

# POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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## The maronite church's influence on lebanese political structure: from historical dominance to contemporary challenges

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### Abstract.

This paper examines the historical and contemporary influence of the Maronite Church on Lebanon's political structure and state formation. The Maronite Church, one of the oldest and most historically significant churches in the Middle East, has played a crucial role in shaping Lebanon's unique confessional system. While Lebanon has historically been a place where Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have coexisted, the Maronite Church has maintained a dominant position, particularly through the constitutional requirement that the President of Lebanon must be a Maronite Christian. The study analyzes the transformation of Maronite political influence from the pre-civil war era to the current Second Republic, established following the Taif Agreement. The research focuses on the significant reduction in Maronite political power post-civil war, where the presidential role became largely ceremonial while powers shifted to the Sunni Prime Minister. The paper examines the case of Michel Aoun, Lebanon's president from 2016 to 2022, whose controversial alliance with Hezbollah represents a significant shift in traditional Maronite political alignment. The study reveals how contemporary challenges including high emigration rates, low birth rates, and economic crisis have weakened the Maronite community's political influence. Despite constitutional guarantees, the Maronites face an uncertain future in Lebanon's complex sectarian political landscape, raising questions about the sustainability of the current confessional system and Lebanon's political stability.

### Keywords:

*Maronite Church*  
*Lebanon*  
*Confessionalism*  
*political structure*  
*sectarianism*

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

### **Introduction**

The Maronite Church stands as one of the oldest and most historically significant ecclesiastical institutions in the Middle East, its influence extending far beyond the realm of religious affairs into the very foundations of Lebanese statehood and political identity. Established in the late 4th century by Saint Maron, a Syrian monk whose ascetic teachings attracted followers in the mountains of Lebanon, the Maronite Church has evolved into a unique religious and political force that has shaped the trajectory of Lebanese history for over fifteen centuries (Salibi, 2019). Its profound impact on the formation and continued existence of the Lebanese state cannot be overstated, as it represents not merely a religious institution but a cornerstone of Lebanese national identity and political legitimacy.

Lebanon has historically functioned as a remarkable example of religious pluralism in the Middle East, serving as a sanctuary where the peoples of the three major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—have coexisted within a relatively small geographical space. This coexistence, while not without its challenges and periods of conflict, has created a unique confessional system that distinguishes Lebanon from its regional neighbors (Makdisi, 2019). Among these religious communities, Christianity has maintained a prominent position, with the Maronite Church emerging as the most influential Christian denomination and a dominant political force throughout Lebanon's modern history.

The Maronite Church occupies a distinctive position within the broader Catholic communion, acknowledging the supremacy of the Pope in Rome while maintaining its own liturgical traditions, canonical structures, and cultural practices. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which represents the Western Catholic tradition, the Maronite Church belongs to the Eastern Catholic tradition, serving as a bridge between Eastern and Western Christianity (Hakim, 2013). This unique ecclesiastical position was eloquently articulated by Pope John Paul II, who described the relationship between Western and Eastern Catholic Churches as "the two lungs of the universal Church through which the Catholic faith breathes"

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

(St. Monica's Parish, 2017). This metaphor captures the essential complementarity between these traditions and underscores the Maronite Church's role in maintaining the diversity of Catholic expression.

The geographical and demographic context of Lebanon provides the backdrop against which Maronite influence must be understood. Lebanon, covering an area of 10,452 square kilometers with a population of 5,364,482 people, represents one of the most densely populated and religiously diverse countries in the Middle East. The current religious distribution reveals a significant demographic shift from earlier periods: 67.8% Muslims (31.9% Sunni, 31.2% Shia) and 32.4% Christians, with Maronite Christians constituting the largest Christian group (Central Intelligence Agency, 2022). This demographic transformation has profound implications for the political balance of power and the future of confessional governance in Lebanon.

Despite its modest size, Lebanon occupies a position of disproportionate significance in Middle Eastern affairs, functioning as a cultural and religious crossroads that has attracted the attention of regional and international powers throughout history. The country's territory has served as a bridge between East and West, a meeting point of civilizations that has fostered both cultural exchange and political complexity (Traboulsi, 2012). This strategic location has subjected Lebanon to numerous external influences and conflicts, yet the country has demonstrated remarkable resilience in preserving its unique diversity, which manifests in both religious and ethnic plurality.

The Maronite community represents far more than a religious minority; it constitutes a foundational element of Lebanese political architecture and national identity. Maronite Christians have played a crucial role in the formation and development of the Lebanese state, from the establishment of Greater Lebanon under French mandate to the complex confessional arrangements that characterize contemporary Lebanese governance (Khalaf, 2002). Their influence extends beyond numerical representation to encompass cultural, educational, and economic dimensions that have shaped modern Lebanon's character and orientation.

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

This analysis seeks to examine the multifaceted role of the Maronite Church in Lebanese politics and society, exploring both its historical significance and contemporary challenges. The study aims to demonstrate why the Maronite Church remains important in contemporary Lebanese politics, what influence it continues to exert on state formation and governance, and why the constitutional requirement that Lebanon's President must be a Maronite Christian persists despite demographic and political changes. Through this examination, we will analyze the situation in Lebanon from both political and social perspectives, considering the complex interplay between religious identity, political power, and national governance in one of the Middle East's most unique political systems.

### **The Lebanese Second Republic: Transformation of Maronite Political Power**

The establishment of the Lebanese Second Republic following the Taif Agreement of 1989 marked a watershed moment in the evolution of Maronite political influence and the broader reconfiguration of Lebanon's confessional system. This transformative period fundamentally altered the balance of power that had characterized Lebanese politics since independence, initiating a process of political restructuring that continues to shape contemporary Lebanese governance. The Taif Agreement, formally known as the Document of National Understanding, emerged from protracted negotiations aimed at ending the devastating civil war that had torn Lebanon apart for fifteen years, but its implementation brought profound consequences for the Maronite community's traditional political dominance (Hanf, 2019).

As a direct result of the Taif Agreement, the previously existing status quo was systematically altered, significantly diminishing the institutional role of the Maronites within Lebanon's political framework. While the agreement preserved the constitutional principle that the country's president must be a Maronite Christian, this symbolic continuity masked a substantial reduction in presidential powers and authority. The office of the presidency, once the pinnacle of executive power in Lebanon, was transformed into a largely ceremonial position, with many of the president's former powers and

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

responsibilities being redistributed to other offices, most notably to the Sunni prime minister (Picard, 2016). This redistribution represented more than a mere administrative reshuffling; it constituted a fundamental rebalancing of sectarian power that reflected the new demographic and political realities of post-war Lebanon.

The parliamentary reforms introduced by the Taif Agreement further exemplified this systematic reduction of Christian, and particularly Maronite, political influence. The agreement brought comprehensive changes to the formation and composition of parliament, altering the sectarian distribution of seats in ways that dramatically reduced Christian representation. Whereas the pre-war parliamentary system had allocated seats according to a 60-40 distribution favoring Christians, the new arrangement established an equal 50-50 division between Christians and Muslims (Diss & Steffen, 2017). This seemingly modest numerical adjustment had profound implications for legislative politics, effectively ending Christian parliamentary majorities and requiring new forms of cross-sectarian coalition building to achieve political objectives.

Contemporary Maronite political challenges extend far beyond institutional reforms to encompass broader socio-demographic trends that threaten the community's long-term political viability. Today, the Maronites face a complex array of socio-political problems, driven primarily by demographic decline resulting from high emigration rates and persistently low birth rates. These demographic pressures have created a self-reinforcing cycle of political marginalization, as reduced numbers translate into decreased political influence, which in turn provides additional incentives for emigration among politically ambitious community members (Baroudi, 2018).

The Lebanese diaspora, which has grown substantially since the civil war, consists predominantly of Maronite Christians who have concentrated their settlements in Latin America, France, and the United States. This geographic distribution reflects both historical migration patterns and contemporary preferences for destinations where Christianity represents the dominant religious tradition. The loss of

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

political privileges following the civil war served as a powerful catalyst for this emigration wave, prompting many Maronites to abandon their ancestral homeland in favor of developed nations where they perceived greater opportunities for social and economic advancement without the constraints of sectarian politics (El-Husseini, 2012).

### **Michel Aoun: A Case Study in Contemporary Maronite Politics**

The presidency of Michel Aoun, who held office from 2016 until 2022, provides a compelling lens through which to examine the complexities and contradictions of contemporary Maronite political leadership. Aoun's career trajectory and political evolution encapsulate many of the broader challenges facing the Maronite community in the post-Taif era, making his case study essential for understanding both the opportunities and limitations of Maronite political influence in modern Lebanon (Nasr, 2021).

Michel Aoun remains a controversial and polarizing figure whose political alliances have fundamentally challenged traditional assumptions about Maronite political orientation. His party, the Free Patriotic Movement, became directly allied with the Shiite parliamentary bloc, which maintains close ties with Hezbollah, creating an unprecedented political configuration that defied conventional sectarian alignments. This alliance generated significant division within the Maronite community, creating competing factions of supporters and opponents whose disagreements extended beyond mere political preferences to encompass fundamental questions about community identity and strategic orientation. The broader context of Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis further complicated these internal divisions, as economic hardship intensified debates about political effectiveness and leadership accountability (Haddad, 2020).

Understanding Michel Aoun's political evolution requires careful examination of his personal trajectory and the historical forces that shaped his worldview. Born on September 30, 1935, Aoun's Maronite Christian identity provided him with the constitutional eligibility to seek the presidency, but his path to that office proved far more complex than his sectarian credentials might suggest. The constitutional

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

requirement that Lebanon's president must be a Maronite Christian represents one of the few remaining institutional guarantees of Maronite political influence, yet achieving the presidency requires broader parliamentary support that transcends sectarian boundaries, forcing Maronite candidates to build complex coalitions across religious lines.

Aoun's military career, beginning with his entry into the Lebanese Army in 1958 and culminating in his promotion to general in 1984, positioned him as a key figure during the tumultuous civil war period. His participation in the civil war reflected his commitment to preserving the political status quo that had favored Christian communities, naturally leading him to advocate for maintaining the institutional privileges that Christians had traditionally enjoyed within the Lebanese system. This stance placed him among the most vocal opponents of the Taif Agreement, which he correctly perceived as a mechanism for fundamentally restructuring Lebanon's political order in ways that would significantly limit Christian political power while correspondingly strengthening both Shiite and Sunni Muslim influence (Zahar, 2015).

The conclusion of the civil war forced Aoun into a fifteen-year exile in France, a period that profoundly influenced his subsequent political development and strategic thinking. Following the 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, which occurred in the aftermath of the Cedar Revolution, Aoun returned to his homeland and established the Free Patriotic Movement, which rapidly emerged as the country's primary Maronite Christian political party. The initial orientation of his party toward Western and European powers reflected both his extended residence in France and the traditional Maronite preference for maintaining strong ties with Western Christian nations (Salamey, 2014).

However, the most surprising and controversial aspect of Aoun's political evolution was his decision, beginning in 2016, to form a formal alliance with Hezbollah, a partnership that was codified through a detailed memorandum of understanding (Frakes, 2022). This alliance fundamentally altered the dynamics of Lebanese politics by creating an unprecedented coalition between the country's largest

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Maronite party and its most powerful Shiite organization. The strategic logic behind this alliance centered on Aoun's recognition that securing Shiite support represented the most viable path to achieving his presidential ambitions, given the mathematical realities of parliamentary arithmetic and the need for cross-sectarian coalition building.

The October 2016 parliamentary election of Michel Aoun as president, following nearly three years during which parliament had been unable to achieve the necessary consensus to elect a president, demonstrated both the effectiveness of his alliance strategy and the continuing importance of sectarian calculations in Lebanese politics. Hezbollah played an instrumental role in facilitating his election, with all votes allocated to Shiite parliamentary seats supporting Michel Aoun's candidacy, thereby making his election relatively straightforward once this crucial support was secured. This electoral success validated Aoun's strategic calculation that pragmatic alliance building could overcome traditional sectarian boundaries, but it also committed him to maintaining these relationships throughout his presidency.

During his six-year presidency, the alliance with Hezbollah not only persisted but evolved and strengthened, with Hezbollah and the broader Shiite community remaining among his most reliable pillars of political support. This relationship enabled Aoun to maintain political stability and legislative influence despite the ceremonial limitations of the presidential office, but it also associated his presidency with Hezbollah's broader regional agenda and ideological orientation. The persistence of this alliance throughout his tenure demonstrated both its practical utility and the extent to which contemporary Maronite political leadership had adapted to new political realities that required cross-sectarian partnership for effective governance.

The economic dimensions of Aoun's presidency proved particularly challenging and ultimately damaging to his political legacy and to broader Maronite political credibility. During his tenure, Lebanon experienced one of the most severe economic crises in its modern history, characterized by currency devaluation, banking sector collapse, and widespread social unrest. Aoun faced legitimate

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

criticism for his administration's handling of this crisis, particularly given numerous revelations of corruption involving individuals within his immediate political circle. These economic failures occurred against the backdrop of broader governmental dysfunction and highlighted the limitations of Lebanon's confessional system in addressing complex policy challenges that required technical expertise and cross-sectarian coordination.

Michel Aoun's presidency thus represents a fascinating case study in the contradictions and complexities of contemporary Maronite political leadership. His career trajectory illustrates the tension between preserving traditional Maronite political influence and adapting to new political realities that require pragmatic coalition building with former adversaries. Once regarded as a stalwart defender of Christian and Maronite interests—both through his military service and his political opposition to the Taif Agreement—Aoun's presidential tenure was characterized by unexpected strategic choices that challenged conventional assumptions about sectarian political behavior. His alliance with Hezbollah, an organization widely recognized by Western nations and Israel as a terrorist organization, represented perhaps the most dramatic example of this strategic adaptation, demonstrating the extent to which contemporary Maronite politicians must navigate complex regional and international pressures while maintaining domestic political viability.

Moreover, Aoun's inability to implement meaningful political reforms or effectively address Lebanon's economic crisis highlighted the structural limitations facing any Lebanese president, regardless of their sectarian affiliation or political skill. His presidency ultimately led the country into an even deeper political and economic impasse, raising fundamental questions about the effectiveness of Lebanon's confessional system and the capacity of traditional sectarian leadership to address contemporary challenges (Al Jazeera, 2022). These failures had particular resonance for the Maronite community, as they occurred during a period when demographic decline and political marginalization had already weakened the community's overall influence within Lebanese

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

society.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have discussed the Maronite Church in Lebanon and its influence on the country's political structure. The Maronites, who once constituted the majority among Lebanon's religious groups, no longer represent the majority today. Although, under the existing agreement, the country's president continues to be a Maronite Christian, his role and functions have visibly diminished in the post-civil-war era and, as we have already noted, have taken on a largely ceremonial character. As a result, both the Maronites and Lebanon itself find themselves in a complex situation.

The transformation of Maronite political influence from the pre-civil war era to the contemporary Second Republic represents a fundamental shift in Lebanon's confessional system. The Taif Agreement, while maintaining the symbolic requirement of a Maronite presidency, effectively redistributed political power away from the Christian community toward a more balanced sectarian arrangement. This redistribution has been accompanied by significant demographic changes, with Muslim populations now comprising approximately 67.8% of Lebanon's population, fundamentally altering the religious landscape that once favored Christian dominance.

The case of Michel Aoun exemplifies the challenges facing contemporary Maronite political leadership. His controversial alliance with Hezbollah, a departure from traditional Maronite Western orientation, demonstrates the pragmatic adaptations necessary for political survival in Lebanon's complex sectarian environment. However, this alliance has also contributed to internal divisions within the Maronite community and raised questions about the compatibility of traditional Christian values with current political realities.

The ongoing economic crisis, coupled with high emigration rates among Maronite Christians, threatens to further erode the community's political influence. As the Lebanese diaspora continues to grow, particularly in Latin America, France, and the United States, the demographic foundation supporting Maronite political power continues to weaken. This trend

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

raises fundamental questions about the sustainability of Lebanon's confessional system and the future role of sectarian identity in Lebanese politics.

It remains to be seen whether either the Maronites or Lebanon itself will succeed in overcoming the sectarian divisions that persist in the country and in ultimately ending the conflicts that have raged since the civil war. The path forward requires addressing both the structural limitations of confessionalism and the broader challenges of national unity in an increasingly diverse society.

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## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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