against the elite.

This article discusses the potential of protest populism to counter identity populism and, more particularly, whether Lebanese protests are creating a popular collective identity that could undermine the prevailing sectarian identity driven by a deeply rooted sectarian populism. At the theoretical intersection of populism, social movements and collective identities, the article explores the benefits and limitations of protest populism in Lebanon to create a popular identity as an alternative to the prevailing sectarianism.

Key words: Populism, collective identity, popular identity, sectarianism, social movements

Abstrait: Le populisme est une caractéristique majeure de notre époque. Des démocraties occidentales à l'Asie en passant par le monde arabe, la montée des mouvements populistes se caractérise par l'accès au pouvoir de deux types de populisme. Le premier, connu sous le nom de populisme identitaire et poussé par le nationalisme, a conduit à l'émergence de partis politiques de droite radicale, de leaders et de mouvements nationalistes. Un autre type de populisme est le populisme protestataire, un populisme de gauche qui rassemble le peuple contre l'establishment. Identifié par la montée en puissance des mouvements de protestation populaire mobilisant des millions de personnes dans les rues, le populisme protestataire a provoqué l'apparition de nouveaux partis et dirigeants populistes de gauche avec une rhétorique populiste et anti-élitiste forgeant une identité populaire cristallisée autour du peuple contre l'élite.

Cet article examine le potentiel du populisme de protestation pour contrer le populisme identitaire et, plus particulièrement, si les protestations libanaises créent une identité collective populaire qui pourrait saper l'identité sectaire dominante, animée par un populisme sectaire profondément enraciné. À l'intersection théorique du populisme, des mouvements sociaux et des identités collectives, l'article explore les avantages et les limites du populisme de protestation au Liban pour créer une identité populaire comme alternative au sectarisme dominant.

Mots clés: Populisme, identité collective, identité populaire, sectarisme, mouvements sociaux

1. The Era of Populism

We live in what is considered the "populist zeitgeist" (Mudde 2004) or the era of populism. In western liberal democracies, populist movements are characterized by the rise of radical right political parties, leaders and nationalist movements that are hostile to immigration, international treaties, international institutions and globalization (Crewe and Sanders 2019). Taguieff suggests that there are two types of populism: the identity populism and the protest populism. Identity populism is more of a rightwing base and relies on the ethnos rather the demos (Taguieff 2007); it is rooted in identity rather than economic inequality and fueled by ethnicity, race and religion (Fukuyama 2018). Identity populism aims to rally inter-class front to protect identities. Contemporary populist movements in the West are mainly built around national identity and explain the rise of populist leaders, like Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orban, or populist parties, such as Vox in Spain, the Freedom Party in Austria or the Alternative for Germany.

Another contemporary phenomena is the rise of "the movements of the squares'' (Gerbaudo 2017) or popular protest movements mobilizing millions of people. These movements emerged globally starting with the Arab Spring, followed by the Spanish and Greek protests and most recently in Chile, Hong Kong, France (Yellow Vest) and the United States (Black Lives Matter). Formed by unformal and deinstitutionalized groups and characterized by the occupation of city squares and setting up of long term protest camps, these social movements ac-

tively use the public space to announce their grievances and put collective pressure on authorities to take on changes. They fall under what Taguieff (2007) calls protest populism, a leftwing phenomenon that led to the rise of left wing populism parties, like Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, or populist leaders, like Bernie Sanders in the United States. It even managed in some countries to change the existing political system (Gerbaudo 2017). The traditional and established parties lost their hegemony in favor of "street politics," (Bayat 2010) driven by new populist actors with other political alternatives and with a call for the people against the ruling elites (political, economic or cultural elites).

Beyond being a place to communicate grievances, streets and squares became a place where protestors experienced solidarity, friendships and a sense of unity (Ishkanian, Glasius and Ali 2013). Through their collective demands, shared feelings and experiences, a collective identity is forged and transformed into a popular identity where the "us" is crystalized around "the people" while "them" is the power holders. This common ground is able to bring together dispersed identities under a new political one: the popular identity.

In Arab countries, popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes started in Tunisia in 2010 and spread across the region (Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya), demanding democracy, social freedom and better participation in political life. As for Lebanon, it was not until 2015 that the country really jumped on the Arab Spring bandwagon when protesters took to the streets after the government's failure to collect trash piling up in the streets for weeks, mainly because of sectarian power sharing and corruption. The so-called "garbage crisis" marked the beginning of popular non-sectarian mobilizations (Salloukh and Verheij 2017). On October 17, 2019, Lebanon witnessed a new wave of decentralized and grassroots social protests that engaged citizens from diverse socio-economic, geographical and religious backgrounds. "Al-Thawra" (revolution in Arabic), as protestors call it, successfully mobilized Lebanese citizens regardless of their historical belonging and loyalty to political and sectarian parties. Protests were sparked by a proposed tax on messaging applications. However, the roots of the issue go much deeper and have to do with a severe economic crisis, lack of dollars, a deficient banking system, government inability to deliver any efficient ser-

vice (electricity, water, social services…) and, above all, institutionalized corruption and sectarianism (Chehayeb and Sewell 2019).

The paper discusses the potential of protest populism to counter identity populism. In other words, can these new protest-populism-based social movements create a collective identity that contests exiting political identities? The research will focus on Lebanon's protests and explore whether divided Lebanese are creating a new popular identity that could undermine the prevailing and supposedly fixed sectarian identity fueled by sectarian populism. Indeed, Lebanon's history of self-governing communities laid the foundation for the development of sectarianism, i.e. the structuring of politics around sectarian identity (Cammet 2014) where the religion is the primary marker of political identity (Makdisi 2000).

The research relies on ethnographic field study to collect activists' interviews, documentary data in books, articles, media content to analyze two main popular protests in Lebanon (2015 and 2019).[1] As the protests continued to unfold in 2019 during the research, we relied also on observation and interaction with the protesters to grasp the real-life environment; the immersion approach helping us to explore the complex dynamic of collective identities. At the theoretical intersection of populism, social movements and collective identities, the article explores the benefits and limitations of this protest populism to create a popular identity as an alternative to the prevailing sectarian identity.

2. Lebanon's Controversial Collective Identity

A collective identity is considered as a unified social group that comes out from collective attributes, like class, nation, ethnic background, race, gender and profession (McGarry and Jasper 2015). It is regarded as an act of collective imagination, stirring a group of people to mobilize through arousal of feelings of oneness with others or by separating the group from other categories of people (McGarry and Jasper 2015). This process largely stems from the universal mental process of social categorization that divides people into "us" and "them": The in-group is a source of pride and self-esteem while the out-group is labeled with negative attributes (Tajfel 1974). It is perceived to be a necessary fiction as it is

crucial not only for political mobilization but also for transforming societies into a "nation". Smith (1988) suggests that most modern nations are not awakening nations to self-consciousness resulting from a natural sense of self-collectiveness. They are mainly invented nations relying on a myth of shared history and common descent. They are "imagined communities" and should be analyzed in the way they imagine themselves and not who they really are (Anderson 2006).

In the case of Lebanon, the national collective identity emerged alongside other collective identities and deep-rooted sectarianism, which is a particular type of collective identity. Sectarianism is considered as the organization of political, economic, and social life in a way that it "redirects individual loyalties away from state institutions and symbols toward sectarian communities" (Salloukh, Barakat, et al. 2015, 3). Since the end of the 5th century, persecuted minorities have found shelter in Lebanon's uneven mountainous landscape, which permitted them to develop their singularity, allowing 18 religious communities[2] to live together in relative harmony and peace. Any interference in another community's social or political life broke up the equilibrium and often led to armed conflicts (Azar 1999). The communities living on what will be later Lebanon developed a strong self-consciousness as a sectarian identity.

Scholars trace the construction of modern sectarianism in Lebanon back to the 19th century when Maronites and Druze, with the support of the Ottoman Empire and European partners, strived to end violence and determine the boundaries and relationship between both communities (Makdisi, 2000; Weiss, 2010). It started in 1843 when the Ottomans established a dual "qa'immaqamiyya", a system of proportional representation for each sectarian community. In 1861, as fighting kept on erupting frequently, Ottomans promulgated the "Reglement Organique" reunifying Lebanon under the "Mutasarrifiyya": a separate governing institution for Mount Lebanon under the sway of a "Mutasarrif", a governor appointed by the Ottomans, and an administrative council based on proportional representation.[3] It engendered and institutionalized sectarianism in Lebanon by installing power sharing that is based on quotas proportional to political and demographic power between different sectarian communities (Salloukh *et al*, 2015).

Lebanon as a modern state was created after the downfall of the Ottoman Empire and following the powerful and pressing instigation of the Maronite

Church and political leaders. Lebanon and Syria's French mandate authorities created Greater Lebanon in 1920 by annexing the Beqaa Valley and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains to Mount Lebanon, Beirut and coastal towns. The creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920 took place amidst a problematic national identity, other collective identities and increased intercommunal tensions: Shiites considered themselves more Syrian than Lebanese, Greek Orthodox and Catholics were in favor of Syrian unity and Sunnis were advocating for an Arab State (Salibi 1988).

By doing so, Greater Lebanon demographics were modified, significantly increasing the number of Druze and Muslims (both Shiites and Sunnis), while Christians, mainly Maronites, represented around 50% of the population. In order to guarantee power sharing for each community, the Lebanese Constitution (1926) granted each community specific personal status law (Article 9), freedom of education and the right for religious communities to have their own schools (Article 10). It also stipulated that state jobs would be divided fairly and proportionally between communities, thus allowing the country to leap to unconditional and complete sectarianism (Rabbath 1983).

To secure a viable model, the power sharing recipe was adopted again in 1943 whilst the creation of the Republic of Lebanon along with the "National Act", an unwritten agreement between the Christian President of the Republic and the Sunni Prime Minister stipulating that the President will be Maronite, the Prime Minister Sunni and the speaker of the Parliament Shiite. Other executive, legislative and judicial powers will also be distributed according to sectarian power sharing principle. The system is also known as Consociationalism.

Consociationalism was first employed in the Netherlands in 1917 and has been used since to reach a peaceful solution in politically destabilized countries and ethnic-racial tensions (Lijphart 1968). If this power sharing strategy was successful in countries like Northern Ireland or Cyprus, in other societies, such as Lebanon, consociationalism reinforced divisions: it institutionalized the existence of ethnic differences rather than piecing back together a shared collective identity (Lijphart 1977). The inter-sectarian power sharing formula that was supposed to stabilize the country turned out to be non-viable in the long run. The collective identity narratives around the "pluralistic society", "the bridge between East and West" and "Switzerland of the East" worked for two decades,[4] but could not suc-

cessfully stand the external and internal political tensions and a deeply rooted and polarized sectarian identity.

Indeed, the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990 heightened sectarian divisions, with every community establishing its own militia, administrative bodies and media channels (Salloukh *et al.* 2015) and living on its own homogeneous ethnic territory. Sectarian political parties and leaders sought the support of an external coalition in order to strengthen their local power. In 1989, a national reconciliation agreement, known as Ta'if Agreement, was negotiated in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia and approved by Lebanese parliament. The agreement put an end to the civil war and "recycled the sectarian political system in a manner reflecting new demographic and political realities but did not dismantle it" (Salloukh *et al.* 2015*,* 21). It reflected also regional balance of power: executive power shifted from the Christian Maronite president to the Council of Ministries, composed of the representative ministries of the communities and political parties, giving more power to Sunni and Shiite communities.

Ethnic conflict is an example of how identities can turn deadly and are strategically used to hold power (Nagle 2015). Political elites exacerbate tensions by exploiting prejudices and hatred between groups (Posen 1993). Lebanon was no exception and political leaders used all means to hold power. Populism was one of them.

3. Sectarian Populism

Although populism has become one of the major "buzz words" of this century, there is a large confusion about the concept and a lack of a theory of populism and thus consistent measures to classify what and who is populist (Müller 2016). Even though some scholars trace back the birthplace of populism in ancient Rome (Doan 2019), it is widely considered as a modern phenomenon that appeared in the late 19th century in the United States and Russia as populist agrarian and rural movements (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Throughout the years, the term has been used for various and often contradictory phenomena: from democratic to autocratic countries, from left-wing to right-wing parties and

from liberal to totalitarian regimes, they are all upbraided as populists, making it a political controversial concept. Taggart considers populism as a "slippery concept" with "chameleon quality," making it quite difficult, rather impossible, to have a universal and comprehensive definition (Taggart 2000).

Mudde, a reference in the field of populism studies, considers populism "as a thin-centered ideology," i.e. it can engage concepts from other ideologies, allowing the constitution of diversified and contradictory "populist" movements with three common concepts: the people, the elite and the general will. Society is ultimately separated into two antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," with politics being an expression of the general will (Mudde 2004). Populism is also defined as a rhetorical style of communication arguing that the only legitimacy comes from the people or "Us", while "Them" are the deeply corrupted power holders (Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Aslanidis 2015; Norris & Inglehart 2019).

This paper will not argue over the definition of populism. Populism has multiple forms depending on the cultural, political and geographical environment (Manshur 2019). Since there is a general agreement that all types of populism incorporate the concept of the "people" against "the elite", while the definition of the people depends on populist practices, this paper will look at populism as a political tool to mobilize a social group with collective attributes (real or fiction) against the "Other". It will be used as a lens to help us understand if the rise of a popular identity in Lebanon can undermine the prevailing sectarian collective identity nurtured by sectarian populism.

According to Salamey and Tabar (2012), contemporary populist movements in Lebanon can be traced back to the 1950s with the *Chamounism* party led by Camille Chamoun[5] who "skillfully capitalized" on the Nasserism[6] "thread" to increase his popularity and turn into "the defender of Christian interests" (El-Khazen 2000, 52). It was followed in the 1960s by the *Harakat al-Mahroumin* (The Deprived Movement). Founded by Imam Moussa Sadr, the movement was an attempt to encounter Maronite hegemony over the political and economic life of the country and to increase the share of the Shiite community, which remained the most economically disadvantaged and politically underrepresented. After the mysterious disappearance of the Imam, Amal Movement took leadership of the

Shiite community until the rise of the populist Hezbollah Party, which still has the lead on the community since the end of the Lebanese war in 1990, with a perfectly orchestrated populist and propagandist discourse by Hassan Nasrallah, a strong and charismatic leader.

During the civil war, most Christian parties were reunited by Bashir Gemayel under the right-wing Lebanese Forces militia. The charismatic young man took the lead of the Christian community and was considered as a hero by a large number of the community, which was galvanized by his anti-Palestinian and anti-Syrian populist discourses. He was assassinated in 1982 at the age of 34, less than one month after his election as president of the republic. Gemayel is still considered as one of the most charismatic and populist leaders of the Christian community (El-Khazen 2000). By the end of the civil war, Michel Aoun[7] took the lead as Christian populist leader. Aoun's discourse, revolving around liberating the country from Syrian occupation and putting an end to state corruption, seduced the Christian population seeking stability and tired of the Christian militia (Laurent 1991). Although he started with a relative secular political discourse, his party (Free Patriotic Movement) shifted to a "sectarian political discourse, practices and strategy to compete against its sectarian counterparts" (Helou 2020, 3). Recent years featured the rise of Samir Geagea[8] as a populist leader among the Christian community, with his campaigns targeting mainly Hezbollah's weapons, Saad Hariri's accommodation of their interests and President Aoun's alliance with the party (Mansour and Khatib 2018). Sunni populism experienced a pan-Arab orientation with no major sectarian populist leadership (El-Khazen 2000) until the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and the arrival to power of his son Saad Al-Din Hariri (Salamey and Tabar 2012). As for the Druze community, they always had unconditional support to the Jumblatt family, be it Kamal or his son Walid (El-Khazen 1988).

Populist movements in Lebanon have a "unique character". They always came out around sectarian requests and would on no account be able to turn into a unifying national populist movement (Salamey and Tabar 2012, 500). Sectarian populist leaders always bring out sectarian identities and use sectarian populism to obstruct the emergence of cross-confessional movements or a popular identity. If this strategy has been successful for over a century, are the actual nonsec-

tarian social movements undermining the deeply rooted sectarian identity and re-categorizing the country with a more inclusive popular identity?

4. From the "Garbage Crisis" to "Al-Thawra"[9]

In summer 2015, a surge of outrage hit Lebanon when garbage started piling up in the streets of Beirut and its suburbs after the closure of one of the main landfills. The government failed to renew the contract of the company in charge of waste collection due to sectarian and economic power sharing. What started with a small group of civil society activists requesting a solution for the garbage crisis turned into larger protests rejecting clientelism and demanding democracy and better livelihood. This grassroots social movement was called "Harak" (movement in Arabic) and marked the emergence of two main movements: You Stink and We Want Accountability. You Stink started as online activism with the hashtag #youstink against the ruling elite unable to solve the trash crisis then turned into a Facebook page before changing into a physical mobilization in the streets and squares. It is considered as a spontaneous movement and included mainly young activist from civil society organizations (Civil Society Knowledge Center 2019). While We Want Accountability included independents and members from left wing parties[10] (AbiYaghi, Catusse and Younes 2017) and relied more on traditional forms of mobilizations among networks and less on social medias (Civil Society Knowledge Center 2019). Although they succeeded in mobilizing large amount of cross-sectarian protestors, they failed to have a unified discourse and to transform the street's demands into a political program. According to Nammour,[11] 2015 protests did not convince the people or "the average citizen". It was "labeled" as a civil society movement of educated middle class activists with middle class claims that were not able to communicate with the popular base or to "break the social barrier". The "Us" (civil society and secular educated middle class activists) and "Them" (traditional parties) did not appeal to the larger segment of the population. In terms of garbage and environmental crisis, the outcome was the return to the pre-protest period with a "ticking time bomb" ready to explode at any time (Civil Society Knowledge Center 2019). Still, 2015 protests paved the way for

"Beirut Madinati", a collective political movement created in September 2015 by academics and activists which challenged mainstream sectarian lists during Beirut's municipal elections.

On October 17, 2019, protesters took to the streets spontaneously across Lebanon in reaction to a proposed tax on WhatsApp and messaging applications. The tax did spark the uprisings, but the demands were rooted in political and economic grievances: sectarianism, nepotism, government inability to deal with the electricity and water shortage, garbage collection, failure of social services institutions and above all a striking economic crisis and institutionalized corruption (Chehayeb and Sewell 2019). October 17, 2019 is considered by far the most important grassroots social mobilization since the end of the civil war that was able to mobilize cross-sectarian and cross-socioeconomic protestors (Bou Khater and Majed 2020). Although Lebanon does not have a long history in collective cross sectarian action, the multiple and successive protests initiated since 2011 were building up to the outburst of October uprisings as they helped to break the boundaries of fear from the sectarian elites, especially for the Shiite community (Civil Society Knowledge Center 2020).

Another characteristic of this uprising is its grassroots nature without a clear centralized leadership. As well as worldwide street mobilizations (Ishkanian, Glasius and Ali 2013), Lebanese protesters created grassroots horizontal practices in order to avoid the hierarchal structure of power found in a direct democracy parliament model, with shared decision making and where everything is collectively debated and voted. According to Fakhry,[12] "a leader does not exist without the people and people are clear: they don't want a leader with a personal agenda; they want institutions." Nammour considers that the rejection of all kind of leadership is the "essence and the DNA of October protests. Protesters were living a libertarian utopia without any power; everything was permitted." These protests are the union of neo-anarchism and democratic populism, described by Gerbaudo (2017) as "citizenism" or the populism of the citizen. It is horizontal populism that does not need a leader to identify with or unite it.

Unlike 2015 where protesters stayed confined and limited to symbolic spaces like Downtown Beirut, they ventured also in popular neighborhoods. According to Nammour, all socioeconomic classes were present during the protests,

from the popular class to the middle class and upper class. "This alliance surprised everybody, especially the political parties who did not know how to react at the beginning." Protesters took back public spaces and squares in Beirut and major cities across the country and reorganized the space in a way to ensure long-term occupation of the squares, from public debate tents to sleeping and canteen tents and places for leisure and celebrations.

The occupation of the public squares created a sense of belonging rooted not only in a shared space but also in a shared experience. Through daily practices of solidarity, people contributed largely in sustaining the movement by giving support to the protestors' physical and mental health needs: they engaged in cooking, collecting and distributing foods as well as providing emergency care and mental support. They organized daily trash and recycling clean up. The social interactions and the shared experiences and solidarities resulting from this street occupation produced a shared emotional connection and a sense of community and ownership. They felt they belong to a common "we" that distinguishes them from a different "other". This oneness transcended social concentric circles typical to divided societies like Lebanon (Nagle 2015): in a deeply ethnic Lebanon, different communities live on a homogeneous ethnic territory where social relationships are predominantly concentrated within a specific ethnic circle, reducing the possibilities of overlapping with others (Diani 2000). "Some people are unemployed without any income and are poor; others are working and can sustain themselves; others come from the rich class. People from all socioeconomic classes participate in the movements on a daily basis, from all region and from all sectarian belongings," stated Zeina Karam[13]. Protests created cross-cutting relationships that go beyond sectarian and class divisions and surpass the polarization around sectarian identity.

Contrary to identitarian collective identities, protesters belong to what Flesher Fominaya (2015) defines as autonomous and anti-identitarian movements that refuse to be labeled. They are inclusive and embrace diversity that "allows for truly heterogeneous assemblies (with basic minimums) and attempts to be open to any concerned individual who wants to join in" (Flesher Fominaya 2015, 79). Not only they raised slogans refusing sectarianism, they rejected any link to political and sectarian parties and any label other than "revolutionary". They focused

more on organizing mobilizations, protests and direct actions with the active use of social media. The widespread use of digital technology during the protests also played a significant role in building a collective identity with shared consciousness versus the different "other".

5. Towards a Popular Identity?

For Laclau (2005b), the process of constructing a collective identity starts with a simple and single social request. The person will not engage in any action if her request is taken into consideration and achieved. However, if the power holders ignore the request or refuse to take action, personal frustration will occur. If this frustration is limited to one person, nothing will happen, but if several individual requests are rejected from the same power holder, a larger section of the society will feel frustrated. More and more people will aggregate around multiple and collective unsatisfied demands, creating what Laclau and Mouffe call "chain of equivalence" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). This chain of equivalence is a key element in the process of building a collective identity: it creates an extensive political front with broad claims and interrelated demands, forming nodal points of identity (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). The chain will link multiple and diversified unfulfilled claims and will crystallize around an "empty signifier" or a common denominator, thus creating oneness around this empty signifier that will be transformed with time into a collective identity.

This transformation is a long process and involves the emergence of myths (Laclau 1990). Myths work as an anchoring point for a variety of social demands that can reach the level of social imaginary, a state where the group goes beyond its personal interests to reach universal level (Laclau 1996). People will not lose their particularities and differences, but will be able to link them to a social imaginary, thus identifying themselves to a larger group that will reach a collective identity. People gain a sense of solidarity and pride that enables them to demand rights as a group and to crystallize around a dichotomy of "us" versus "them", a crucial element to the process of collective identity creation.

This collective identity is regarded as an act of collective imagination, an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006) that is key not only for social movements and political actions but also to transforming societies into nations. Nation creation relies on myths of shared history, quality and descent and not on what nations really are. In the case of popular identity, the empty nodal points will crystallize around an empty signifier: the people (Laclau 2005a). This popular identity allows individuals to gain a sense of solidarity and pride in oneself and will divide the society in two opposite parts: Us, the people, "the only legitimate populous" (Laclau 2005a, 81) against the other, the power holder.

In the study of social movements, collective identities are recognized as crucial to mobilize movements (Jasper, Tramontano and Aidan 2015). Scholars also recognize several strategies that enable the development of collective identities: in order to recruit more participants and to sustain solidarity and commitments, movements have to strategically frame their identity (Jasper, Tramontano and Aidan 2015). They can choose between a unified and clear frame and a more fluid and deconstructed one. During the peak of October protests,[14] several tents, mostly concentrated in Downtown Beirut, created hubs for grassroots movements to share information and allow fruitful discussions. However, as of today, Lebanese protests lack a clear frame for a unified collective identity. It has been a deliberate strategy by protestors in order to avoid meddling by external players, namely the traditional sectarian power holders. This has weakened the participation of a larger crowd and led even to the exit of core activists.

Another challenge is the essence of identity: Melucci (1995) emphasizes on identity as a process and as a fluid one, suggesting that the content of an identity is not stable and permanent. It is a process of continual identification (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). This fluidity of identity may stir internal contestations whenever differences of opinions and contestation within the group arise (McGarry and Jasper 2015). As well as other social movements, Lebanese protesters groups are contested internally regarding the purpose, strategies and identity of the movements. This leads sometimes to irreconcilable disagreements and even to the destruction of the groups. Movements are also driven by individual ego or ambition of its members, which can also affect the membership and duplicate the efforts. Internal contestations confused the public during 2015 protests, which led to the loss

of popular support. Internal contestations also appeared during the 2019 protests and resulted in some activists' withdrawal and people's confusion. According to Maddison (2004), internal conflicts are essential to the success of a movement: internal disputes make room for discussions regarding key topics, such as goals, tactics and action plans. This has the potential to renew and offer more clarity to the movement's vision and purpose and to ensure unity for future collective action.

More than 100 protest groups were created during these protests and since May 2020[15] more and more initiatives have been working to transform the vague dissatisfactions and multiple claims into a set of unified political agenda and demands (Al Fakhry). Lebanese protesters aggregated around a chain of equivalence and as long as the power holders did not satisfy their demands, they are in the process of linking these unsatisfied demands to an empty signifier. Lebanon's protests raised awareness about "we", the people, against "the elite" and mainly their corruption, nepotism and inefficiency. They engendered public debates about democracy, corruption and civil rights. The people as an empty signifier is in the process of polarization into "Us" against "Them" but still lacks a myth and a social imaginary in order to stigmatize a popular collective identity.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates the potential of protest populism that Lebanon is experiencing to counter the deeply rooted identity populism. We explored the qualitative ethnographic method to capture the fluid, unstable and complex identities and to assess if these protests are leading to a popular identity that would undermine the prevailing and supposedly fixed sectarian identity. We analyzed the social, historical and political context of sectarianism and identity populism in Lebanon and compared analyses and approaches since the 2nd half of the nineteen century until the ongoing popular protests, covering also the identity dilemma during the declaration of Greater Lebanon in 1920 and the independence of the Lebanese state in 1943. While the protests continue to unfold, the survey technique included immersion in 2019-2020 on-going protests and semi-struc-

tured interviews with protesters with a long history of activism in order to capture the complex dynamic of the identity process.

The study provides a contribution to the literature related to the protest populism and popular identity in divided sectarian countries and to the Lebanese context in particular: From a contextual perspective, it is, to our knowledge, the first research on the on-going Lebanese protests that tackles identity in general and the rise of a popular identity. The results challenged the perception about the fixed sectarian Lebanese identity and paved the way for future quantitative research on popular identities as alternative to sectarian identities in ethnic divided societies. Nevertheless, despite the novelty in the analysis of the popular identity in Lebanon, it is crucial to recognize the limitations of the study. Although the ethnographic qualitative approach uncovered the underlying process of the protests and the slow evolution of the Lebanese national identity, the sampling size does not allow us to generalize the results unless a quantitative research based on a representative sample of the Lebanese population. The study doesn't aim to generalize but rather to gain understanding of the potential of the on the on-going protests to shape a popular national identity that can counter sectarian identity. Another major limitation of the study is the constantly evolving process of national identities (Jenkins 2014) and its fluid content (Melucci 1995) making it very difficult to capture specially in the context of on-going protests.

Even though the limitations of the research, the study showed a clear change in the attitudes within the protestors. Lebanon's popular protests are slowly transforming modes and thinking of people's everyday life that reinforces sectarian divisions. These movements upset what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) describe as the "molarities"[16] of social thinking and order: the process through which individuals are assigned into categories by endowing them with a specific identity or theme that delimits change. The technologies of molarity work by promoting territorialization, stratification, organization and basically the enclosure of social groups into specific areas, thus reinforcing division (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). It is reinforced in Lebanon by sectarian populism from the traditional power holders, and increases the chances of border conflicts, civil wars and separatist movement (Metz 2018).

In contrast to molarities, the social movements in Lebanon display the characteristics of molecularity,[17] in reference to fortuitous structures that de-territorialize space, create crosscutting social relationships and destabilize the sectarian identity of the society (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). Even though the political salience of ethnicity limits nonsectarian social movements, they can still transform modes of everyday life and thinking that reinforce social divisions. Focusing on autonomous and anti-identitarian movements that refuse to be labeled, as they are still doing until now, allowed them to escape from the accusations of violating traditional sectarian categorizations.

Nevertheless, the identity dilemmas that social movements in divided societies face are complex. Social change does not happen overnight, and social movements take time and years of planning. Social movements are not parties or unions and cannot be assessed upon their instant impact on political systems. Their main task is to create opportunities for individuals to leave the confinement of their ethnic identities and to opt for alternative identities that transcend traditional sectarian interests (Nagle 2015). In order to deconstruct the sectarian identity and reconstruct a popular identity, social movements should ensure consistency and durability by focusing on strengthening the organizational aspect of the identity rather than the political and ideological ones. The organizational structure of a movement is not the only key to achieve the desired outcomes; it is a goal in itself. Creating cross-cleavage movements in ritualistic forms and re-appropriating symbolic public spaces can ensure momentums and galvanize solidarities. Creating emotional moments of togetherness, empathy and unity allow groups from all sections of society to come together, participate and, above all, feel emotions that will energize collective actions. Emotions are what energizes collective action (Polletta and Jasper 2001) and are essential to the sustainability of the movement. A particular moment of togetherness and overwhelming emotions is the human chain organized all over Lebanon. It showed how this emotional moment reinforced the ideal of unity through diversity and the idea that differences should be celebrated rather than fought against.[18]

Another key element in the process of reconstructing identities is rhetoric. By focusing on oneness, shared values and attitudes, powerful stories and narratives shared on digital media support the process of creating self-consciousness

and social imaginary. The power of narrative can be widely used to stress out and amplify the dichotomy of "us", the people, as a homogeneous category against "them", the victimizers and power holders' elite. By establishing intentionally populist rhetoric around "we" against "them", these grassroots movements can create an inclusive populism that seeks to create unity between divided sectarian groups around the same political issue, thus undermining the sectarian identity dueled by sectarian populism.

In Lebanon, the sectarian ruling elites are still ignoring the requests of the people and focusing on preserving their interests, giving time to popular protests to structure themselves and gain maturity in framing their popular identity. However, this process is still underway and still has many challenges and several stages to undergo. They must clearly frame their popular identity, demonstrate institutional failure, and organize grassroots emotional momentums and debates in order to advance their agenda, develop a populist rhetoric, educate the people and gain their support. If the Lebanese succeed to re-categorize themselves more in a term of an inclusive popular identity, then, despite sectarian differences, they can start to see themselves as part of a common national group with positive attributes.

Notes

1. The Cedar revolution that took place in 2005 after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri is not part of our study. Although protestors contested the sectarian system, we consider it mainly as a top-down action initiated by traditional sectarian parties and leaders. It ended by splitting protestors between two camps based on their confessional and political affiliations: pro-west March 14 (Sunni and Christian) and pro-Syrian occupation March 8 (Shi'a and Christian). Another mobilization, during the Arab protests in 2011 will not be part of the study too as it was sporadic and failed to gain traction.

2. 12 Christian communities (Maronite, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox and Protestant), 4 Muslim communities (Sunni, Shiites, Isma'ili, Alawite), Druze and Jewish.

3. Four Maronite, three Druze, two Greek Orthodox, one Greek Catholic, one Sunni Muslim and one Shi'a Muslim.

4. Lebanon's golden age started in the mid-fifties until the civil war in 1975.

5. One of the country's main Christian Maronite leader and president of the republic of Lebanon between 1952 and 1958.

6. A Pan-Arab nationalist ideology based on the thinking of former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

7. Current president of the Lebanese republic and previous commander of the Lebanese army. He was appointed as interim prime minister between 1988 and 1990 when he led the "War of Liberation" against the Syrian army established in Lebanon. He rejected the Tai'f Agreement in 1990 and was forced into exile in France by Syrian forces.

8. Current leader of the Lebanese Forces Party and previous right-wing Christian militia.

9. The Revolution in Arabic, as it is called by the protesters.

10. The Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, the Socialist Arab Lebanon Vanguard Party, the People's Movement and The Democratic Youth Union (the youth organization of the Lebanese Communist Party).

11. Jihad Nammour is a professor of Political Sciences at Saint Joseph University. Previous member of "Sakarit El Dekkane", an anti-corruption activist group, he considers himself as a militant citizen. He has actively participated to the protests since 2005 and was engaged alongside Saint Joseph University's students and tents in Downtown Beirut.

12. Chawki El Fakhry is a civil engineer, an activist and founding member of the Civil Center for National Initiative. He is advocating for a civil state in Lebanon and the creation of a senate to separate religion from civil status.

13. Zeina Karam is an activist involved in several movements and organizations (Irap, Farah El Ataa, Beirut Madinati). She lived for 30 years in France and returned in the early 2000s to Lebanon and supported grassroots movements.

14. October, November and December.

15. After the confinement related to the outbreak of the Covid-19.

16. Re-appropriated from molarity used in chemistry to denote the concentration of a substance in a liquid.

17. Molecularity in chemistry denotes the mechanism in which two reacting species or more combine in the transition state.

18. According to discussions with participants during the human chain.

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