

In addition, participants discussed the prevalent perception that Lebanon's economic imbalances were reflected in uneven development among the country's communal groupings (for example, the Maronites were perceived as the most affluent, the Shi'ites the most impoverished). Corm rejected the accuracy of this perception, noting, for example, the affluence of Shi'ite feudal landlords in the south. Participants agreed that there were upper, middle, and lower classes in each community, but that overall socioeconomic indicators demonstrated inequities. Samir Khalaf attributed this uneven development, in part, to different rates of exposure to modernizing forces (Maronite exposure began in the seventeenth century, whereas Shi'ite modernization was a much more recent phenomenon). Nevertheless, these intercommunal gaps were closing before the war began. Noting the socioeconomic levelling effect of the war, Richard Norton recommended reevaluating previous conceptions about sectarian and regional economic imbalances in light of new realities.

The Consociational System: Preservation, Reform, or Deconfessionalization?

A major point of contention among the Lebanese concerned the "fairness" and representativity of the confessionally based system. On the eve of the war, Lebanon's leaders were divided: some (especially conservative Christian elements)¹⁰ were committed to the preservation of the system and its confessional ratios for power-sharing; others (traditional Muslim leaders in particular) lobbied for reform so that the ratios better reflected demographic changes.¹¹ Yet others -- a "counterelite" composed of both Muslims and Christians -- called for the deconfessionalization of the system, asserting their political disaffection with sectarian quotas. As Hani Faris noted: "Large segments of the population

¹⁰ These leaders viewed the existing preferential status of the Maronites, especially as embodied in the considerable power of the president of the Republic (who was to be Maronite) as the only way to ensure the "security" of their community. Dissenters argued that Maronite privileges resulted in Maronite control of the state (to that community's advantage).

¹¹ Differential rates of population growth among Lebanon's communities had resulted, by 1975, in a clear Muslim majority composed particularly of Shi'ites. Questioning the justification for the continuation of Maronite political privileges given the new demography, Muslims began to call for constitutional reform. This aggravated the fears of some Christians who considered "reform" a ploy aimed at instituting Muslim domination.