

The Implications of Political Sectarianism on Political Stability: A Dialectic of Construction and Econstruction

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Abstract:

This paper endeavors to scrutinize the phenomenon of political sectarianism and elucidate its multifaceted repercussions on political stability. Although the interplay between political sectarianism and political stability is a relatively nascent subject, it constitutes a contentious arena within the global scholarly community. This debate centers on the interpretation of the concept and its extensive ramifications across multiple dimensions. In nations characterized by ethnic, linguistic,

and religious plurality, and where managing such diversity presents considerable challenges, it becomes imperative to engage critically with political sectarianism. It is important to explore the inherent contradictions of political sectarianism and its linkage to state stability, necessitating both the strategic construction and reformative mitigation of its impacts, which are intrinsically dualistic—either stabilizing or destabilizing. Consequently, adopting a conciliatory governance approach becomes indispensable for states grappling with sectarian diversity.

Keywords: Conflict; Factional divisions; Homogenization; Political sectarianism; Political stability.

Introduction:

From a conceptual perspective, the discourse on political sectarianism and its correlation with political stability engenders significant scholarly interest due to its inherent complexity. The prevalence of states lacking sectarian homogeneity exacerbates this complexity. The existence of diverse sectarian groups within a single state often precipitates internal strife and sharpens divisions along sectarian lines, particularly as sects vie for dominance over political power and economic resources. Such scenarios foster a milieu of conflicting interests and the proliferation of multiple identities and sub-identities, which stand in contrast to the overarching national identity.

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Political sectarianism serves as a paradoxical instrument that can either foster political stability by contributing to the state's foundational continuity or act as a catalyst for division and intensify sectarian strife, thereby posing a significant threat to international stability. The challenge of forming cohesive governance in multi-sectarian states often impedes the achievement of political consensus, necessary for formulating policies that accommodate the comprehensive social and political rights of all stakeholders.

Various political regimes strive to assimilate sectarian groups into the modern state framework, a process contingent upon the state's capacity to integrate these groups without infringing upon their rights. The approach to managing political sectarianism as an extant reality plays a pivotal role in either reinforcing or undermining political stability. The issue of doctrinal diversity significantly destabilizes political harmony in states with multiple sects, complicating efforts to reconcile these groups and formulate inclusive political resolutions that uphold the social and political rights of all citizens. Hence, political sectarianism emerges as a critical concern relating to the representation of all sects within the political arena and the adaptability of political systems to incorporate them effectively.

The importance of this study stems from the myriad intricate challenges posed by political sectarianism, which necessitates effective management to secure political stability in the affected nations. This management is crucial to prevent political sectarianism from being exploited as a mechanism of external coercion or as an internal destabilizing force that fosters chaos and instability.

This paper aims to elucidate the phenomenon of political sectarianism, examining both its constructive and destructive roles, and to highlight its consequential effects on either bolstering or compromising political stability.

Research Problem: The central quandary of political sectarianism lies in its dual challenge: firstly, it tests the inclusivity of political representation across various sects; secondly, it examines the capability of the political system to embrace diversity and dissent without compromising the rights of any sectarian group, thus ensuring a foundational level of political stability.

The research question posed in this study is as follows:



- Does political sectarianism function as a supportive element or a threat to political stability in states?

To address this question, our analysis will proceed along three primary sections.

First Section: Political Sectarianism: Definitions and Implications:

Globally, nations manifest a plethora of sectarian identities grounded in religious, ethnic, or racial distinctions. This diversity not only enriches societal fabric with its unique customs and traditions but also introduces complexities when intertwined with political frameworks. The scholarly discourse on political sectarianism is rich and varied, with numerous scholars providing nuanced definitions that address its multifaceted dimensions. This section endeavors to refine our understanding of this concept, scrutinizing it from both a general and a specifically political lens.

1- Linguistic Definitions of Sectarianism:

The term 'sectarianism' originates from the word 'sect,' which linguistically signifies a part or fragment of a whole. In its singular usage, 'sect' may refer to an individual, whereas, in its plural form, it denotes a collective, suggesting a group united by a shared identity or purpose⁽¹⁾.

Furthermore, 'sect' implies a segment or fraction, ranging from an individual to a larger collective, symbolizing the notion of individuality within unity⁽²⁾.

Sectarianism entails membership in a designated religious or social faction, distinct from ethnic groupings. Thus, individuals from diverse national backgrounds and linguistic affiliations may converge within a single sectarian group, transcending their geographical and cultural origins

Building upon the aforementioned definitions, it becomes evident that the term "sectarianism," derived from "sect," refers to a numerical component of a group that is neither strictly limited to few nor many. The term is interchangeable with "faction" or "group." A sect comprises individuals, generally not exceeding one thousand, who diverge from the collective within a specifically chosen framework to which they have committed—whether this commitment manifests as an adherence to a particular doctrine, ideology, or perspective. These individuals then focus their efforts on promoting this chosen aspect at the expense of



commonalities with the larger entity to which they belong. For example, within a Muslim nation, there are multiple sects, and sometimes, the importance of the specific issues championed by a sect may override the broader allegiance to the nation. This phenomenon can be observed among adherents to various doctrines or factions.

It is posited that an individual becomes sectarian when they elevate the priorities or doctrines of their sect above the shared values with the broader nation, allocating more attention to these sectarian interests than to the communal bonds that ideally connect them to the larger body of the nation. As a result, despite remaining connected to the larger national body, they may become virtually isolated from it⁽³⁾.

Thus, from a linguistic standpoint, a "sect" signifies an affiliation to a specific group, and the nexus between a sect and sectarianism lies in the latter being a constructed identity. This description highlights the inherent linkage among individuals based on shared foundational principles, most notably those of an ideological nature.

2- Procedural Definitions of Political Sectarianism:

This exploration delves into how sectarianism extends from individual societal levels to encompass political representation of the sects these individuals affiliate with, thereby manifesting at the state level. We are thus concerned with examining the sect within a distinctly political context. The ensuing discussion will outline key definitions of the term within this domain, which bifurcates into two distinct orientations: one negative and the other positive.

2-1. Political Sectarianism from a Negative Perspective:

Political sectarianism is often viewed through a negative lens, where the differences among sects escalate into outright rejection of the other, thereby undermining political system stability. The Political Encyclopedia defines political sectarianism as a "regressive socio-political system that relies on treating the individual as part of a religious category that substitutes for their political stance, and along with other sects, constitutes the state's political body. This system is inherently fragile due to its foundation on vertical divisions that disrupt its unity and cohesion."⁽⁴⁾ This delineation suggests that such division originates within the structure of the political system and permeates to societal layers, in scenarios where sectarian loyalty overrides the national unity that should ideally coalesce all individuals under the citizenship principle.



Burhan Ghalioun underscores that sectarian peril intensifies when it intersects with politics, positioning sectarianism within the political rather than religious sphere. He describes it as "a constellation of phenomena manifesting the utilization of inherent religious, ethnic, and clientelistic loyalties tied to favoritism, aimed at circumventing public policy laws and transforming the state from a mechanism for fostering collective benefit to an instrument for advancing specific, narrow interests."⁽⁵⁾

Therefore, the presence of doctrinal diversity within a state is natural unless exploited to prefer one sect over another or to enable a sect's monopolization of power, thereby intensifying and entrenching sectarian conflict among the society's members at the expense of broader issues. These issues become instrumentalized by the political regime and power brokers as a tactical lever when necessary⁽⁶⁾.

Azmi Bashara regards political sectarianism as inherently antithetical to defining national interests, aiming instead to secure narrow, partisan interests at the cost of sidelining national concerns⁽⁷⁾.

This pragmatic interpretation of sectarianism suggests that political sectarianism's deployment within the state transforms this originally religious notion into a new ideological form of political factionalism. This transformation ultimately perpetuates violence and sectarian entrenchment, counteracting integration and peaceful coexistence in accordance with the contemporary state's demands and the realities some societies face.

Hassan Moussa Al-Saffar characterizes political sectarianism as discriminatory practices among citizens that foster sectarian conflict for political ends.⁽⁸⁾

In this framework, political sectarianism, laden with its negative implications, stands in opposition to the concept of a social contract envisioned to prevail among free, equal, and equitable citizens, irrespective of their social identities. Thus, it transposes community-based sectarianism, rooted in individuals' affiliations to various sects, into a political realm where power is monopolized for the benefit of one sect over others, invariably threatening the sought-after stability.

2-2. Political Sectarianism from a Positive Perspective:

This perspective conceptualizes political sectarianism as a juridical framework ideally suited to multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian states,



superior to alternative governance models, notwithstanding the actual outcomes which are influenced by a variety of factors.

Aql Aql posits in his definition that political sectarianism is an integral and efficacious element of the socio-political fabric. It ensures political equilibrium among the diverse societal components, thereby facilitating equitable representation of all sects within highly pluralistic societies without privileging one group over another. Consequently, this system is deemed indispensable and the optimal approach for administering and stabilizing pluralistic societies⁽⁹⁾.

Charbel Nahas concedes that despite the potentially negative repercussions, the political sectarian system functions as a structured form of political organization within society. It systematically arranges the state apparatus based on the historical and religious legacies of institutions, incorporating a model where various groups and sects have stewardship over diverse entities such as schools, corporations, associations, courts, and media outlets⁽¹⁰⁾.

From these analyses, it becomes evident that the conceptualization of political sectarianism diverges along two distinct trajectories—one negative and the other positive. This bifurcation prompts the recognition that political sectarianism, as a governance system, represents a feasible and appropriate choice for managing states characterized by diverse sects and ethnic compositions. However, in its practical enactment—actual governance—it tends to rely extensively on a quota-based system, which frequently engenders adverse outcomes, reinforcing sectarian divisions and eroding allegiance to the nation-state.

Second Section: Political Stability: Conceptualization and Indicators

Political stability is a multifaceted and intricate concept, marked by a lack of clarity in its foundational aspects. As such, the interpretations and implications of political stability are numerous, varying across developed and developing nations and characterized by multiple intertwined dimensions. It is among the more elusive political concepts, primarily due to the extensive debate concerning its unified definition, as it is deemed a collective imperative for states and their citizenries alike. This discussion aims to unpack the concept through the diverse metrics used to measure it, which vary significantly across different contexts.



1. Linguistic Interpretation of Political Stability:

The term "political stability" originates from the root "to stabilize," implying permanence, steadiness, and tranquility⁽¹¹⁾. This semantic interpretation resonates with definitions found in various international dictionaries addressing stability.

Larousse defines stability as the persistence of a state or condition in its existing form, denoting a state of ongoing equilibrium. The Britannica Encyclopedia characterizes political stability as the condition in which a political system sustains itself during crises without internal strife⁽¹²⁾.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Political Stability:

Political stability is a relative concept that has not been distinctly or conclusively defined; therefore, we will present a compilation of conceptual frameworks:

Alan Ball conceptualizes political stability as a general consensus among the elite and the masses regarding the operational rules of the political system, linked to the notion of political legitimacy.

Richard Higgott describes political stability as the capacity of political institutions to adeptly address crises and manage internal conflicts, thereby maintaining their structural integrity. This involves instituting necessary adaptations to meet at least the minimal expectations and needs of the populace⁽¹³⁾.

LeBest posits that political stability is the outcome of the political system's performance when it functions efficiently and effectively in areas of political and economic development, political legitimacy, and efficacy⁽¹⁴⁾.

Samuel Huntington categorizes stability based on the relationship between political participation and institutionalization, varying across three levels—low, medium, and high—and differentiates between civilian and praetorian systems⁽¹⁵⁾.

Hirots considers stability through a holistic lens, encompassing numerous elements such as preventing sudden governmental collapses and coups that could disrupt the political system and necessitate a reconfiguration of its institutions and governance structures.

Drawing from these definitions, it is evident that achieving stability requires concerted efforts from both the political system and the community. When the political system garners widespread acceptance due to policies that yield tangible benefits, citizens perceive this system

as representative of their interests, fostering a commitment to preserve state institutions and the overarching social order. This collective engagement culminates in a state of stability⁽¹⁶⁾.

In conclusion, political stability is achieved not merely through systemic efforts but also through the engagement and acceptance of the citizenry, fostered by policies that deliver concrete results, enhancing the representativeness of the system and deepening national loyalty essential for sustaining the institutional and social frameworks of the state.

3- Indicators of Political Stability:

The methodologies for identifying indicators of political stability vary significantly, influenced by different theoretical frameworks and reference points. Some analysts approach the identification of these indicators from the perspective of instability, noting the prevalence of instability in various nations marked by loss of sovereignty, institutional fragmentation, exacerbated sectarian tensions, and deepening social and economic inequalities (e.g., Iraq, Libya). Conversely, others investigate the phenomenon within distinct research paradigms, drawing on specific national experiences⁽¹⁷⁾.

The following encapsulates the primary indicators of political stability:

- Legal transition of power within the state
- Legitimacy of the political system
- Sovereignty
- Stability in political leadership positions
- A robust political system and effective government administration.
- Democracy, characterized by enhanced civic engagement and participatory governance.
- Absence of violence, including the eradication of civil wars, separatist movements, and insurgent activities.
- Established principle of citizenship
- A thriving economy
- Low levels of internal and external migration
- A constitution that not only guarantees rights and delineates duties but also ensures an equitable distribution of political positions and economic resources, accommodating societal diversity based on equality.

These elements collectively delineate the contours of political stability within any governance system. Stability may be compromised by formal indicators directed against the regime, such as demonstrations, riots, and political crises, or by informal indicators targeting state institutions, such as inflation, elevated unemployment or poverty rates, or public dissent against governmental policies. Nonetheless, these phenomena are typically linked to specific destabilizing factors within a particular state and resist easy generalization across different contexts.

Third Section: The Dual Impact of Sectarianism on Political Stability: Consolidation and Destabilization

Earlier discussions delineated two distinct interpretative lenses through which political sectarianism is analyzed in relation to the political system: one positive and the other negative. In line with this bifurcated perspective, it is methodologically sound to examine the influence of political sectarianism on political stability from both these viewpoints.

1. The Significance of Political Sectarianism in Consolidating Political Stability:

This analysis focuses on elucidating the principal advantages that a sectarian political system offers to societies marked by ethnic, racial, or religious diversity. Its primary capability is fostering coexistence among various sectarian groups within a single state. The benefits include:

1.1. Minority Rights Within the Principle of Citizenship:

The term "minorities" refers to demographic groups within a state or region that differ from the majority in ethnic, linguistic, or religious attributes, without necessarily assuming a distinct political or class-based stance. It is important to note that approaches to minorities diverge significantly depending on a state's proximity to democratic practices. In "advanced" countries, the presence of minorities does not hinder national unity, as all individuals contribute to societal cohesion. In contrast, in developing nations, multiple crises-fuelled by both internal and external factors—can provoke violence and instability, promoting the "divide and rule" strategy by instigating minority antagonism against the majority under the guise of oppression, consequently diminishing their national loyalty⁽¹⁸⁾.

According to the principle of consensus and within the framework of citizenship, the sectarian political system ensures equitable living conditions for minorities through social interactions that render them effectively equal. This system operates under democratic foundations that ensure freedom of expression and equality in rights and responsibilities, fostering a commitment to national loyalty that transcends diverse and varied group affiliations, regardless of sectarian, religious, or tribal distinctions⁽¹⁹⁾.

Therefore, sectarian representation in a political sectarian system becomes a pivotal criterion for ensuring minority rights. In pluralistic societies with complex political dynamics, purely national, non-sectarian political representation that can inclusively reflect all sects on the political stage is unattainable⁽²⁰⁾. Consequently, moving away from a sectarian system and its representation of clannishness and tribalism as though relinquishing citizenship and political rights would mean relinquishing all authority and participation in decision-making affecting minority groups. This results in a diminished capacity to contribute to the establishment of a governance structure that maintains control over the populace. In such a context, the less represented sect finds itself compelled to depend on its sectarian affiliation, which acts akin to a political party defending the interests of its members and solving their affiliation issues in the absence of other viable alternatives to secure their lives, ensure their dignity, and maintain their psychological and material balance⁽²¹⁾. When these groups find their voices unheeded by the ruling authority, they may resort to non-political alternatives, often yielding counterproductive outcomes as these are typically rooted in violence and rebellion.

1.2. Consociational Democracy: Balancing Stability and Sectarian Tensions:

Consociational democracy is characterized by its provision for political powers that represent various societal sects to possess a "mutual veto." This mechanism allows these factions to halt decisions by other political entities if perceived as detrimental to their interests, regardless of their proportional weight. This governance model is particularly pertinent in contexts with profound societal divisions that can only be mediated through such a system⁽²²⁾. Thus, this form of democracy is suited to states with significant social diversity, where

each sect maintains distinct principles, cultures, languages, and ideologies⁽²³⁾.

At its core, consociational democracy acknowledges the diversity of sectarian and denominational power centers within society. To safeguard these varied interests, legislation underpins the sectarian political system to prevent any single group from dominating the others. This is accomplished by placing leaders of sects and political parties at the forefront of the state's legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Lebanon serves as a quintessential example, where the positions of President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of the Parliament are allocated to different religious sects.

Social diversity alone does not justify the adoption of consociational democracy; this diversity is also present in states that employ majority democratic systems. Rather, the rationale for its implementation is rooted in the challenges of achieving social harmony among diverse sects, often impeded by deep-rooted sectarian or ethnic barriers. This is accomplished by strategically placing leaders of various sects and heads of political parties in pivotal roles within the state's legislative, executive, and judicial branches. An illustrative case is Lebanon, where the distribution of key political offices—Christian as President, Sunni Muslim as Prime Minister, and Shia Muslim as Speaker of the Parliament—epitomizes this approach.⁽²⁴⁾

Consequently, consociational democracy emerges as a strategic alternative to circumvent exacerbation of conflicts and prevent political instability. For this model to be effective, conducive political, economic, and social conditions are essential. These conditions facilitate not only the establishment of a pluralistic society but also the enhancement and structuring of democratic governance.

2. Political Sectarianism and Political Instability:

The discussion of the positive aspects of consociational democracy might suggest that, at least theoretically, it prioritizes national over narrow tribal, clannish, or ethnic loyalties, aiming to foster a culture of coexistence within a unified state. This approach seeks to preserve societal unity and avert internal divisions.

However, the solutions proposed by this system often lean more towards the idealistic than the realistic. When applied in practice, numerous challenges and questions arise that highlight significant vulnerabilities. The practical application of this system can descend to



the lowest levels of efficacy, burdened by the inherent tax of relinquishing societal stability and even threatening the political entity of the state itself, as observed in countries like Iraq and Libya.

The inherent risks of this system include:

2.1. Weakening of State Sovereignty:

sovereignty denotes the supreme, unique authority inherent to the state, enabling the monopoly of legitimate coercive force essential for the enactment and enforcement of laws⁽²⁵⁾. In situations where consociationalism fails to provide a peaceful political climate and yet mandates a system recognizing diversity, it must simultaneously embody state authority and general law compliance across all represented political entities. This is to ensure that sectarianism does not devolve into conflict, quota-sharing, and violence.

Thus, while the consociational model theoretically acknowledges the pluralism of power centers within multi-ethnic states, it paradoxically may absolve the state from its protective responsibilities and undermine the enforcement of law. By institutionalizing sectarianism, it inadvertently strengthens sectarian and ethnic quota-sharing⁽²⁶⁾, fostering an environment where non-dominant sects perceive the system not as a consensus framework but as a "sectarian dictatorship." This perception can escalate issues to levels detrimental to state sovereignty, prompting oppressed sects to seek alternative means of asserting their rights, such as arming themselves, engaging in uprisings, or soliciting external support to challenge the political regime, thereby destabilizing the state.

2.2. The Legitimacy Crisis in Political Systems:

Legitimacy stands as a cornerstone of political stability and a fundamental guarantor of national cohesion. The public's acceptance of a political system enhances loyalty and a sense of national belonging while resolving interpersonal discrepancies. Max Weber (1864-1920) differentiated among three types of legitimacy, summarized briefly below:

– **Traditional Legitimacy:** Emerges from long-established traditions ingrained in the collective psyche through habitual acceptance. This form of legitimacy is often revered and unquestioned, exemplified by monarchical or tribal leadership.

– **Charismatic Legitimacy:** Derives its strength from the personal appeal and stature of a leader perceived by followers as a savior from



crises. This form is evident in figures such as prophets, saints, and both national and spiritual leaders.

– **Rational-Legal Legitimacy:** Based on the authority of law and constitutional governance, where institutions and statutes reflect the collective will of the populace, moving away from reliance on traditional heritage or charismatic individuals⁽²⁷⁾.

The crisis of legitimacy in political systems becomes apparent in environments marked by sectarian and denominational diversity. Particularly when a political system shifts away from a consensual framework representing all sects on the political stage, it risks being dominated by a single ideological perspective. This can lead to enhancing its power through the support of its ideologically aligned base, thereby augmenting its political and social standing. Factors such as demographic dominance, military strength, or economic and political influence often underscore this behavior, emphasizing allegiance to the sect over national loyalty. These dynamic fosters distrust among political factions representing diverse sects.

Here, the system's legitimacy stems primarily from the sect it represents, catering to its specific interests and demands because the sect reciprocally supports and amplifies the system's power. This close relationship, deeply rooted in shared ideological beliefs, operates within a framework of traditional legitimacy.

Conclusion:

In sum, both political sectarianism and political stability are contemporary concepts still under development and intricately linked in various aspects. They remain contentious topics among scholars and political analysts, who debate their precise implications.

Political sectarianism directly impacts the state's structure, either by fragmenting it due to an inability to embrace and accept diversity, or by contributing to the state's unity through consociational democracy. This system utilizes the diversity of opinions and sectarian differences to foster state service and stability.

The study concludes that political sectarianism presents considerable challenges—political, security, economic, and democratic—to states experiencing this phenomenon. It emerges not from a vacuum but as a consequence of decades of political governance that neglected rights and deviated from the principles of rule of law and institutional

integrity, with notable examples including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, and Bahrain.

Moreover, it is useful to capitalize on the successful international precedents in the integration of minorities and sectarian groups, Western political systems have adeptly transformed heterogeneous groups into a formidable force conducive to societal and state development. Prominent examples include Brazil, Malaysia, the United States, Canada, and key European nations, particularly Switzerland and the Netherlands. These countries have effectively implemented inclusive policies that enhance social cohesion and reinforce national unity

Drawing from the findings, a series of recommendations are proposed:

- It is essential to coordinate and collaborate earnestly among both official and unofficial state actors to address the factors that have precipitated crises and to mitigate the adverse effects of political sectarianism in countries that have experienced escalations in separatist conflicts, such as Sudan and Yemen.

- Conduct comprehensive internal and regional academic dialogues at all levels to study the phenomenon and establish foundations for peaceful coexistence in societies familiar with these issues.

- Commit to prioritizing the state's interest and unity over the narrow interests of various sects.

- Promote a political culture of national participation founded on enhancing values of individual respect and involvement in political activities, without discriminating among different segments of society.

- Strengthen the principle of citizenship and make consensus the cornerstone for achieving political stability.

- Develop a political socialization that elevates national identity above all beliefs and ethnicities that could cause division and conflict within society, and prevent its exploitation by internal and external entities to serve their interests.

- Build trust among citizens regardless of their political affiliations, ensuring they are active participants in the political system, while supporting shared points and neutralizing points of contention and conflict.

- Allocate political positions based on the principle of equal opportunities rather than a system of political patronage that exacerbates tensions in multi-sectarian societies.

- Embrace diversity and acknowledge the rights of different sects with respect for their religious, ethnic, linguistic, and political particularities, encouraging them to coexist. This approach fosters political stability in its most positive sense, which is the aspiration of both peoples and states alike. This can only be achieved in democratic political systems that recognize political participation and the peaceful rotation of power as guaranteed by the constitution in a rule-of-law state.

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