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Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon

Melani Cammett

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Summary by Leila Kabalan

The idea behind the book, *Compassionate Communalism*, materialized after Dr. Melani Cammett read an article in the *New York Times* about a healthcare facility in Baghdad that was taken over by a newly formed religious party during the American invasion of Iraq. Cammett was fascinated by the phenomenon of access to welfare services in a state where public welfare was crumbling. In that sense, Lebanon became her next logical research field as it is known for welfare provisions by non-state actors. Cammett wanted to understand why non-state actors distribute welfare and the reasons behind choosing to serve their in-group constituents to branch out to out-groups.

Why do non-state actors distribute welfare? Incentives, incentives, incentives

Cammett, who is currently Professor of Government at Harvard University, argues that parties within national institutions are theoretically obliged to provide non-discriminatory access to services. The efficiency and honesty of that can be argued, however, there are certain “normative pressures to serve all citizens regardless of sect because their resources are derived from national collective institutions”¹. Thus, the question that Cammett wanted to answer lies in why would non-state actors that use their own resources choose sometimes to serve constituents outside their sectarian groups. She sees that incentives are the main shaper of whether non-state actors distribute welfare strictly within their constituents or delve into out-group constituents.

According to Cammett’s quantitative and qualitative research in Lebanon, state-centric parties tend to distribute benefits to both in-group and out-group communities. Since those parties are more concerned with national elections and power over formal institutions of the state, they will reach out to a wider audience. This is also because the Lebanese electoral system is based on sect-allocated seats that are voted for from multi-sectarian districts.

By the same logic, extra-state parties have less reasons to serve out-group communities and thus their welfare services are reserved to their loyal supporters. Extra-state parties are not interested in the process of electoral politics.

¹ Cammett, M. (2014). *Compassionate Communalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Competition

Aside from the state-centric and extra-state binaries, Cammett sees that another determining factor for welfare provision is competition. The degree of competition for political distribution of the sect pushes for an intra-sect out-bidding dynamic. According to Cammett, in the Lebanese system political parties “face incentives to become the dominant political representative of their respective communities”². Thus, when a political party faces competition from another one of the same sectarian identity, paradoxically, it decreases its welfare provision in a process of out-bidding the competitors. When competition is low and political dominance of a sect is guaranteed, then a political party would increase the scope of welfare provision.

Consequences of Welfare Provision

Cammett concluded her talk by arguing that this opens up the space for understanding deeper notions of identity politics and its intersection with welfare provision. This complicated system of informal welfare provision has serious policy implications that can be widely seen across Lebanon. Sectarian welfare provision heavily marginalizes the public sector from its core duty. This in turn decreases the ability for a formation of a national identity leaving a citizenry widely dependent on their sectarian allegiances.

² Ibid.