

Introducing **Christiana Parreira**

Assistant Professor at the Geneva Graduate Institute.

Christiana Parreira is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations and Political Science at the Geneva Graduate Institute. Her research focuses on the role of local political institutions and actors in governance, looking primarily at post-conflict contexts in the Middle East and North Africa. We spoke about her upcoming book project, future plans, and her experience living across the world.

You currently have a book project that focuses on how local governance has shaped the state-building process in Lebanon. Could you tell us more about this book and why you chose to focus on Lebanon?

I first came to Lebanon for research in 2016, just after the last round of municipal elections. To be honest, I knew very little about local governance in the US, where I'm from, let alone in Lebanon. But because of the timing, this was something on the top of peoples' minds, and I was fascinated - the scholarship I had read about Lebanon focused on the Parliament, the presidency, and other types of Beirut-centric political machinery. But I quickly learned that much of "everyday politics" in Lebanon (as in many other places) takes place at the local level. For example, the quotidian aspects of daily life - garbage pickup, road maintenance, street lighting, public parks to walk in - are all handled at the municipal level, along with various other responsibilities.

So I went to interview municipal councilors across different parts of Lebanon with this in mind. When I began framing my research in these terms, municipal officials laughed at me. They told me they were



overloaded with these responsibilities but had no independent authority or funding to follow through on them. Some of them, mind you, were just discovering this, as they had only recently been elected. They told me that to govern locally, paradoxically, they needed the approval and support of the national government. And to get that, they needed the approval and support of the small set of parties who had controlled the national government since the end of the civil war. One former councilor from the second largest city in Lebanon, Tripoli, told me that he "couldn't so much as plant a tree" without asking a national political party.

From there, I tried to understand in more detail how these center-periphery relations operated, and how they evolved to uphold the interests of those in power rather

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than ordinary Lebanese constituents. This involved researching what ties between national and local authorities had looked like in the past; how they evolved during Lebanon's fifteen-year-long civil war; and how this process compared to other regional state counterparts. And what I found was that Lebanon's political order looks like a democracy on paper, but functions as an electoral autocracy in practice. It virtually eliminates voters' agency through monopolizing control by a small set of parties, specifically by monopolizing local control. Lebanon's 2019 protest wave provided further evidence of this, with protesters deliberately adopting a discourse that emphasized the totalizing control of the country's elite class and linking it to poor governance quality.

Besides your book, what do you have coming up in 2023?

I have a few projects in different stages of the pipeline that I'm excited about. One early-stage project focuses

on how legacies of displacement and militia participation during Lebanon's civil war shape contemporary political behavior, and another look at varieties of power-sharing from a more cross-national comparative perspective. In terms of fieldwork, Lebanon is scheduled to hold municipal elections in 2023, after having been delayed a year due to the economic crisis - so if they happen, I plan to be there to see if the tumult of the past few years will produce electoral upsets at the local level.

You are in Geneva, Switzerland, right now, but you have lived in 9 other cities and 5 other countries before that. What has been your favorite place to live so far, and why?

Most of the places I've lived as an adult have been by chance, but I've been very fortunate to live in each of them. One of the most unexpected places I've lived was in Rwanda. After college, I worked for a small public health organization outside Kigali. It was completely unrelated to anything I'd done or learned before, but it ended up being a crash course in research: the logistics of fieldwork; conducting interviews; constructing a narrative using different forms of evidence; and framing one's research for different donor audiences. Our offices were located on a large farm, so I also learned a few skills that I haven't had to use much since, like how to slaughter a goat...

Since starting my PhD, I've been lucky to end up in a series of wonderful places, each of which I associate with specific memories: running along the Charles River in Cambridge, the autumn foliage on Princeton's campus, and conversations over fondue next to Lake Geneva. But if I had to choose a favorite place, of course, it would be Beirut. I have lived there periodically for the last seven years, and I don't think it will ever cease (depending on the hour) to amaze, confuse, annoy, and inspire me.

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