Activism, Change and Sectarianism in the Free Patriotic Movement in Lebanon

Joseph P. Helou

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The self-immolation of the Tunisian fruit-cart vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 sparked a nationwide protest movement in his country, which quickly inspired protests in several other Arab countries that toppled long-standing dictatorial regimes. Some of the ensuing protest movements evolved into bloody civil wars, as in Libya and Syria, where the external military intervention of state and non-state actors further complicated prospects for a peaceful transition to democratic rule (Lynch 2016).

The political process generating these protests quickly became the topic of concern in several research works examining some of the influencing factors: the role of the media in the 2011 protests (Lynch 2014, Chap. 5); the political elite in prioritizing political reform while dismissing economic reforms to preserve their interests (Abdelrahman 2012); and the leaderless nature of the protests, which often transformed into broad coalitions of ideologically opposed actors that fractured the political scene and provided an advantage for the more organized actors, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Durac 2015). Prior to the Arab uprisings of 2011, this political process hosted Islamist actors as organized forces providing breeding grounds for often violent activism (Hafez 2003; Wiktorowicz 2004; Wickham 2015) and labor movements that were infiltrated and manipulated by the regime (see Beinin and Lockman 1998; Beinin and Vairel 2011; Beinin 2015). Although dimensions of the political process varied across Arab states, different authoritarian practices were a hallmark of the Arab state system, which, in turn, decreased the access points

to government and limited avenues for political participation. Therefore, examining the composition, ideas and mobilization of social movements and other forms of protest activity became important to understand how people expressed their demands collectively outside the institutions of the state.

Perhaps Lebanon stood out from among its Arab counterparts because its political system allowed for a wide margin of political participation, with minimal intervention of national security forces in national politics. Yet, as the Syrian suzerainty of Lebanon weighed in heavily on Lebanese post-war politics in the period 1990–2005, some authoritarian practices seeped into the Lebanese political arena by diffusion (El-Khazen 2003). Lebanon's political system can be characterized as a state with fragmented institutions undergirded by elite practices mired in high levels of corruption (Leenders 2012), and as a sectarian system incentivizing people to pledge allegiance to a group of political, financial-economic and religious elites at the expense of the state (Salloukh et al. 2015), which, in turn, gains its vitality from a vast network of patron–client relations that often provide citizens with access to resources and public goods through the intercession of elites that are influential with the state (Hottinger 1961; Khalaf 1968, 2003; Cammet 2014; Helou 2015). Its domestic politics can be understood by closely examining the nature of the political and constitutional order prevailing in the country both before and after the Lebanese Civil War that began in 1975 (Hudson 1968; Picard 1996; Leenders 2012), the factors contributing to the conflagrations of the Lebanese Civil War (Salibi 1976; El-Khazen 2000; Randal 2012), and the Lebanese post-war elite who were allied with Syria (El-Husseini 2012). While this book recognizes the complexities embedded in Lebanese politics, it does not seek to adopt any of the aforementioned aspects of Lebanese politics as the focus of this study.

In fact, this book chooses to focus on the experience of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) in a political context governed by the dialectic of the complex nature of Lebanese politics, which on the one hand hosts democratic avenues for participation, and on the other buttresses a sectarian system with fragmented state institutions and a network of patron—client relations. This context shows that the 30-year-old trajectory of the FPM includes the early formation of the movement during the final stages of the Lebanese Civil War in 1989, its emergence and persistence as a secular freedom movement during the period 1990–2005, and a transformation into a sectarian political party following 2005.

Such a diverse and often contradictory political history can provide valuable insights into an experiment in social movement activism for many aspiring political movements and parties throughout the Middle East region. This book speaks to practitioners and intellectuals and mostly addresses those whose interests lie in collective activity, social movement and political parties, especially in the Middle East. It also makes a valuable contribution to Middle Eastern politics by illuminating the role of political activists whose backgrounds happen to be predominantly middle-class Christian, which, in turn, adds a new empirical case study to the fields of social movements and minority politics.

The FPM began taking shape when supporters, comprising largely Lebanese Christians, rallied in support of the political proposals of Lebanese army commander Michel Aoun, whose public appearances in 1989 won him popular support. Following his defeat in a Syrian-led military attack in 1990 and his expatriation to France, Aoun's supporters marched in the shadow of their leader in Lebanon, forming what became known as the FPM, which launched collective activity—that is protests, demonstrations and the distribution of pamphlets—and called for the freedom, sovereignty and independence of Lebanon, despite the many challenges imposed on the movement by the Lebanese political elite. However, this social movement not only managed to survive throughout the period 1990–2005, but even transformed itself into a political party after the return of Aoun to Lebanon in 2005. Even today, the FPM continues to exist as a powerful player in Lebanese politics, with a sizable bloc in Parliament and members serving in the Council of Ministers.

Aims

This book seeks to present an empirical analysis of a Lebanese political movement that had an important impact on the course of national politics, especially in the country's post-war scenario, as a sizable movement that was disenfranchised from formal participation in conventional politics (Parliament, Council of Ministers, positions within the state bureaucracy, etc.) in the period 1990–2005. Although this movement conveyed secular political ideas in relation to its counterparts, the sociological composition of the movement's membership was clearly tilted toward middle-class Christians, while simultaneously welcoming activists from various Muslim denominations into its ranks. Therefore, the disenfranchisement of the FPM from Lebanese politics and the expatriation of its leader, Michel

Aoun, spelled the exclusion of Lebanese Christians from actively engaging in national politics.

Despite the FPM's exclusion from national politics, the Lebanese political system was never too authoritarian to prevent the rise of opposition voices in civil society, including the FPM. With more than 20,000 troops based in Lebanon, a political elite favoring their policies and sectarianism pervading every nook and cranny of politics on the national and societal level, Syria was able to dominate and manipulate Lebanese politics, but never controlled every aspect of its existence. The political environment prevailing in Lebanon throughout the period 1990–2005 can best be described as "authoritarianism by diffusion," as suggested by Farid El-Khazen (2003), which bore witness to a number of non-transparent political practices in the country that were sponsored by Syria or its allies among the Lebanese political elite.

Ironically, the prevailing political conditions in post-war Lebanon accommodated sectarian practices, corruption and democratic avenues for participation, which, in turn, challenged the rise of opposition movements, such as the FPM, but without rendering their emergence a mission impossible. Therefore, this book seeks to explore the rise of the FPM amid a fluid and nuanced, but no doubt challenging, political environment. This work will analyze the opportunities that favored the emergence of the FPM after the expatriation of its leader, Michel Aoun, to France in 1991. It will uncover the kind of opportunities and ideas that incentivized FPM activists to partake in collective activism by organizing strikes, protests, sit-ins and so on, to voice their objection to the sectarian practices and corrupt dealings of the Lebanese political elite and to Syria's overshadowing role in Lebanon. This analysis seeks to anchor the pivotal role that civil society (members of syndicates and unions, university students and ordinary individuals across towns and villages) played in building the FPM as a social movement across Lebanon.

Another aspect this book aims to uncover is the role that FPM activists—that is, university students, members of syndicates and individuals in a number of towns and villages—played in ensuring the persistence of their movement's activism. With numerous challenges to overcome, FPM activists could not have built a movement without a semblance of organization to mobilize for activism, resources to ensure the persistence of their movement, and ideas and incentives to deepen activists' commitment to the FPM throughout the period 1991–2005. By shedding light on its operations, this book seeks to reveal the role of both Aoun and

FPM activists in forming the FPM. Typically, accounts of the movement exaggerate the role attributed to Aoun in its organization. Therefore, the analysis will strike a much-needed balance by revealing the role of various other actors.

Since this book examines the three-decade trajectory of the FPM, it will seek to analyze the institutional transformation that occurred within it following the return of Aoun to Lebanon in 2005. The institution of the FPM as a political party, the assignment of individuals to positions within the newly established party, and its participation in conventional politics (Parliament and Council of Ministers) led to a series of issues within the party that clearly characterized a transitioning social movement. Therefore, this work aims to uncover the impacts these struggles had on the shape of the party and its activities.

In addition, the book will show how the FPM turned from a movement that expressed a relatively secular political outlook and ideas to one that adopted sectarian political discourse, practices and strategies to compete against its sectarian counterparts in conventional politics; that is to say, how its members emerged victorious in parliamentary elections in the post-2005 period. They also sought to maintain their movement's position as the defender of the rights of their support base, which predominantly comprised middle-class Christians. Yet precisely why the FPM turned sectarian and how it managed to evolve in order to preserve its support base is a puzzling aspect that will be explored in this empirical account.

Rationale

The primary rationale warranting a study of the FPM is to fill a gap in the Lebanese social movement's literature. The main reason no one has analyzed the movement is because a study of it during the period 1990–2005 was almost impossible, given the tremendous challenges imposed on the FPM, which, in turn, obliged the movement to maintain a certain level of secrecy to ensure the success of its activism. Researchers who might have been willing to study the movement during the period 1990–2005 would have encountered difficulties in gathering data, since FPM activists were quite cautious about sharing information with anyone regarding their political activism within the movement for fear of being hunted down by national security institutions, such as the Lebanese army, Internal Security Forces, General Security Directorate and State Security Directorate.

Therefore, studying the FPM, which was clearly opposed to the political elite of Lebanon and the intervention of Syria in Lebanese affairs, only became possible following the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005, which provided the movement with the right to assemble freely.

Of course, an important rationale for the study of the FPM, and movement politics in Lebanon generally, is to understand how these movements interact with their broader political context. In this respect, the Lebanese state, which is driven by a complex set of disunited and fragmented institutions, a disunited and quarreling political elite, and sectarian politics, which, in turn, is manifested in high levels of post-war corruption, cannot be treated as a unitary actor as such. Since the FPM was faced with this type of fragmented state, this author was interested to analyze to what extent it was able to reject the established order on the one hand, and to what degree it coexisted within the established order on the other.

In addition to studying the interaction of the FPM with the Lebanese political system, the extent to which the movement was able to combat Lebanese sectarian politics or otherwise succumb to certain features of sectarianism constitutes an essential rationale for this research. Sectarianism is not only a power-sharing agreement that assigns members of a sectarian community to the positions designated for their specific sect within the Lebanese political system, but also a political-economic system fostered by the political elite to share in the spoils of government and then use some of those resources to mobilize the loyalty of their supporters. This book embraces the definition of sectarianism advanced by Salloukh et al. (2015, p. 3), who define it as "a modern constitutive Foucauldian socioeconomic and political power that produces and reproduces sectarian subjects and modes of political subjectification and mobilization through a dispersed ensemble of institutional, clientelist, and discursive practices." Those authors view sectarianism as a holistic political-economic and ideological system that pervades many aspects of Lebanese life, which is underpinned by clientelist patronage networks and a symbolic repertoire that incorporates large segments of society into corporatized sectarian communities. This sectarian system results in a distorted incentive structure that redirects individual loyalties away from state institutions and symbols toward sectarian communities and their political and religious elite (ibid.).

Although the FPM expressed forms of collective action that resembled many other social movements, such as protests and demonstrations, what makes a study of it extremely significant is the way it was able to run

its political activity in spite of limited access to resources and exclusion from the institutions of the state, such as Parliament and the Council of Ministers. Therefore, it is possible to further appreciate the significance of this research and its aims by pinning down the precise nature of this partial exclusion from the Lebanese system, which allowed the FPM to emerge in professional syndicates, student elections on university campuses, on municipal councils and in towns and villages, while remaining officially banned as a political movement. This work seeks to clarify to what extent the Lebanese political elite consciously determined for which political positions FPM activists were allowed to strive or in which particular areas they were permitted to emerge. It will investigate to what extent FPM activists were able to build on political activities that were regarded as insignificant by the political elite, to emerge and persist as a movement throughout the period 1990–2005.

Yet another rationale for an analysis of the FPM is to contribute to the expansion of the Middle Eastern social movement repertoire by analyzing a movement with a secular political outlook, but whose active members are predominantly middle-class Christians. The logic of this complex relationship, characterized by a movement whose members are predominantly Christian on the one hand and whose political ideas are secular on the other, should be clearly examined given the sectarian features of Lebanese politics. In other words, examining to what extent the FPM was able to stand out as a secular movement or otherwise play by the rules of Lebanon's sectarian politics requires some elucidation.

Research Methodology

This book draws on 30 semi-structured interviews as primary sources of information to flesh out FPM narratives of activism, change and sectarianism during its examination of the emergence, persistence and institutional transformation phases of the movement. During the interviews the author conducted, FPM activists shared their experiences in movement activism as well as their dissatisfaction with some internal party affairs. While this author draws on the information gathered from these semi-structured interviews, no part of this work replicates the ideas, opinions or proposals of FPM activists without subjecting them to critical review.

Therefore, readers of this work should understand that this research does not constitute a movement publication that reveals the subjective voices of FPM activists, but a critical analysis of the movement that inte-

grates these voices into an analytical framework that paints a coherent narrative of the FPM. This narrative seeks to provide valuable insights into FPM activism, change and sectarianism throughout the movement's 30-year trajectory.

The author sampled FPM activists for interviews using the snowballing technique. By pinpointing a few famous FPM activists in Lebanon, it was possible to identify some members of the core group of activists, some of whom spent an extensive period of time in mobilizing FPM activism throughout the period 1990–2005 and beyond. After interviewing some of these members, the author was able to widen the interviewee sample by gaining information on FPM activism involving other activists.

On average, the author spent 90 minutes interviewing each FPM activist. These interviews were recorded in Arabic and then translated and transcribed by the author. This process generated approximately 450 pages of typed script, which were analyzed for the dimensions of the FPM under scrutiny.

As such, this method generated important primary sources of information that contributed to the story fleshed out here. The author also relied on secondary sources of information, such as newspaper articles from the Lebanese daily *Annahar*, which covered FPM activism throughout the 1990–2005 period. Both these primary and secondary sources help explain the dimensions of the FPM in this book.

Central Argument

This book demonstrates that the role of FPM activists and Michel Aoun were the key factors that built on political change to bring about the emergence and institutional transformation of the FPM on the one hand, and to mobilize resources for the persistence of the movement on the other. FPM activists played a crucial role in dealing with the opportunities and resources at their disposal to bring the movement to life by launching rounds of activism and continuing to express their political thoughts, while also having to face the attempts of the political elite to weaken their movement. They also had to deal with the challenges imposed by the sectarian politics of Lebanon, which affected the transformation of the FPM into a political party in the post-2005 period by drawing it away from its secular political discourse toward the adoption of more overt sectarian strategies and discourse. Despite the importance of political change in bringing about the emergence and institutional transformation of the

movement (an essential aspect of this analysis, no doubt), it is the role of agency—that is, FPM activists and their leader—which illuminates many aspects of the study's three lines of inquiry: emergence, persistence and institutional transformation.

The emergence of the FPM could not have occurred without the effective role of FPM activists and Aoun in seizing the right opportunities for the rise of their movement. FPM activists first saw in the rise of Aoun to the office of Lebanese premier an opportunity to wash away their grievances, chiefly because Aoun was the antithesis to the wartime chaos they had suffered. These activists continued seizing numerous opportunities in post-war Lebanon, which helped their movement emerge within universities, professional syndicates, towns and villages, before making a more visible appearance nationally. On the other hand, Aoun also played an essential role in the emergence of the FPM by framing messages and ideas that, in turn, helped to identify prevalent political issues, propose solutions and motivate individuals to action, thus having a positive bearing on the emergence of the movement. Therefore, by examining why FPM activists and Aoun acted the way they did and exercised their agency when given political opportunities, we understand why the crucial role of FPM activists and Aoun helped lead to the FPM's emergence when it happened.

The FPM's persistence also depended on the active role FPM activists played in mobilizing resources and channeling them to organize collective activity on the one hand, and on the way they structured the FPM and devised tactics to overcome attempts to weaken their movement on the other. The resources at the disposal of FPM activists may not have been substantial, but their dedication to their movement helped them structure it in a way that enabled them to persist without the need for communication (particularly in small, loosely connected and decentralized activist units). However, whether mobilizing resources, structuring the movement or employing tactics to encourage activism, the central feature of the FPM was its dedicated activists, who made sure it remained active throughout the period 1990–2005 as a social movement. As already discussed in the explanation of the FPM's emergence, the role of Aoun in framing FPM messages also ensured its persistence, chiefly by keeping activists in line with the movement's principles and goals, in addition to calling on them to adopt corrective action by persisting in their activism. Therefore, an analysis of the FPM's persistence should provide an adequate account of the role of FPM activists and Aoun in contributing to

the mobilization process of the movement, because merely concentrating on the resources involved in the organization of FPM activity cannot properly convey how the movement organized its activity and overcame the challenges it faced.

The availability of certain political opportunities helped to provide a conducive environment for the FPM to participate in parliamentary elections and operate formally in the political context of Lebanon. However, although these opportunities provided an important political setting for the operation of the FPM following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, they were not directly responsible for the transformation of the movement into a political party. It was the decisive agency of Aoun that played the determining role in transforming the FPM to a political party in 2005. Therefore, while political change provides conducive conditions for several aspects of movement activity, it is only by examining the conscious decisions of agency or leadership that we understand why individuals chose to act the way they did, given their circumstances.

However, because of the complexities of Lebanese politics, which is guided by an institutionally fragmented state with political elites with diverging views and sectarian politics manifested in high levels of corruption, political opportunities alone do not determine when the FPM engages in activism, especially in the post-2005 period. Perhaps in the period 1990–2005, when the FPM was partially excluded from formal participation in the Lebanese political system—that is, excluded from participation in parliamentary elections, while emerging actively within professional syndicates and on university campuses—political opportunities helped show when the FPM would emerge. However, with the FPM's formal participation in the 2005 parliamentary elections and its subsequent participation in the Council of Ministers, other factors, such as sectarian competition among the contending political parties in Lebanon, contribute to an understanding of movement politics and, thus, when those movements or political parties participated in activism.

In fact, FPM activism was often carried out throughout the period 1990–2005 to highlight the existence of a political movement that voiced its objection to the dominant sectarian political system in Lebanon, in addition to its unwavering objection to the presence of Syrian troops on Lebanese turf. It was thus directed at the political elite, many of whom were represented in Parliament, the Council of Ministers and as heads of influential political parties or movements. However, upon the return of Aoun to Lebanon in 2005 and the participation of the FPM in con-

ventional politics, the movement found itself having to operate within the Lebanese sectarian political context. In other words, for a movement whose rank-and-file activists and leadership comprised predominantly middle-class Christians, this reality led it to compete naturally for the support of the Christian community and, as a consequence, adopt a discourse that expresses the concerns of the Christian community of Lebanon in terms of bettering their gains within the political system, while simultaneously struggling to hold on to its reputation as a movement that promoted secular ideas in the period 1990–2005. Therefore, the Lebanese political context is not a springboard for political opportunities that determines the ebb and flow of FPM activism, but rather a fluid environment in which opportunities, sectarian politics, electoral calculations and the need to maintain effective mobilization of supporters may lead movements to consider activism as a course of action.

Moreover, this analysis draws on aspects of political process theory to explain empirical questions on the emergence, persistence and institutional transformation of the FPM by referring to the theoretical concepts of political opportunity, mobilization and framing, without excluding the role of other explanatory factors, such as the agency of activists and the impact of Lebanese sectarian politics on various dimensions of the movement. As this book will reveal, agency plays a crucial role in all the stages of the FPM, thereby emphasizing the need to analyze the interaction between agency and structure together and not separately, or without dissociating one from the other. Moreover, structure, or the political context, involves more than a series of political opportunities that lead to the ebb and flow of movement activism. As evidenced by the case of Lebanon, the political context includes sectarianism as a characteristic feature that influences the course of most political phenomena, including movement activism.

Findings

This book presents important findings that contribute to a better understanding of the FPM. These reveal the role of leadership, social class, sectarian politics and ideas in the various stages of the movement.

By examining the political opportunities that FPM activists seized for their movement's emergence, this research finds that the FPM was able to emerge initially by seizing opportunities in civil society, such as elections on university campuses and in syndicates, before participating in the

municipal elections of 1998. Because the sectarian strategies of Lebanon's political elite had contributed to the partial exclusion of the FPM from Lebanese politics—that is, from enjoying a presence in Parliament and the Council of Ministers, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters—activists sought other avenues for their movement's emergence. These findings are of empirical significance to scholars of Lebanese politics because, since the FPM did not enjoy a presence in conventional politics in the period 1990–2005, this is the first study that empirically tracks the developments that helped the movement emerge.

Furthermore, another crucial finding that this book uncovers is the full role of FPM activists in bringing the movement to life and ensuring its persistence throughout the period 1990–2005. This contribution is significant chiefly because the way in which these activists operated during Aoun's years in exile was largely unknown by the general public, and by many journalists too. In fact, during this author's search for pieces in the archives of the Lebanese daily newspaper *Annahar*, no article was found that describes in any detail the way these activists operated. Whether this information had been purposefully obscured by FPM activists to ensure the safety of their activism or not, the current examination of the FPM contributes to the literature of the movement by grounding it in an understanding of the role of activists, Aoun and political conditions in Lebanon throughout the movement's trajectory.

The research finds that the role played by agency in the FPM helped the movement express an ideational character, maintain its reputation as peaceful by adopting non-violent means of collective activity, and organize for collective activity despite many challenges. It uncovers how the FPM relied on the formation of small, loosely connected and decentralized activist units for the organization of activism to overcome the challenges it confronted in post-war Lebanon. Moreover, the analysis of the internal and external structures of the FPM helps to show how the movement was able to gather resources and channel them to ensure its persistence within Lebanon by maintaining a relationship with groups abroad for lobbying purposes.

This examination of the FPM also makes important contributions to the repertoire of Middle Eastern social movements generally, by highlighting the existence of a political movement whose members were mainly middle-class Christians, but whose political outlook was founded on secular ideas. In examining the movement through this lens, the results generated two outcomes. First, during the period 1990–2005 in which the

FPM was partially excluded from the institutions of state—that is, the Parliament and the Council of Ministers—it seized certain political opportunities and spaces to launch its peaceful activism against the presence of Syrian troops on Lebanese soil and the sectarian politics of the Lebanese political elite. As a result, the FPM was able to demonstrate its secular orientation by highlighting ideas that appealed to activists from both the Christian and Muslim communities of Lebanon, in spite of its membership base comprising predominantly Christians.

Secondly, when Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon in 2005 and the FPM was able to be represented in Parliament and the Council of Ministers, the movement became more influenced by the country's sectarian politics and, as a consequence, found itself voicing a platform that aimed to achieve the demands of Lebanese Christians. Since the electoral constituencies the FPM represented were mainly Christian, the movement not only sought to fulfill its promises to Lebanese Christians, but also found itself in fierce competition with other Christian parties, such as the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb, which, in turn, obliged the FPM to compete with these sectarian parties. This kind of sectarian competition made it adopt a more sectarian discourse and thus shift away from its previous ideas of secularism to the adoption of a bold Christian viewpoint.

Since the FPM yielded to some sectarian strategies and discourse in the post-2005 period, this study finds that the political system of Lebanon was able to reproduce sectarian modes of political subjectification and mobilization, in the words of Salloukh et al. (2015), even within the FPM, which had been established on non-sectarian ideas. However, it also finds that the FPM's predominantly Christian support base in the period 1990–2005 did not inform the movement's strategies or discourse, particularly because the FPM did not participate in conventional politics. However, with its participation in parliamentary elections and the Council of Ministers after 2005, the FPM was obliged to serve its electoral constituencies of mainly Christian voters, which included thousands of sympathizers beyond its committed activist base, who demanded social services and infrastructure projects. Due to this reality and the fierce competition the FPM faced from other Christian parties, it adopted sectarian strategies and discourse in servicing its Christian voter base. Therefore, this book shows that it is the actual participation in conventional politics that led the FPM to adopt features of sectarian politics, and not simply the composition of its support base.

As will be revealed throughout this book, this contribution to the field of Lebanese political movement literature fills an existing gap that is due to an absence of a complete analysis of the trajectory of the FPM. This