

# Lebanon: between aspiration of changes and the ancient regime

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edited by  
Marco Di Donato and Patrizia Manduchi



RESOCONTI /2

The Syrian refugee crisis, the 2019 riots, the 2020 Beirut port explosion, a deep institutional and financial crisis. In these last years Lebanon and Lebanese experienced extraordinary events which hugely affected both people and institutions. This report is exploring all these crisis dimensions with the aim of providing “food for thought” and contribute to the debate related to the immediate future of the country and the role that youth can eventually play.

Thanks to the collaboration with Lebanese academicians and a well-structured field research performed in the country, authors have been able to present an unusual point of view with respect to some crucial issues that are affecting nowadays Lebanon: the resilience of the sectarian system, youths' aspirations for the future, new parties and movements aims and objectives and the “old regime” perspectives.

This report represents a unique “document” containing unprecedented testimonies. A “document” which will be hopefully upscaled by other academicians for their future research; a first step towards the comprehension of complex phenomena that will interest Lebanon institutions and Lebanese lives in the forthcoming years. As no final answer is ready yet, it is necessary to continue to research for it and stimulate debate around urgent and critical issues. “Leaving” (Irhal) cannot be the only solution both for corrupt politicians neither for Lebanese youths.

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Marco DI DONATO and Patrizia MANDUCHI



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## The role of universities for the future of the Mediterranean: The Lebanese paradigm

In the face of the various crises facing the southern shore of the Mediterranean, we often ask ourselves, from our perspective as a network of 140 universities from 23 countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region, what role UNIMED can play as a network and through its members.

The Lebanese youth protest movement of 2019, which found its vitality and strength within the universities, clearly illustrates the intrinsic potential of the university system which, beyond political and sectarian characterizations, can and should contribute to creating a positive humus for the future of the young Mediterranean generation.

The contributions of the researchers involved in the Irhal project, which demonstrate the extent to which young people and academics in Lebanon feel the need to go beyond constitutional multi-confessionalism, a system that has indeed created a barrier around a possible positive evolution of Lebanese politics, thus lend credence to the very nature of UNIMED: to give universities a long-term “political” role in creating the conditions for the development of a region as complicated as the southern shore of the Mediterranean, but so rich in history, culture and traditions common to much of Mediterranean Europe.

Debate, critical analysis, the search for solutions to common problems, close but always positive confrontation - all the dynamics typical of free and independent academic systems - can be disruptive in the long run and can also release that energy which is too often kept in check if not stifled.

However, the urgency of many Mediterranean regional crises does not allow us to wait too long. The future will depend on our actions today, on our ability to give space to the energy of which, in the case of the analysis proposed by this publication, Lebanese youth has become the vanguard during 2019. It is our duty to give space and support to this movement for freedom and especially to the strong demand for youth participation in the social, economic and political life of Lebanon. But this is also true for all countries in the MENA region.

UNIMED is and will always be close to the Universities in order to make them the promoters and also the guarantors of this demand for autonomy and freedom: it is time to act to go beyond the status quo. It is time to give meaning to the prospects of the future, to give space to a young Mediterranean generation.

This publication is the first in a series of UNIMED contributions on the role of universities in this perspective. We hope to offer not only an analysis of current trends but also to contribute, from our small and modest observatory, to give a positive perspective to the current debate, which is too often limited to geopolitical analyses without paying close attention to young students and academics as protagonists of social and civil life who can act as promoters of change, as we have learned from 2011 and 2019 in Lebanon.

It is to them that our continued commitment will return so that we can achieve the too frequently imagined and never really tenaciously pursued goal of a cohesive and peaceful Mediterranean region.

*Marcello Scalisi*

Director of UNIMED - Union of Mediterranean Universities



# For an analysis of Lebanese protests and the role of youth beyond the paradigm of confessionalism.

## Introductory remarks.

Patrizia Manduchi  
(University of Cagliari)

*Irhal* means: *Leave!* It is, as known, one of the most widespread slogans in the language of the so-called Arab uprisings, and it has been used as a slogan also in the Lebanese uprising of 2019. This simple word, or better, this imperative verbal form, represents very well the cry of protesters' demands in the popular uprisings arose across almost all the Arab world – uprisings and protests that strongly asked for answers to quests coming from below, from civil society in a context of political, economic, social and cultural crisis – the popular quest for a political and social change, against the repressive, ineffective, corrupt policies by authoritarian, neo-patrimonial regimes.

The focus of our project is the analysis of the political dynamics which have been shaking Lebanon since 2019, to try to understand the future prospects of this country which, after decades of dramatic political conflicts, is now undergoing to deep, protracted and overlapping (economic, social, political) crises, whose end is hard to see.

Lebanon is not so far from Italy in the Mediterranean and has always been, for its strategic position and its political role, a pivotal country for regional policy and geopolitical developments (see, for instance, the current rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why it is so important in the action of Italian foreign policy, in particular in its Mediterranean perspective. Indeed, since 1982, Italian armed forces are consistently present in the country through the UNIFIL mission. Furthermore, Italy is the second most important European import partner of Lebanon. Therefore, understanding the short-term political trajectories of the country represents a priority of primary importance for the Italian foreign policy agenda, especially in a moment, like the current one, where Lebanon is struggling between growing political instability, a very serious economic crisis and increasingly heated protest movements.

To come back to our project, we all know that the Lebanese system has been historically based on a sectarian division of the state offices, the country's institutional architecture, and the division of powers, with significant backlashes also on the sectarian division of society.

But, especially in the past decade, the academic and political debate is better focusing on the limits of this analytical and political understanding of Lebanese politics. About this, I would like to mention here a very useful instrument for understanding this change in academic scholarship about Lebanon, the recent essay "Le Liban et la recherche internationale après les révoltes de 2011" by Rosita Di Peri and Estella Carpi<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Among publications in Italian language regarding Lebanon it is possible to consult Di Peri, Rosita (2017). *Il Libano contemporaneo: storia, politica, società*. Roma, Carocci; Di Donato, Marco (2015). *Hezbollah. Storia del Partito di Dio*, Milano, Mimesis. Among the several articles from both authors: Di Peri Rosita (2012), *Costruzione identitaria e democrazia locale in Libano*, «Meridiana», n. 73/74, pp. 231-256; Di Peri Rosita (2009): "Determinanti storiche e politiche della nascita e dell'evoluzione di Hizballah", «Il Politico», Vol. 74, (n. 2), (Issue 221), pp. 27-61. Di Donato Marco (2019). *Islam politico e Guerra fredda: alternative islamiste in Iraq e Libano (1967-1991)*, «Contemporanea, Rivista di storia dell'800 e del '900» Vol. 3, pp. 481-499; Di Donato Marco (2013) *Continuità e discontinuità dell'islamismo libanese di fronte all'egemonia confessionale*, in Campanini Massimo (a cura di), *Le rivolte arabe, l'Islam, la transizione incompiuta*, Bologna, Il Mulino, pp. 171-194.

Carpi and Di Peri's critical inquiry starts from the consideration that the "sectarian narrative", by the key of confessionalism and politics of local communities, has been acritically reproduced in international research. They continue by stressing how and when scholars began to change the way of thinking about Lebanese events, starting to introduce other reading keys, like class structure.

In effect actually, while the very recent protests have certainly not represented a unicum in the tormented history of the country, the same protests represent potentially a new political phenomenon because they overcame the rigid confessional and socio-geographical mobilization schemes. Therefore, they can be considered a very interesting multi and inter-confessional (as well as a multi and inter-class) laboratory.

In this perspective, in our project we'll try to overcome the dominant essentialist interpretation of Lebanese political events in terms of sectarian divisions, which has certainly been the most used interpretative key in academic and political reflections since the independence (1943), and even more after Ta'if agreements (October 1989).

The *starting hypothesis* of our project is that today the dominant understanding of Lebanese socio-political divisions along sectarian lines needs to be re-considered. We argue that sectarian-based socio-political divisions should not be considered as a result of immutable religious identities, but rather as the result of historicized cultural, material and political conditions and practices. Therefore, belonging to a sectarian socio-political group means primarily belonging to a "functional group", functional for example in terms of opportunities in education, access to services, healthcare, job placement.

The enhancement "from above" of sectarian identities through a variety of material, legal-institutional, and discursive practices, continues to keep Lebanon a deeply divided society. On the other hand, under the thrust of endemic corruption, economic stagnation, and poor services, the political system is showing clear signs of weakness and corruptibility and cannot work effectively and transparently, and these are precisely the triggers which fed 2019-2020 protests in the country.

It is a matter of fact that since the 1990s one of the major fields of social mobilization has been that of civil and citizenship rights, advocating for transparency and reconciliation. Also, in the past three decades, Lebanese citizens have been constantly mobilizing along cross-sectarian lines, challenging the existing sectarian post-civil war neoliberal order.

In 2005, for instance, the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri triggered an outstanding civil mobilization (the so-called Cedar Revolution, or Lebanese Spring) which played a pivotal role for the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon. The Syrian withdrawal represented, according to some observers, a crucial turning point for the reconfiguration of the country's political balances into two major sectarian ruling blocks according to the respective pro-Saudi or pro-Iranian international alignment. But it is important to point out that, at the same time, social movements demanded a reconfiguration of *status quo* on secular and more equal and inclusive bases, registering an increasing intersectionality of agendas and campaigns.

Given these premises, our project wants to examine the role that youth have been playing in the process of reshuffling of Lebanese political landscape triggered by the October 2019 Uprising, with a specific focus on university students and institutions. The case study – we argue – is relevant because students, along with having played a central role in the development of the Uprising, are also representing one of the most permeable social groups to the quests for a radical change that the Uprising expressed.

In particular, our project intends to focus on the participation of the Lebanese youth community (and, within it, specifically the student component) in the protest movements that took place in Lebanon from 17 October 2019 to 11 February 2020, stopped by the lockdown due to the global pandemic of COVID-19).

As already said, the focus is specifically on the role of youth in the quest for political change, as youth has been (and is) very important in Lebanese political debate and praxis: in this con-

text they are a good example of that Gramscian “subalternity” that means marginality but also possibility of growing political awareness; they are important even because their new languages and praxis are rather different (in Arab world as elsewhere) from the traditional forms for expressing political dissent that we were used to deal with, in the past decades.

Pivotal for our project is the starting point: listening to protests’ actors, asked about their political leanings, sensibilities and perceptions, but also personal feelings, emotions, frustrations and hopes.

Lebanese youth’s voices are, according to us, a very useful reading key to better understand the actual situation, allowing an analytical perspective “from below” of the dynamics of social transformation, that are still in progress – a perspective that is different from the official, mainstream narratives of events coming “from above”.

Methodologically, the project can be divided into two parts: a first theoretical analysis to frame the socio-political context of the protests (through a reconstruction provided by local Lebanese researchers), followed by a second part, consisting of a field research, through the organization of focus groups and field-interviews in Lebanon.

The support of Lebanese University professors has ensured the best implementation of our project, focused on local actors and national stakeholders.

About this point, the role of Lebanese researchers has been crucial to have access to databases, archives and local libraries with not-on line resources, and to analyze the contents of social media used by young Lebanese during the protests, as well as to conduct interviews on specific topics and focus groups with key actors during the uprisings.

In addition to fieldwork and qualitative interviews, our research project team used a particular working methodology for conducting focus groups with youth groups and university students. The focus groups aimed to highlight the variety of opinion, the differences of perceptions and perspectives, the behaviors associated with opinions, backgrounds, motivations and actions, as well as to collect useful information for the interpretation of the results of the quantitative study.

All the contributions of this report provide an interesting insight into the reality (and perception of the reality) of Lebanese youth. From different perspectives, sharing however a single common thread: the necessity to discover new and appropriate reading keys for a more complete and coherent analysis of the difficult situation the country is experiencing.

Despite the harsh conditions we are all experiencing in this difficult period, because of the pandemic emergency, much more severe in Lebanon for the heavy crisis that the country is going through, we hope both to have reached all the expected goals, and that this project will be followed by other opportunities for discussion and collaboration between our universities.



# Reflections on 2019 Lebanese Protests: Seeds of Change and the Role of University Institutions

*Noma Ziadeh-Mikati*  
(Lebanese University)

## Summary

This intervention is part of “IRHAL” project which aim is to analyze the participation of the youth component and specifically students within it, in 2019 protests and riots in Lebanon. “IRHAL” is an Arabic word that means go away and, in this context, it symbolizes the demands of Lebanese protests against the political sectarian corrupted regime. October 2019 protests, a major momentous in the history of Lebanon, brought great hope of change for a better Lebanon among the Lebanese population. Today, a year and a half since the outbreak of these protests, and with the mixture of economic, financial and political crisis that the country is facing, the flame of hope is hardly seen leaving a general feeling of hopelessness and despair. In this intervention I argue that despite the difficulties of change within the political system in Lebanon, the changes in mindset and the increase in political culture among the population in general and among youth in particular might still be potential seeds for long-term change. In this area, university institutions are important when they empower Lebanese youth with quality education and when they work on shifting youth’s energy away from sectarian politics toward a more democratic citizenship framework.

## Introduction

Today, a year and a half since the outbreak of October 2019 protests, the situation in Lebanon seems complex and unstable and the hope of change that October protests once generated looks so far, so inexistent. Though in October 2019 things seemed different, people changed and believed that change is coming. Within few days after the declaration of new set of austerity measures and spurred by a financial and economic crisis, Lebanese from all over the country re-joined streets, reclaiming their rights, their dignity (Hermez 2011). What was impossible to see during the past years, the unity for a better Lebanon, among the different religions, regions, social classes, age range was taking place in the heart of many Lebanese in Lebanon and abroad, and “the fear from others” a fear that sectarian regime had always tried to nourish in order to ensure its continuity and legitimacy, was breaking. October protests, by breaking this fear and uniting people, were thus considered as a new beginning and were marking the end of the civil war (Kassir 2019, Khuri 2019).

For the next four months, protests continued on a nation-wide base, people demonstrating against domestic grievance (Malmvig and Fakhoury 2019) against the deterioration of economic conditions and most importantly against the corruption of the ruling political class. The intensity of the protests, its inclusiveness, «the de-sanctification of political figures, including the most untouchable of them», the awakening of population regarding all major politicians and parties as «one class that is committing crimes against the people»<sup>1</sup>, the huge amount of

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<sup>1</sup> Nizar Hassan, LCPS Has the October 17 Revolution Accomplished Anything At All? The Lebanese center for policy studies October 2020 retrieved from <https://lcps-lebanon.org/agendaArticle.php?id=197>

hope in the eyes of the population and their will to change for something else, was new and true.

In a country that witnessed many previous protests and where the freedom of speech and the right to demonstrate are guaranteed under the Lebanese constitution, October 2019 was a different story.

It was different not only because it was a true legitimate call for a revolution to overthrow the established political order (Kassir 2019) and to remove all the political elite that has been governing Lebanon like a cartel for the past thirty years, but more importantly it was different because a new mindset was emerging among the population and a collective political awareness was taking place. The unity of people based on legitimate collective demands was creating the power of possible change and this was threatening and destabilizing the most important pillar of the “democratic” sectarian regime in Lebanon: legitimacy.

Youth in particular were very active during October protests. Motivated by their refusal of a current corrupt situation and their aspiration for a better country, youth broke down political, geographical and social barriers and enthusiastically participated in daily debates and discussions. They showed eagerness to understand and to participate in public affairs. This new generation, the future citizens who were criticized for being selfish and nonchalant, showed that they were able to change for the better and to be active and proactive if the adequate ambience exists. Also, educated elite, gathering university professors, professional and young activists, played a crucial role in spreading this new culture and increasing political awareness.

Understanding the difficulties of organizing for change within the sectarian regime and knowing the impact that demobilizing techniques in addition to the very severe economic crisis that the economy is facing, on protests and on the willingness to fight and to change, and away from romanticizing the possible changes that October 2019 protests achieved, in this intervention I focus on the change in the mindset of the population that was seen during October protests as a potential element of change to consider and to work on. Some may argue that October 2019 mobilization did not provide long lasting impact specifically concerning the citizens’ change in mindset. So, these were really ephemeral awakenings that dissipate with time. The question here is: if these awakenings were achievable in October 2019, how is it possible to reinforce and sustain them in the long run? How is it possible to build a different culture among citizens and youth in particular where opinions are based on objective critical thinking and on openness to different points of view? The objective here is not changing the political system that obviously at least in the short run seems a quite impossible task, but how to make small changes in people’s thinking and behavior that may lead to more strategic changes in political culture in the long run, and what role could university institutions play in this area. The remaining part of this intervention is organized as follow: in the first section I review some of the obstacles that undermine the continuity and the success of protests in Lebanon; in the second section I present some of the changes generated by October protests and I specifically focus on the increase in political awareness and the change in mindset among youth as an interesting achievement of this mobilization; in a last section I discuss how university institutions by providing quality education are able to create good seeds for destabilizing some pillars of a corrupt political system.

### **Difficulties of change within the sectarian power-sharing system**

The wave of October protests 2019 is not an isolated event in Lebanon. During the last thirty years, Lebanon witnessed many mobilisations against corruption and against the poor performance of the political class that had failed to deliver social and economic justice to the Lebanese population. Still the results from these mobilisations were away from the aspiration of the populace and in every time, the political system was able to reproduce itself despite the apparent collective resentment. Many elements impact the capacity of protests to bring real changes in the political system or in the behavior of political representatives: the demobilization techniques used by government, the challenges of reform within the confessional



regime, the lack of strategy and the lack of clear short-term goals for the mobilization and the deteriorating economic conditions are among the several factors that impact mobilizations sustainability and their capacity to bring strategic changes. Also, these challenges are thought to be more pronounced within the Lebanese confessional political system (Fakhoury 2011, Majed 2017).

Literature related to the demobilization techniques used by established political regimes to weaken mobilizations or prevent people from joining to protest is abundant. In Lebanon, where the political system is based on a confessional division of political power, established regime has even more potential to demobilize and dis-incentivize protests since the divide-and-rule strategy is very easily applicable in this case. Geha (2019) presents a study on how the Lebanese government reacted through co-optation, counter narratives and repression to two waves of protests during 2011 and 2015 that used slogans denouncing the country's sectarian system of government. Co-optation techniques, where politicians and political parties co-opt the demands of the mobilization by sympathizing the demands and by claiming protests demands as their own, is a traditional strategy used to dilute protests. In the early stages of October protests co-optation techniques were less efficient because of the collective outrage against the whole political elites translated into the wide use of the slogan "all of them means all of them". Still the political regime in Lebanon used a wide range of policies and infiltration in order to demonize October protests and to decrease its legitimacy: from accusing the uprising of being funded and controlled by foreign countries to holding it responsible for the degradation of the economic conditions, to making trouble through infiltration, to holding protestors responsible for threatening the stability of the state. Also, repression techniques such as the use of excessive force and unlawful detention were also wildly used. All these demobilization policies not only demotivate people from joining a protest but also and more dangerously make the status quo a more rational choice.

The second element that represents a considerable complexity is related to the difficulty of change within the sectarian power-sharing regime in Lebanon. Breaking the dependence of the Lebanese population to political representatives is complicated because of the socio-political and economic structure of the political system and the complicity between political representatives and the different institutions of the state. The diversity and pluralistic nature of the Lebanese society which includes 18 different confessions, is not a unique case in the world, but what is more particular in Lebanon is how the state deals differently with these different communities: each community has its own civil personal status law, religious court, political representatives, educational institutions... So instead of being citizens for a unified country the Lebanese population are «members of religious 'communities' through which they subscribe to the state in order to access their political and social rights» (Majed 2017). For example, looking at the political economy of sectarianism in Lebanon and how it impacts the possibility of change within sectarian power sharing regime it is argued that people are more or less dependent 'economically' to political representatives. Baumann (2016) defines the political economy in Lebanon as «one where a small politically connected elite appropriates the bulk of economic surplus and redistributes it through communal clientelism». As a result, we have in one hand the political representatives of the different communities who are controlling the resources of the state and on the other hand we have the citizens of the different communities who depend to some extent on the political representative or *za'im* in order to get patronage resources (jobs, education, health care...). Mobilizations that threaten the sectarian elite cartel will be fiercely rejected and demobilized by this elite because such mobilization threatens elite's capacity to control resources and population. Also, when people are economically dependent on political elites to get patronage resources, mobilizing for change may not be an economically optimal decision even if people have a conviction that change is necessary. Another major challenge of change within the sectarian political regime in Lebanon is the politicized judiciary. Despite the principle of separation of powers in Lebanon, judicial work is highly influenced by the interests of political leaders when the latter appoint key judges and legal investigators magistrates.

In this context, any mobilization for change will be meaningless if accountability and the rule of law are not restored (Al-Habbal 2019).

Today many countries around the world are witnessing protests that are operating informally away from any form of institutional leadership.

The leaderless character of the Lebanese 2019 protests was purposely kept in order to decrease the risk of co-optation and repression by the government. But despite the rightness of such fear can show the results of street protests be sustainable without good organization or institutions that work on strategies in order to leverage people's hope and anger into tactical policies in the context of major change? Even if October 2019 protests mobilized hundreds of thousands of Lebanese people through all the country, it is well expected that street mobilizations could not continue indefinitely and could not be sustained for long period of time. «Neither numbers nor streets are by themselves magic wands for change» (Tufekci 2020), accordingly street protests need to deliver organized entities that are more capable to work on long term strategies and on the channels through which changes may be designed. For example, institutions like unions and syndicates positively contributed to the success of protests to implement change in political institutions in many countries (Majed 2020, Salloukh 2020). In Lebanon knowing that syndicates are particularly influenced by the ruling confessional parties, the strengthening of newly organized entities or groups that emerged during the protests may be a potential element for more sustainable results.

At the beginning of the protests deteriorating financial and economic conditions were among the elements that mobilized people to join protests. However, with the highly unstable economy and with the collapse of the Lebanese lira and the associated surge of inflation, the decision to protest or to mobilize for change is highly challenged. First, large numbers of people are spending their time working or searching for an income locally and abroad. Second, an increasing number of highly educated citizens who played a crucial role in October protests left the country. Third, deteriorating economic conditions may increase the dependency of a larger part of the population on patronage subsidies and services making dependency on the current political elites more difficult to break. All these elements in addition to the overwhelming despair that exists among the Lebanese population make mobilization for change less practical even for those who actively participated in October protests.

### **Seeds of change in October Protests**

If the change in political system and the political institutions is used to assess the success of October protests, then for sure it will be an acknowledgment of failure. Still given that changing mindset is fundamental for changing politics, in this part of the intervention, I focus on the change in mindset and the collective political and social awareness among the Lebanese population and among youth in particular as an interesting element of change to work on.

October protests helped into changing the mindset of a good part of the society. In the early stages of the protests this change was expressed by the rejection of the political figures and the economic and political system, by the organization of several interest groups and discussion entities, by the collective interest specifically from youth to participate into political, economic and social debate and by a willingness to increase knowledge and to be part of discussions related to public matters. People were evolving from simple dispersed individuals to engaged and active citizens asking for their rights and understanding their duties. This is considered a crucial change because it was shaping a new mentality, a new identity of the population away from the sectarian identity that the political system imposes.

Today, these changes may seem less obvious, so why is it important to focus on these elements as good seeds of change?

As mentioned in the previous section there are huge difficulties of change within the current political system and political parties have much more power to keep and preserve the status quo: they control government institutions, they control the different social economic political religious educational and legal institutions through clientelist networks, they are able

to control population and voters through patronage subsidies and they have great power to demobilize any attempt of change.

Still, the hope and optimism inspired during these protests are important elements when they fueled energy, hard work, perseverance and creativity. People's change in mindset was translated into discussions that regrouped different communities, into creation of interest groups and professional organizations, into active civic engagement and into more acts of accountability to limit corruption. Of course, October protests did not stop corruption, they did not change the political system and they did not dissipate divergence between people but more realistically they reunified people despite divergence, on the basis of common ground rights and mutual grievances and on the basis of citizenship. October protests permitted the people to meet, to discuss and to think outside the traditional framework, they also allowed people to dream, to imagine alternatives and for some professionals and activists to work on these alternatives: another world is possible outside the current political regime and this is the element of power that destabilize the regime and this is what is being discussed in this section.

The predominance and the ingrained character of corruption in the different societal institutions and the influence of political elites on population through the different channels of patronage and clientelism are two well-rooted problems in the Lebanese political system. As a result, a collective sense of acceptability of corruption and a collective indifference to the rule of law have prevailed (Helou 2019). This could be explained first by the fact that corruption is beneficial for a good part of society. Also, given the improper influence of political elites over judges individually and the judiciary as a whole in Lebanon (ICJ 2017), corruption is an intractable problem for those who are aspiring to the state of justice. October protests have destabilized in some way this general acceptance or indifference toward corruption. At first hand, the popular mobilization has been able to uncover the violations of the political regime and to expose the files of corruption of the authority and the sources of waste in its sectors. Also there has been a popular trend to denounce specific politically connected corrupted officials through social media and protests around their home and workplace. By doing so the uprising appears as a potential turning point in the field of strengthening popular control over the performance of the authorities (Kabbanji 2019). On the other hand, the uprising encouraged the Lebanese judge's association<sup>2</sup> formed by independent judges to take actions against corruption. For example, a few days after the beginning of October protests the Lebanese judge's association filed a complaint at the Lebanese central bank asking to lift banking secrecy and to freeze the accounts of all politicians, senior officials, judges and anyone who deals with public affairs and whose banking account value exceeds 750 million Lebanese pounds. The association also issued a statement on the unconstitutionality of the parliament session that was supposed to be held in November 2019 and criticized its agenda.

The outbreak of the financial and economic crisis in 2019 revealed the failure of the Lebanese political and economic system to provide social justice for the different part of the population. October protests permitted to generate and propagate a collective awareness regarding this matter: the political and economic system in Lebanon is not functional and the political economy of corruption where political elite use their power and influence to consolidate private wealth on the expense of the public good is to be rethought and redesigned.

October protests were not limited to street protests but included protestors' active engagements in many cultural activities and in debates and discussions related to economic and political issues. The energy that has been seen during October protests among university and college students and among young activists and young professors and professionals, was a promising element of change. It reflected a higher level of political culture and a higher level of political awareness among the population in general and among youth in particular. This is an important element to consider because it may have positive influence on governmental quality and political performance (Almond and Verba 1989, Kotzian 2012, Claibourn and Mar-

<sup>2</sup> The aim of this association is to guarantee the independence of the judiciary. It was established in 2018 after encountering several obstacles.

tin 2007). Political awareness is a desirable and promising element of change since it impacts how people evaluate political performance and accordingly it may also impact their votes on the basis of this information (Claibourn and Martin 2007). Besides, given that legitimacy and a certain degree of acceptance are required for government to operate (Gilley 2006) a higher level of political awareness and culture among electorate may put more pressure on government to show better performance (Kotzian 2012).

Away from exaggerating the importance of the increase in political awareness and its capacity to bring real changes in the political system through electoral in Lebanon and knowing that *“aside from the urban civil society elite, there is no strong sign that Lebanese society is ready to overcome the role of sects in politics”* (DRI 2019), the change in mindset that prevailed during these protests specifically among youth and the role that educated elite played in this matter are still good seeds to nurture and to work on for long-term change: first the cultural activities that has been organized during October protests created an optimal environment where youth including university and college students were able to meet, discuss and rethink topics related to public matters accordingly to increase their political culture. By actively participating in these aspects of mobilizations, youth have once again confirmed that they were the strongest supporters for positive real change and the most receptive to efforts to transform attitudes and social-political behaviors in post-conflict societies (Nagel and Staeheli 2015). Furthermore, October protests shed the light on the potential role that the educated elite among professors, professionals and activists, could play in spreading this cultural space and in increasing the political awareness and political culture among youth. Educated elite’s role could also be considered as a potential element that helps shifting youth’s energy away from sectarian politics toward a more democratic citizenship framework.

### **The role of university institutions**

*Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world.*  
Nelson Mandela<sup>3</sup>

October mobilizations away from being able to impact political institutions, shed the light on two interesting elements that I (as a professor at a Lebanese university) would retain for this last part: first, youth and more specifically university students showed that they are good supporters and good seeds for positive change. They showed that they were able to change for the better and to be active and proactive (even if temporarily) if the adequate ambiance exists. Second, educated elite among which university professor’s good candidates to create this ambiance when they played an important role in animating and organizing the cultural spaces that characterized October protests and that reflected a higher degree of political culture and political awareness. These two elements that were part of the cultural mobilization are also main actors in university institutions. Based on this fact, in this last part of my intervention and from an educator’s perspective, I would like to reflect and to question the role that university institutions may play in providing this adequate ambiance. For doing so I will limit my discussion on two elements: the role that quality education may play in decreasing the economic reliance of youth on clientelism, and the role that university institutions may play in shaping an ethical, qualified, clear conscious, open minded generation.

It has been discussed in a previous section how the confessional political system in Lebanon is widely related to the economic political system.

Baumann (2016) explained how, in a sectarian system, political elites control the population by controlling the surplus of the economy and by redistributing it through communal clientelism. Baumann also argued that in order for this control of the population to continue, two main elements must be preserved: first, politicians should be able to maintain control over the

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<sup>3</sup> According to Oxford Reference, quotes from a speech held at Madison Park High School, Boston, 23 June 1990.

distribution of resources and second, the majority of Lebanese should “remain dependent on patronage resources controlled by the politician”. One way to break this control of political elites over the population and specifically over youth is to work on this second element. This is to make students less dependent on nepotism and political connections to access the job market. The point here is that by empowering youth with quality education, university institutions are decreasing the dependency of youth to clientelism, therefore destabilizing a main pillar of this regime and creating seeds for long-lasting changes. When universities deliver up to date and meaningful materials and empower students with skills needed to be productive citizens and to be able to compete at the national and international level, in this case, education is serving a much wider objective: since access to job market is facilitated with good marketable skills, students and youth are financially empowered and reliance on clientelism decrease. Spreading awareness among citizens about the importance of quality education as an important element of the emancipation from this regime and from corruption is also essential. Quality education is not a mere diploma that institutions deliver at the end of the curriculum. Commercial universities that treat students as clients and where tuitions guarantee graduation are doing great harm at the national level rooting the dependence of youth to clientelism and spreading the culture of mediocrity and corruption among the new generation.

The role that higher education and university institutions may play in shifting youth energy away from sectarian politics toward a more democratic citizenship framework is also an interesting area to consider. As presented previously, a major part of the Lebanese society is still not ready to overcome the role of sects in politics and in everyday life (DRI 2019). So, the question of how university institutions may provide some elements of change in this area is an interesting question to discuss and to reflect on. University institutions are significant not only because they deliver technical curriculums but also because they are able to shape and impact future citizens.

LeRoy Long (1992) considers higher education as a cultural asset for society: *“Society is enriched by the presence of institutions devoted to preserving a sense of its heritage, extending an awareness of other cultures, searching for a knowledge of reality, honoring truth as an intrinsic value, developing a zest for working with ideas and providing for the training and maturation of citizens”*.

Away from idealizing the role that Lebanese universities play in shaping students citizenship and knowing that many institutions in Lebanon are owned by confessional communities and by political elites, the objective of the idea here is still not to de-politicize or insure the neutrality of the different actors of the university institutions but more realistically to question the ability of universities to provide a cultural space where students from different backgrounds meet to discuss with each other and with professors on different issues in a professional and scientific manner. The question is how can university institutions provide for the training and maturation of students as citizens? This role is to be discussed and considered as part of universities missions and not only from an individual perspective at the professor’s level. Finally, when universities deliver quality education and when universities implement ethics and moral values, when they value hard work and perseverance, when they encourage discussions to take place on professional basis, when they deal with students as knowledge seekers and not as clients, universities in fact are planting good seeds for future reform. By forming an ethical, qualified, clear conscious, open minded generation, university institutions are helping in changing the culture of clientelism and corruption that prevail Lebanese every day’s life and Lebanese political confessional system.

Building different culture among youth is a crucial element for more sustainable changes and for more sustainable results that any mobilization hopes to reach.

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# Lebanese youth facing sectarian forms of political subjectivization: The Art of Political Demobilization

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## **Summary**

The article examines how the Lebanese political class has been gradually weaving a strategy to keep part of the Lebanese youth politically demobilized. To do so, the article delves into what sectarianism represents for the political behavior of the Lebanese youth during the protest movement so-called 'Thawra'. The article addresses some of the political implications related to political disaffection and political subjectivization that leads to the political demobilization of such an important social group. Likewise, the article shows how despite the common risk factors that harm this vulnerable group, the Lebanese youth remain divided concerning their political support to the traditional political establishment and how this group has already made a breakthrough in order to reduce the negative impact of sectarianism in the Lebanese political life.

## **Introduction**

It is enough to read the headlines of the main Lebanese newspapers to realize that the current situation in Lebanon, since August 2020, is not promising at all. The devastating explosion that took place in the port of Beirut on August 4 has not only fueled the anger of the protest movement but has also finished squandering the scant confidence that the Lebanese people had concerning the technocratic government or authorities in general. Such a disaster in material and human terms can serve as a turning point to eliminate the old political order.

Lebanon is at a crossroads where there is endemic corruption that generates ethical misbehavior without responsibility, the devaluation of the Lebanese pound that has lost more than to 85% of its value, an increase in the cost of basic necessities, a shortage of dollars in the market that drowns small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, increases in social inequality rates, unemployment, and poverty that are skyrocketing, rampant sectarianism without rhyme or reason, the threat of the start of another civil war or another war between the formation of Hezbollah and the state of Israel for the control of natural resources, a political class stuck in old and obsolete power mechanisms that no longer fit with the current reality, an increasingly politicized and less efficient opposition movement, increases in external interferences that further heat the already effervescent political scene, the inaction of a supposedly technocratic and independent government though resigned, the lack of structural reforms at the political and economic levels demanded by the international community to turn on the aid tap, fear of the unknown, etc., all of these are some of the factors that are leading the country of cedars to dig its own grave.

Lebanon is on the brink of total collapse (Gharizi & Yacoubian 2021). The country is facing multiple crises from different levels that are destroying the authority and legitimation of such a *sui generis* statal entity. Lebanon that was considered the 'Switzerland of the Middle East' is hitting the best positions in factors related to the lack of governance. Lack in providing the basic services (electricity, water, garbage collection, medical services, etc.), corruption, nepotism, feudal practices, lack of transparency, lack of responsibility or accountability, mismanagement of public sources, continuing political deadlock, lack of trust in politics and politicians, and the

negative impact of sectarianism are a few elements that could explain why and how Lebanon can be considered a failed state.

Regardless of the time frame of the current crises where the currency has lost more than 85% of its value and Lebanon reached the second worldwide position in hyperinflation, citizens can feel how the situation is not going to improve anytime soon. Importantly, the level of desperation and humiliation are increasing and the need for a new sociopolitical order and new social contract are far more necessary than any previous time.

Through those elements it is possible to understand why and how the 2019 Revolution surfaced. That seminal development was a remarkable event and followed the 2005 Cedar Revolution because it was the first time that Lebanese citizens rushed to the streets to express their anger and dissatisfaction with the government's performance and the behavior of the ruling class. What is also remarkable is that this revolution was chiefly manned by Lebanese youngsters calling for fairer and better opportunities that would enable them to stay in the country and have a decent life. It was one of those rare occasions where the sectarian affiliation did not work in determining the participation or not in such an event. Unfortunately, the old forces immediately called their respective members not to take part in such a protest movement. Special attention to the Shia community, where the leader of one of the most important political forces of the Shia community like Hezbollah, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, in a televised speech gave the order to his acolytes not to participate in such demonstrations, because, he surmised, these were all part of a diabolical plot by foreign embassies and external powers (Haboush 2019). Be that as it may, the 17<sup>th</sup> October 2019 Revolution, the so-called 'Thawra', was considered an important litmus test for the ruling class stuck in feudal or sectarian political practices (Ayalon 1987).

This article sheds light on the forms of political subjectivization affecting such a fragile group as the Lebanese youth. It aims to explain how the majority of this group prefers to opt for demobilization rather than active participation in Lebanese political life and try to answer to the question if sectarianism and inequality do increase the level of political disaffection and political demobilization. It shows how the manipulation of sectarianism for political purposes alongside the lack of political options and political opportunities put the Lebanese youth in a real dilemma where apathy and disaffection are the most commonly used escape routes.

The article will be structured as follows. After these introductory remarks, the next section will assess the impact of sectarianism and how it affects political subjectivization. The third section outlines some of the factors that would be behind the political disaffection and political demobilization of Lebanese youth. In the fourth section, the article tackles the political stances of the Lebanese youth concerning the current political establishment and the revolutionary movement. In the last section, the article offers a few general considerations related to the future political role that could be played by the Lebanese youth in the post-Thawra period and proposes avenues for further research.

### **Sectarianism and Political Subjectivization**

In Lebanon, it could be argued that the political elites have configured an economic-political system designed to avoid the construction of a political entity and a common Lebanese identity for fear of losing their traditional role and privileges on the political scene. An example is the failure to comply with some of the most important precepts of the Taef agreements in which it was committed to the gradual eradication of political confessionalism and the creation of a Senate to serve as an intercommunity chamber of representation. The mechanism for this shared power paradigm is perceived as a transitory element towards a liberal democracy that in the case of Lebanon, has been perpetuated by the mutual distrust shown by the different confessional communities. Any attempt at reform and legal or political changes would thus be perceived as a threat in a neo-patrimonial system where public resources are part of the game of struggles, negotiations, and concessions between said elites.

In Lebanon, as a corporate consociational system, what is registered is an 'ethnocracy' where «citizens who do not identify with one of the ethnic segments - the 'Others' - are the jure and/or de facto marginalized and discriminated against in the exercise of their political rights and beyond» (Stojanovic 2020: p. 33). We would be referring to a system of government governed by a plurality of peoples that rule together, but not as one. The Lebanese government would present itself as an exceptional example to understand what 'ethnocracy' means. The cartel that would form the executive branch would fit perfectly with the idea of government management based on the proportional representation of the main confessional communities. The problem would arise when, in the so called grand coalition, the different sects could compete in what has come to be known as 'ethnurgy'. We would be talking about a «conscious fabrication and politicization of ethnic identity» (Hanf 1999: p. 45) when the competition would intersect at the domestic level requires it. Political elites have not hesitated to promote sectarian narratives based on memory and trauma that are extremely useful in fear mongering. Community elites often use collective memory and collective trauma as a strategy for the political mobilization of their constituents. Ultimately, 'ethnurgy', memory and trauma are factors that can undermine, on the one hand, the power-sharing political mechanism and on the other, the willingness to take an active part in politics.

We have to bear in mind that sectarian identities are historical construction in which intensity and modes of mobilizations are based on specific political, ideological, and geopolitical contexts (Salloukh et al., 2015: p. 1), that have the power to affect the entire social spectrum of the Lebanese society including, of course, the youth. Sectarian modes of political mobilization thrive on state weakness and ideological vacuum because such sectarian practices could be perceived as practices of social reproduction, material domination, and national imagination (Salloukh et al., 2015: p. 3). Therefore, certain social groups like the Lebanese youth must face in unfavorable conditions the hegemony of sectarian forms of subjectivization that «is not the product of an imagined essential Lebanese identity; it is rather the result of the operation of an ensemble of institutional, clientelist, and discursive practices at different levels. The disciplinary tentacles of the sectarian system also shape its own political economy» (Salloukh et al., 2015: pp. 4-5). Therefore, the sectarian system denies the Lebanese their existence as citizens with inalienable political and social rights, reducing them instead to unequal members of state-recognized sectarian communities regulated by extended patriarchal kinship groups, and clientelism networks.

There is a sort of intra-community loyalty that generates a kind of subjective politicization that hinders the creation of a common national identity and project. As a matter of fact, Lebanese youth forge its feeling of belonging based on parochial subgroups related to other elements like family, ethnic, religion, sect, kinship, and political patron (Harb 2021: p. 373). As a result, the most important elements to forge their social identification and social construction are based on religious and sectarian belongings. The subordination of the national project for the sake of the consolidation of a kind of 'communitocracy'<sup>1</sup> would serve us to prove how some confessional communities do not consider democracy as a basic objective. There is a kind of intra-community loyalty that generates a kind of subjective politicization that hinders the creation of a common national identity and project (Barroso & Kechichian 2020: p. 7). The consociational system would serve as a kind of opportunity game where each sectarian leader would have to fight, on the one hand, to achieve clear leadership within his respective community, and on the other, to obtain the greatest possible quota of resources for his own community competing with other leaders of other faith communities.

The end of political confessionalism would mean the loss of such an 'intersectarian negotiation platform' that would translate into a loss of hegemony in relation to its corresponding

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<sup>1</sup> 'Communitocracy' might be perceived as a governance system where the policies would be designed to serve more than the interests of the people, the interests of non-state groups, confessional communities, or ethnic groups. See: Imad Salamey. *The Decline of Nation-States after the Arab Spring. The Rise of Communitocracy*, New York, Routledge, p. 85.

confessional community. In addition, it would affect the main decision-making process since horizontal communication between different elites would be more important for the present case than vertical communication between the elite and their co-religionists (Tsebelis 1990).

As a result, we constantly notice the combination of consent and coercion in the sectarian system which reinforces the sectarian linkages and undermines the potential emergence of national, inter-sectarian socio-economic movements and alliances. In this context, the Lebanese youth keeps suffering the direct impact of such dynamic of consent and coercion because not only they are one of the most vulnerable social groups but because they are perceiving how the authorities are implementing the so-called 'necropolitics' that could be considered as a sort of dark governance where the authority determines who can live and who must die (Mbembé & Meintjes 2003). Therefore, the lack of political options pushes part of this group to behave as simple followers without any kind of critical thinking by seeing itself as simply a passive element that has nothing to contribute or to say. As a kind of collateral damage of the thirty-year sectarian system that Lebanese youth have inherited. As a result, the level of sectarianism and political polarization are increasing due to the enhancement of the mechanism of patronage and clientelist practices that represents a very important obstacle to achieve their long-awaited emancipation. The remaining question is whether the Lebanese citizen in general and young citizens in particular, are going to be capable to enforce a new social contract between the Lebanese and their representatives (Peterson 2019).

#### Political Disaffection and Political Demobilization

Lebanese elites have been able to consolidate their roles and statuses due to the confessional political system that has undermined not only the mere conception of citizenship but the social cohesion and plural coexistence that are vital to building a State *per se*. This sort of solidarity among the main 'Zaim' [strongman] has become extremely important to understand the reticence to tackle the political, economic, and legal reforms needed to rescue the country. In this vein, political confessionalism is used by members of this elite to justify the unjustifiable. Indeed, this behavior could be understood as a suicide pact where once for all the Lebanese politicians are on their own and must face the consequences of their worst actions as well (Young 2021).

The impact of the lack of legal and political reforms necessary to get Lebanon out of the quagmire has been aggravated by the erosion of democratic principles, and the increase in the autocratization process that have been evident. In fact, Lebanon could be affected by what has come to be called the 'third wave of autocratization', which would be defined as a «substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy» (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019: p. 1096). For the Lebanese case, we could mention that the erosion of democratic factors can be labeled as backsliding which was defined as «state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy» (Bermeo 2016). In this article, democratization refers to the process of developing democratic institutions and practices and the sustainability of these institutions (Mostov 2015).

Political disaffection can be understood «as the subjective feeling of powerlessness, cynicism, and lack of confidence in the political process, politicians, and democratic institutions, but with no questioning of the political regime» (Torcal & Montero 2006: p. 6). Therefore, it is vital to check up what the main triggers of disaffection are for Lebanese youth. In this vein, we could highlight among other the following factors behind the increase of political disaffection among this specific group<sup>2</sup>:

- The crisis of representation and intermediation, and the usurpation of people's voice

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<sup>2</sup> The list of factors behind political disaffection is the result of a questionnaire, where 25 students of the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK) took part. The questionnaire was implemented between April 5 and April 25, 2021.

- Corruption, and illegal financing
- The economic crisis and its consequences
- Lack of virtue of the political class
- Lack of transparency, internal democracy, and participation in political parties
- Governments are not in charge, the impotence of politics (triumph of 'Communitocracy')
- Information asymmetries and manipulation
- Limitations to the uncertainty of results and political outcomes (policies)
- Hostility towards political parties, the crisis of representation, and crisis of ideology
- Political decisions are trapped by sectarian ties
- Non-fulfillment of electoral promises and programs

If we could describe the feeling of the Lebanese young adults in two words it could be helpless and hopeless. In general, the pulse of the streets is giving us some hints to understand those emotions. How they could avoid sharing those emotions when they cannot help their families, communities or they perceive that they cannot achieve their dreams in their homeland (Al Mahmoud 2021). Those feelings are creating a sort of humiliation understood in the way it was presented by Professor Dominique Moisi who states «humiliation is impotence, an emotion that seems above all from the feeling that you are no longer in control of your life either collectively, as a people, a nation or a religious community, or individually, as a single person. Humiliation peaks when you are convinced that the Other has intruded into the private realm of your own life and made you utterly dependent» (Moisi 2010: p. 56).

Regrettably, one of the most obvious outcomes is related to the deterioration of mental health in Lebanon<sup>3</sup>, especially among young people. Depression, fear, uncertainty, socio-economic stress, emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, Covid-19, lack of professional opportunities, and the Beirut blast are common elements within this specific vulnerable social group (Al Mahmoud 2021).

This lack of control is related to the lack of emancipation that certain vulnerable groups are facing in Lebanon. In this vein, it will be useful to bring up the definition of security as emancipation coined by Professor Ken Booth, who considers security as 'the absence of threats'. Indeed, and according to Both, «Emancipation is the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them from carrying out what the world freely chooses to do. War and the threat of war is one of those constraints, together with poverty, poor education, political oppression and so on» (Booth 1991: p. 319).

Part of the Lebanese youth feels liberated from the shadows of their sectarian leaders showing somehow certain discrepancies concerning their parents. Likewise, they perceive the entire political class as part of the main problem and not part of the solution but implicated in corruption and mismanagement (Halabi 2019: p. 6). Something also interesting is related to the concept of civil society as independent from the traditional political forces and parties. The need for political emancipation and the promotion of this new entity, civil society, are essential to understand what this specific group can do against the current political establishment. Whatever the outcome will be, one thing is certain, we have a new generation of youth which leads the emergence of collective awareness that is going to be less permissive with any sign of lack of governance or traditional ways to deal with politics. Indeed, the public perception of politics and politicians is not going to be the same as before.

### **Lebanese youth behavior within the Protest Movement**

To tackle the Lebanese youth behavior with the protest movement is a herculean task if we bear in mind that the Lebanese youth does not represent a homogeneous group. Social charac-

<sup>3</sup> Even if suicide is still a taboo in Lebanon and the real numbers are underreported, it represents a very important problem that affects more and more the Lebanese youth. As a matter of fact, according to 'Embrace', a local organization, more than half of the people who died by suicide in 2020 were between the ages of 18 and 29.

teristics, mixed views on politics, religiosity, attitudes towards migration, and women's rights are some factors among others that could be used in order to settle a proper diagnosis of our object of study. Needless to say, without such an endeavor the task to understand the elements promoting youth's depoliticization will be in vain. In this vein, a very interesting contribution was provided by Professor Mona Harb, who presented a proposal to divide the Lebanese youth into a total of five clusters taking into account the aforementioned elements<sup>4</sup>.

What is interesting is to see how the main block of clusters compounds by 'Secular Youth', 'Potential Migrants' and 'Conservative Students' (59% of the sample) seems to be eager to take part in politics, are concerned to improve women's right, and are keen to dissociate religion from politics (Diab et al. 2017: p. 42). All these clusters have something in common, the suffering from a patronage and political clientelism system perfectly organized to political demobilize Lebanese youth.

According to the result of our questionnaire, this segment of the Lebanese youth stressed the following factors as the main drivers to join the 'Thawra':

- High rate of unemployment
- Fragile economic and financial situation
- The willingness and readiness to seek a change of the political system or at least to minimize the impact of the immoderate sectarianism in running the internal affairs of the country
- The corruption of the ruling class
- The lack of opportunities allows the young generations to increase their living standards
- Inequalities caused by the 'Wasta'.

In this sense, the promotion of this civil society and the increase of the level of emancipation could help to reduce the current Lebanese quota and patronage-based system. The diminishing of political clientelism and the increase of accountability and transparency levels would be helping to establish a civil secular system that will be able to treat the citizens as real citizens, and not as mere acolytes of their respective confessional groups. Therefore, part of the Lebanese youth embraced the slogan '*killon yaane killon*' (all of them means all of them) in order to overthrow a regime considered futile, sectarian and corrupted. Likewise, such a slogan reflects the lack of hope in reforming the current regime (Halabi 2019: 9) and demands a new political authority based on a different mechanism where religion and state are independent of each other. In this vein, one of the most important obstacles to reach emancipation consists in the strength of the old Lebanese political order.

The traditional elite has shown somehow the same appetite for not changing anything as the 'Thawra' is showing to usher in those changes. Therefore, we need to bear in mind that there still exists a sort of politicization of cultural identities, a process known as 'ethnurgy' which was defined by Professor Theodor Hanf (1995) as, «the process of politicization of groups that combines economic, political and cultural approaches for mobilization in communities defined by ethnic markers» (Hanf 1990). Therefore, the political mobilization based on ethnic factors becomes essential to overcome the alienation process.

Still, Lebanese youth must face different layers of resistance before achieving their political emancipation. Despite of the resilience of the oligarchic political system that barely provides space for oppositional politics, Lebanese youth have been able to organize collectively in order to put some pressure on the regime through new forms of activism (Harb 2018: p. 75). However, it is undeniable that 'ethnurgy' and family pressure count enormously in politi-

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<sup>4</sup> According to Mona Harb the clusters would be the following ones: 1. potential migrants, 2. secular youth, 3. school-to-job youth, 4. conservative students, and 5. maturing youth. See more: Harb Mona, Atallah Sami, Diab Mohammed (2021) *Using the clustering method for a heterogeneous reading of Lebanese youth*. «Mediterranean Politics». Vol. 26 (Issue 3), pp. 370-392.

cal decision-making. However, this specific group must face other factors that could explain why, despite the general emotions of feeling helpless and hopeless, part of this social group still defends the confessional scheme by siding with the Government and traditional political parties. Be that as it may, we could organize them in two categories where the first one would represent the youngsters who believe that the segmental leader which they are following has nothing to do with any corrupted or illegal activities. This type of behavior caused a huge polarization among Thawra's participants because those who did not participate thought that the essence of the revolution is directed against the leaders of their political parties.

The second category represents the youngster who thought from the beginning of the revolution that it was a mere political game, controlled, and supervised by leaders of certain political parties. Therefore, according to this group, it will be doomed to fail without achieving any of the advanced objectives. For them, the status quo will last until something much bigger happens within and around Lebanon.

Besides, it would be interesting to dig up into those youngsters who are politically affiliated with political parties to understand a little bit what the main drivers are. In this vein, we can identify at least three different groups. In the first place, those who can see that their interest is with this party and many of those are out there spreading ideas and backing up policies of their parties as they may see it as an opportunity to reach a job or economic and moral status.

On the other side, the second group is the one who is afraid of expressing explicitly their disappointment towards their party due to many factors such as parents and environment who could be politically affiliated and it may also be taboo to criticize the party. There is much work to do in order to help them express their real feelings, even if the revolutionaries could see the elections as a chance to gain those votes, which is controversial.

Finally, the third and most important group is that of the young leaders of the party, many of whom have good political knowledge and experience. Those who lack trust in the faces of the revolution and any new parties formed after it. They cannot find any party in which they can take part and reach a level of influence, where they can be heard and lead a political change, so they prefer to stay with their parties and try to change from the inside.

Regardless of those groups, we can highlight a very interesting element which consists in the creation of a new generation reconciling with politics. It would be risky to maintain the narrative that hurt the image of Lebanese youth in politics. The Lebanese youth cannot be considered indifferent, alienated, or engaged with trivial and superficial matters anymore. Despite the lack of progress in terms of institutional politics and policy, they have proved that regardless of the side they are on, the collective consciousness is a fact that cannot be denied. Indeed, this new awareness could help (Osseiran 2019) us understand how certain private institutions have emerged during 'Thawra'. For instance, the 'University Professor's Coalition' and the group called 'October 17 students' brought together students and professors of private and public universities and were quite active in mass mobilization during that period.

## Conclusions

In general, time provides a better perspective to analyze certain social phenomena.

The 'Thawra' protest movement, regardless of its outcome, gives us a group of signs of optimism to face the future with more hope. How to put an end to the art of political demobilization perfectly established by traditional confessional forces that have led part of the Lebanese youth to feel hopeless and helpless. Without the assumption of a greater role in Lebanese political life, this segment of the population will continue to be excluded from the decision-making process in such a delicate moment as the one we are currently experiencing.

The generational confrontation, the difficulty in joining a political party as most of them are institutions closed to third parties that do not have a 'Wasta'<sup>5</sup>, the intentional exclusion of this

<sup>5</sup> 'Wasta' is an Arabic word that refers to the use of connections to obtain scarce goods or services. See: Egan Martyn, Tabar Paul (2016). *Bourdieu in Beirut: Wasta, the State and Social Reproduction in Lebanon*. «Middle East Critique». Vol. 25 (Issue 3), pp. 249-270.

social group by the political establishment, the traditional problem of Lebanese identity and the incidence of political subjectivization, the difficulty in changing the political culture, the strength of the traditional political caste, the difficulty in becoming independent and emancipated due to the lack of economic resources and options, etc. are some of the factors behind the art of political demobilization that young Lebanese have to face.

For example, despite the strong influence of sectarianism and political disaffection, part of the Lebanese youth has changed their mentality regarding political issues and has shown an important increase in their level of awareness. The assumption of greater responsibility demands greater involvement, and that is precisely what these young people have done. Seeing themselves as having a unique opportunity to save the country from collapse, they have broken several barriers in societal divisions, fear of the political establishment and current political leaders. However, the youth must keep fighting the numerous hurdles that constrain their political inclusion.

Political disaffection and political demobilization can be corrected if the notion of citizenship is restored. Likewise, if the door is opened to new political parties that will bring fresh air to the badly damaged credibility of political parties and public institutions<sup>6</sup>. The involvement of the Lebanese youth will be more significant if they are part and are integrated into the new political forces that are expected to emerge after the nightmare we are living through. Regrettably, without this step, the push and inertia of youth in order to find and consolidate its position within the Lebanese political environment will be in vain. Likewise, other measures could reduce political demobilization, for instance, lowering the voting age as well as the inclusion of the youth factor in political decision-making, appear essential to give a voice to this segment of the population that has been demobilized and ostracized for too long.

To paraphrase the Maronite Patriarch, Cardinal Bechara Boutros al-Rahi, the Lebanese youth are the future of Lebanon as much as Lebanon is their future. The idea of migration, which is producing a calamitous brain drain problem<sup>7</sup>, will remain latent, but it will not be considered the only way out. The elimination of sectarianism and political patronage will bring more opportunities based on meritocracy to the table. Hope against hopelessness and certainty against uncertainty are the only possible ways to save the country. Taking the matters into their hands and fighting civically for what is just and necessary will bring light back to a country that has been and continues to be in chronic darkness unfit for its potential.

Lebanon has always been in the epicenter of turmoil throughout the years and has seen many crises that have led thousands of Lebanese to leave their country. Youth is the future, yet all of them are now dreaming of leaving.

The question that will remain to be answered is whether Lebanon can have a future without them.

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, we could highlight the young activists from the 'Minteshreen movement' (Spread Out) which want to provide an alternative to the political corruption of the elites, the 'Taqaddom' (Progress) describes itself as a progressive democratic party working for social justice and sustainable development, Tahalof Watani (National Alliance), Citizens in a State and National Block.

<sup>7</sup> Human capital is fast eroding. For instance, according to World Bank, 44 percent of Lebanon's tertiary education graduates have emigrated. See: World Bank (2015) *Lebanon: Promoting Poverty Reduction and Shared Prosperity. A Systematic Country Diagnosis*. The World Bank Group Middle East and North Africa Region (June 15). Available from: [https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/698161468179049613/pdf/97498-CAS-P151430-SecM2015-0202-IFC-SecM2015-0073-MIGA-SecM2015-0047-Box391476B-OUO-9.pdf](https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/698161468179049613/pdf/97498CAS-P151430-SecM2015-0202-IFC-SecM2015-0073-MIGA-SecM2015-0047-Box391476B-OUO-9.pdf) (Last access September 2021).



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## The ancient regime vs protest movements views: comparing narrative and expectations

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Debates over society, politics and religion have always been an integral part of what we have been doing at LIU during our classes, seminars and workshops, teaching courses covering media management, media planning and introducing students to the concept of mass media. We have had the opportunity over these last ten years to closely monitor the students' interactions with the developments taking place around them and clearly noticed during the last couple of years a growing interest in politics, as the country started facing both a political and economic crisis that was brought to light following the October 17, 2019 revolution.

As a result, the entire dynamic, whether in class or outside of it, has changed, and our discussions, projects and presentations have been more focused on these issues since they were more pressing than ever, especially since many of the students and instructors were themselves involved in the mobilization and actions undertaken against the corrupt political system in place for many years. However, with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that led people to lose their jobs, in parallel to the local lira's loss of 90% of its value, people started participating less and less in the daily activities as their livelihood was on the line. And as such, their mobilization weakened. Although the August 4, 2020 disaster represented by the Port of Beirut explosion led to the resignation of the second Lebanese government in less than a year, it did not lead to real change since the deputies nominated one of them to form the new Cabinet. And after 9 months, these same politicians are still unable to form a new Cabinet, thus making things even worse.

This needs a closer look on our part and that is what we intend to do in the upcoming six months or so. And our approach will be both descriptive and explanatory, in order to understand and try to explain what went on in Lebanon leading to the October 17 revolution and its aftermath.

These developments that have changed the face of the country and have driven more than half of the Lebanese population below the poverty line, make it very important for us to conduct research to see why and how these events took place and try to explain their meaning and their outcome.

We will try to explain why the uprising took place at that particular time and why it did not succeed in overturning the Taef regime that was installed in the early 1990s. However, we will be starting our approach with the explanatory method in order to explain the importance of, and the need for such a study, and why we should interview the main actors on the Lebanese scene, i.e. the Future Movement, Amal Movement, Hezbollah<sup>1</sup>, the Lebanese Forces Party, the Progressive Socialist Party, and the Free Patriotic Movement. These six political movements have been ironically called by the experts "the club of six", in that all six are equally corrupt and opposed to any real change in the political system. This part will be covered by my colleague Dr. Sadaka.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, despite efforts, both Amal and Hezbollah declined to be interviewed.

But we will not only approach the latter forces, but also the main civil actors, NGOs, opposition parties and movements, and students.

As such, we will be engaging both the traditional political parties on one hand, and civil society, the economic actors, and the opposition movements on the other, which is the part we will be covering ourselves.

Accordingly, we will be talking to the main activists who were very influential during and following the October 17 revolution, especially in the Beirut and Tripoli regions.

As key actors, they probably suffered the most from the failure to change the political system. And today, they are trying to organize themselves – a thing which they had so far failed to achieve – thus holding a major meeting in Achrafieh to announce the formation of an opposition front. The meeting was held at the headquarters of the National bloc in Gemmayzeh.

The National bloc a very old traditional Lebanese party, which had reinvented itself shortly before the eruption of the October 17, 2019 revolution. It is a very good example of what future secular parties might look like, seeing as how it decided to rebuild itself on nonreligious bases. The meeting they held was attended by a number of October 17 figures, such as Attorney Nizar Saghieh from the Legal Agenda, a prominent legal activist and researcher, Attorney Wassef al-Harake, and Ms. Paula Yakoubian, an MP who resigned from Parliament following the August 4 Port explosion. We will be interviewing them, as well as the secretary-general of the National Bloc, Mr. Pierre Issa.

The ongoing popular activities have shifted from the street to social media, partly due to the restrictions enforced as a result of the corona pandemic. And they have mainly moved to Clubhouse, where hundreds of meetings are being held by Lebanese activists on a weekly basis to discuss the best ways to help their country overcome its current crisis and defeat the current political leaders.

A set of questions - up to twenty - will be addressed to each of the interviewees, covering the latest developments in Lebanon on both the political and economic levels. But I must also point to the fact that these questions will be open-ended, depending on the way the interview is going and the people being interviewed.

With LIU research team we will also be holding a focus group discussion with a number of LIU students from both Beirut and Tripoli campuses (around 25 participants).

We will be opening a debate about the revolution, its successes, as well as its failures. In this discussion, as well as in my interviews with the main activists, we will be asking for their take on why they believe they have failed to change the country, at a time when the traditional religious and sectarian parties succeed in mobilizing their troops when needed, and thus thwarted the attempt to renew the political system.

In conclusion, it is clear there is a need to conduct a thorough research into the events that took place in Lebanon over the last few years, leading to it becoming a failed state. A country that was seen as the jewel of the Middle East, which people visited from across the region to study in its universities and get treated at its advanced hospitals. And we're confident that we will be able to get a better view of the situation and see what awaits us after these extensive meetings with the main actors in Lebanese society. Likewise, we should have a clear idea of why and how the old sectarian regime was able to overcome a huge popular uprising and remain in place as if nothing had happened carrying on its business as usual.

## Interview

MR. ABDELKADER AL ABI

Tripoli - 15 June 2021

Activist during the October 17 Revolution in Al Nour Square in Tripoli. He was very active among the Tripoli revolutionaries whose actions turned violent however. He is independent and leads a small group of young activists that have in common a rejection of both the current political system and of Iran and its allies in Lebanon.

**Q: When did you decide to take to the streets and why?**

**A:** I did not decide to take to the streets. I was rather drawn to squares because we could not tolerate more oppression. It was not just me who took to the streets, rather the entire Lebanese society. The action was spontaneous, no one planned it: not even one call to take action was made prior to October 17 2021.

**Q: Was your decision to work actively among the October 17 revolutionaries really spontaneous?**

**A:** As I have said earlier, it was spontaneous and the huge number of participants from all ages and from all the classes of society proves that our action was spontaneous. The security services, however, were able to infiltrate the students and send informants to practice violence and disturb the peaceful actions. In time, they succeeded in portraying our movement in the media as a violent one. Unfortunately, they succeeded in their plot i.e. to demotivate us and get us out of the streets.

**Q: Were the Tripoli revolutionaries financed by foreign powers or outside parties?**

**A:** Not only in this case, but in any other one as well, one should not generalize. All Arab countries are affected and influenced by the embassies and by foreign interference. We saw how Saudi Arabia and Qatar interfered in the noble Syrian revolution and consequently caused its failure. We have heard that Turkey, Saudi Arabia and France were interfering in the events taking place in Lebanon in general and in Tripoli in particular. However, we should not think that all revolutionaries in Tripoli were supported by foreign powers. I can even confirm that a very small number of people were subject to such influence.

**Q: Do you believe that the youth still have hope in the future of Lebanon? Do you plan to leave the country?**

**A:** The current rulers have crushed the dreams and aspirations of the youth. These people do not want to leave power and are ready to do anything to defend their positions and privileges. Honestly, I no longer think or believe that I can achieve my dreams and my hopes in this country. Yes, I prefer to leave Lebanon.

**Q: During the revolution, some popular protests turned violent. Why?**

**A:** Some youths were under the influence of drugs and this is due to the hardships that they are facing in our society. But what are we really talking about here? Do you mean the poor man who used violence against the Tripoli municipality because they had destroyed his only source of livelihood a few hours earlier? Instead of allowing this man to work decently, the municipal police decided to humiliate him. I am not defending

violence or giving excuses. But what occurred was a normal reaction by the people who were looking for food in the garbage and do not care if the municipality building is destroyed or not.

**Q: Your main slogan was “All of them means all of them.” Do you still believe in it?**

**A:** When we said all of them, we meant all those who are corrupt and not all the politicians. After all, the country has known throughout its history many honest politicians and we cannot say that they are in the same category of those governing us today. For example, we cannot call Paula Yakoubian corrupt. When we said all of them, we meant all the political parties that have governed Lebanon and were part of the system of corruption.

**Q: Would you be willing to take to the streets again if people decide to protest in big numbers?**

**A:** In my mind, I am still defending the same principles. Elections are coming next week and I will cast my vote and express my opposition to the current rulers. After all, we were not able to change anything when we took to the streets. The only way available to us to get rid of these corrupt parties is to vote them out of power.

**Q: Do you really believe that one day you will be able to get rid of the current authority?**

**A:** These attempts to change will prevail and we will succeed in our goals. But let us not forget that the Lebanese problem is also related to the developments taking place in the region and in the world. But yes, we will replace the current rulers with new faces through the upcoming parliamentary elections.

DR. MOSTAFA ALLOUSH

Lebanon - 15 May 2021

Vice President Future Movement. According to his social network's profiles, he is a Lebanese politician, former member of Lebanese Parliament, surgeon and columnist in several newspapers.

**Q: As Future Movement, where do you stand from the October 17 revolution and its demands?**

**A:** It would be self-evident to say that we, as a political movement, support, and even bid on, the demands of the October 17 revolution. It is not logical, in light of the design of the revolution, for a political current to come out to oppose it, but with all objectivity, although our partisans with the majority of them took to the streets under the banner of that revolution, for me nothing can be placed under an absolute banner, neither negatively nor positively, including the October 17 Revolution.

**Q: Why do you not pursue the options of the revolution and go to a new election law and a new balance of power in Lebanon?**

**A:** We have seen a new election law based on the Ta'if constitution, which means expanded constituencies on the basis of diversity and relativism. In any case, the revolution did not produce an understanding on which law the elections will be conducted, and we have heard contradictory statements in this regard. As for the production of a new authority, for whoever remembers the years 2005 and 2009, a new authority emerged and was unable to rule under the presence of Hezbollah's weapons. If a new power will be in place, should we afford the same issue again? And how this power will deal with it?

**Q: Some of you accuse the revolution of receiving funding from abroad, is there any evidence for that?**

**A:** As for receiving money for the revolution, I do not know, but the revolution is not a specific entity, but if the discussion is about individuals or organizations in the revolution that received money, then this is another talk, and the answer is not mine.

**Q: All of you are related to relations with foreign countries, is this not considered a bond as well?**

**A:** I understand from this question that the revolutionary forces receive support from foreign countries, and I do not object to that, just as political forces are linked to relations with foreign countries, brotherly or friendly countries, and the world today is open to each other, but it is illogical for a party to establish an armed army affiliated with another country in Lebanon, as is the case with Hezbollah today.

**Q: You have been in power for more than 15 years. Why haven't you made any change in terms of going to a prosperous civil state?**

**A:** Our party, like all other powers, acted according to the traditional rules. Everything that is achieved is based on the balance of power imposed by sectarian realities. With all transparency, we did not achieve anything of what we hoped for in this regard, but the situation has become worse than before.

**Q: In your opinion, who is responsible for the current situation in Lebanon?**

**A:** Who is responsible means that I am able to refer to one entity or one person, but a number of things equally contributed in arriving at what we arrived at. For example, the

structure of the system based on sectarian and tribal quotas, the failure of the parliamentary experience to develop into the logic of citizenship based on democracy, the question of Palestine and its multiple implications, and the presence of an enemy on the one hand that imposes destructive and brotherly options on the other hand, who did not hesitate to trade in Lebanon and other than Lebanon.

**Q: Are you ready to go to a new constitution that abolishes political sectarianism and the quota system based on it in all state centers and institutions?**

**A:** The Ta'if constitution includes this proposition, and we certainly support the abolition of political sectarian laws.

**Q: How do you explain the hundreds of thousands of young people and citizens taking to the streets and raising them to unified slogans and requests?**

**A:** The descent of young people is logical because things have reached the point where there is no longer any hope for them for a better tomorrow, but the slogans remained general, without leadership and without alternatives.

**Q: You hold each other responsible for the political and economic collapse. Have you not allied and shared power over the past 15 years and until now?**

**A:** No party can be held responsible for the other, even though some have more sin than others, but as a result there is a difference between those who insist that they are impartial and outside blame, and those who admit their mistakes and are ready to correct them.

**Q: If you acknowledge the existence of corruption within the state, who is responsible for that?**

**A:** Corruption is a general condition, not a single person, and it is a mentality in which the citizen is brought up: it is considered a way of life. But expanding people's livelihoods, liberating them from favoritism, imposing the rule of law and an independent judiciary are some of the means that can make the difference.

**Q: Are you ready to accept an external solution that might impose a group of specialists and technocrats to run the country in the next phase?**

**A:** I think that we are heading in this direction, as happened in some failed countries, and I think that many citizens today hope so.



MS. SAHHAR GHADDAR HUSSEINI

Beirut - 10 June 2021

An activist during the October 17 Revolution in Martyrs Square. She is the daughter of a Hezbollah dead fighter but is not politically affiliated with them. She has more than 91 thousand followers on Twitter, she has been very active in the streets especially in all actions conducted against the governor of the central bank Riad Salameh and has become a well-known figure due to her many TV interviews.

**Q: When did you decide to take to the streets and why?**

**A:** It was a decision that I had actually taken in 2011, when I became engaged in political and feminist activism. I was present in the street earlier to protest against the government in relation to many social and political issues. But the street exploded on October 17 and I was there.

**Q: Was your decision to work actively among the October 17 revolutionaries spontaneous?**

**A:** Lebanese society was facing many hardships five months before October 17. There was no more bread or fuel, and the disaster was already clear in the month of September when fires ravaged the country while the government stood by idly. On October 17, when the minister of telecommunication decided to raise the tariff on WhatsApp, we gathered spontaneously as activists and called on the people to meet at Martyrs Square at 6 pm. And this is where the first confrontation took place with the bodyguards of then-Minister Akram Shehayeb, who used force against us and fired live rounds at us.

**Q: Was the revolution financed by foreign powers or outside parties?**

**A:** Any civil and political movement is financed and might be financed by external powers, especially in the case of Lebanon where we have many Western intelligence agencies actively working in the country. We also have our enemy, Israel, which is always meddling in our affairs through its intelligence services. This is Politics. But we must not allow these interferences to take the momentum of the street and the rightful demands of the masses.

**Q: Why did the revolution flame fade away?**

**A:** For an obvious reason: the absence of a main component of Lebanese society, i.e. the Shi'i community. The Shi'is took part in the revolution and were the main instigators on October 17. However, two days later, after Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah called on his supporters to leave the squares, it became obvious that the streets were almost empty. In addition, the Free Patriotic Movement of President Aoun was absent from all activities, since its supporters felt as if they were being targeted by our actions. Add to that the fact that the economic crisis erupted and the economic situation worsened, which drove the people to stay home because in the face of such an economic disaster, people do not have the privilege to stay in the street.

**Q: Do you believe that the youth still have hope in the future of Lebanon?**

**A:** I cannot answer that. I mean I cannot say yes, there is hope in the future. But do not forget that our country has always faced great hardships and has always overcome them. However, this blow is bigger than ever before, and is very destructive. In the past, a young man or woman who wanted to build a future could do so in five years. But now

they need at least fifteen. I cannot blame those who are leaving Lebanon, but my decision was to stay and help rebuild the country.

**Q: During the revolution, some popular protests turned violent. Why?**

**A:** Violence in the street is part of the game. No one can accuse us or criticize us because some acts of violence took place. It is normal to see such actions taking place in any revolution. Besides, I do not agree that we used violence, and I accuse the regime and its military services of using violence against their own people. Ours was a normal reaction to these actions. When people take to the streets, it is normal to see some acts of violence and Lebanon is no exception.

**Q: Your main slogan was “All of them means all of them.” Do you still believe in it?**

**A:** Yes, of course I do. When we said all of them, we meant all of them without exception. The country has reached a disastrous situation and those in power are responsible for that. And no one is to be exempted from that huge responsibility.

**Q: Would you be willing to take to the street again if people decide to protest again in big numbers?**

**A:** Of course, I would be willing to continue what we have started. And despite the COVID-19 restrictions that are currently in place, I am actively taking part in all activities and all protests that the revolutionaries have been calling for. And yes, it is true that our current activities are not drawing big numbers, but I will never leave the street because I still believe that our people deserve better and the revolution that we have started on October 17 deserves more sacrifices from us.

MR. AMINE ISSA

Beirut - 20 May 2021

Coordinator of the Political division at the National Bloc, a main party that contributed in the October 17 revolution and was not part of government or parliament for the last thirty years. Brother of the General secretary of the Movement, Pierre Issa. The bloc has right wing sensitivities and is considered to be anti-Hezbollah but was able to gather under its umbrella many different revolutionary movements and activists.

**Q: Why was the fire of the October 17 revolution extinguished?**

**A:** Popular action retreated as a result of the excessive oppression practiced by the security bodies and the militias of the sectarian parties. There were also the repercussions of the August 4 explosion, the spread of the pandemic, and the financial crisis. But the spirit of the revolution continues to exist among the Lebanese who filled the squares starting October 17.

**Q: Could we see the resumption of the popular action in the street with the same momentum?**

**A:** It is possible. The authority is accumulating mistakes and destroying what is left of the institutions and the economy. But in light of the increasing number of citizens living underneath the poverty line, there are legitimate fears over the possibility of seeing riots on a wide scale.

**Q: Why do the revolutionary forces not unite?**

**A:** Throughout thirty years, the authority silenced all the opposition movements using intimidation and oppression and took control of the institutions that usually make the demands, such as the unions and syndicates in order to silence them. They even deepened sectarianism in the sports clubs and scout movements to prevent mixity among the Lebanese, thus frightening them of each other. In these circumstances, and in light of the diverse cultural structure in Lebanon and the lack of experience among the new opposition groups, it was difficult to unite within a short period of time. But not too long ago, alliances started to form, the most important of which being the one announced from the headquarters of the National Bloc on April 13.

**Q: Could your run in the next parliamentary elections together?**

**A:** Yes, we have launched consultations in this regard. This is not an option but a necessity.

**Q: It is true that the revolution is funded by foreign sides?**

**A:** These are lies and fabrications and we defy anyone to show proof of that. Naturally, there are infiltrators trying to lure some groups with such funding. But they have always failed. For example, the National Bloc's funding is purely Lebanese and subjected to an audit to avoid the entry of any suspicious revenues. And anyone can check our budget and financiers on our website.

**Q: Is the disarmament of Hezbollah one of the main demands of the revolution?**

**A:** Yes, as is the case with any weapons that exist outside the context of the Lebanese armed forces. And this issue should be handled through internal dialog, far away from any foreign interference.

**Q: What do you think about the talk surrounding a military government?**

**A:** Since its establishment and despite its flaws, Lebanon believes in democracy. And unlike all the neighboring states, it has never known a military regime throughout its history, and this reality should not change regardless of the circumstances, whether today or tomorrow.

**Q: What is the role of the youth in tomorrow's Lebanon if they are all dreaming of leaving?**

**A:** Today's emigration is due to the lack of trust in Lebanon and particularly the parties of the authority. Their exist from power, the formation of an independent salvation government, and then the organization of honest elections will restore trust in Lebanon's future and push the youth to rebuild Lebanon even this requires them to offer sacrifices. As a result, immigration will retreat.

**Q: How can the revolutionary youth achieve victory over the ruling class?**

**A:** October 17 marked a turning point in Lebanon's history, which was not limited to the rejection of the ruling class, but also showed a deep change in the way the citizens and especially the youth view the Lebanese system. Today, they are convinced that the sectarian regime, the foreign interferences and the entire economy are the reason behind Lebanon's destruction, and view citizenship as a first identity, Lebanon as a sovereign country, and the free economic system as the alternative, in order to redistribute the wealth and enhance social justice. And the ruling class cannot block this anthropological shift for much longer.

**Q: Your party met with the French Foreign Minister Jean Yves le Drian during his last visit to Lebanon. What are you expecting from France?**

**A:** The United States and France are coordinating over Lebanon and the Biden Administration is coordinating world affairs with its European allies. Le Drian' visit came one day after the G7 meeting and his extensive talks with his American counterparts. Both countries are worried from deterioration of the situation in Lebanon and they also fear that any troubles in Lebanon might lead to a wide immigration problem towards the West. Clearly the US does not want additional problems while it is negotiating with Iran. And we believe that France and the US are pressuring Iran and as such Hezbollah in order to lower their repeated obstructions in Lebanon.

MR. CHARLES JABBOUR

Lebanon

Communications and Media Department Head of the Lebanese Forces

**Q: As the Lebanese Forces Party, where do you stand from the October 17 revolution and its demands?**

**A:** Two days after the October 17 revolution, that is, on October 19, the “Lebanese Forces” announced its resignation from the government, and it had paved the way for this step a month and a half ago at the Baabda economic meeting, in which the party leader, Dr. Samir Geagea, called for the necessity of forming a government of independent specialists that alone would be able to face the financial crisis, and this demand constituted one of the basic demands of the revolution. The “Lebanese forces” supported a revolution which united in all the squares of Lebanon in an exceptional peaceful scene in rejection of the adopted policy that led them to poverty and changed their lifestyle. The “Lebanese Forces” support for the revolution stems from its conviction that change cannot be achieved except with the will of the people at the polls.

**Q: Why don't you follow the revolution's choices and go to a new electoral law and a new production of power in Lebanon?**

**A:** The “Lebanese Forces” raised the title of the early parliamentary elections since the start of the revolution, and it is still raising this title, even if alone, based on its conviction that every day the current majority remains in power, means a decline in the conditions of the country and people, and it is impossible to get the country out of its crisis before the majority is removed from power. Through elections, and for this purpose, a bill was submitted to shorten the mandate of the House of Representatives. But insisting on early parliamentary elections is one thing, and the election law is something completely different, because the current law is the best of the successive laws since 1992, which were equal and median laws and do not reflect the correctness of representation. On the contrary the law in force reflects the actual correctness of representation and the basic criterion in any election law. This law was approved after ten years of discussions, disagreements and divisions, in addition to the fact that it is not permissible to change the electoral laws with every electoral entitlement. The revolution is not a party or a single front and each of its groups prefers one law over another, and when the door for discussion on this issue is open, some will take it as an excuse to extend the current parliament and, by extension, extend the crisis. Especially since the authority fears for its majority after the October 17 uprising and seeks to change the law, there is absolutely no interest in opening the door for discussion on this issue. We should focus on completing the elections and not entering into endless discussions and divisions, and the first beneficiary of them is the one who sits in his positions at the expense of the country and the people.

**Q: Some Lebanese parties accuse the revolution of receiving funding from abroad. Do you agree with these accusations and are there any evidence for that?**

**A:** We have nothing to do with the accusations of some parties and what they say, especially since these parties have been affected by the revolution and fear for their political situation, and the revolution in the end is an expression of the mood of the people before they are affiliated with associations, groups and currents, and therefore the most important thing in the revolution is the mood of the people.

**Q: You all have relations with foreign countries, isn't that also considered a pledge?**

**A:** A distinction must be made between those who have an external relationship with a country that was behind the launch of his party and supports it financially and militarily and implements its policies, agenda and interests, and between those who harness their foreign relations in support of the Lebanese cause, especially since Lebanon is an integral part of the Arab and international legitimacy. The "Lebanese Forces" that have the best relations with the Arab and Western decision-making capitals urge them to assume their responsibilities not to leave Lebanon and to support the state and its institutions, and therefore the difference is that the "forces" employ their relations in order to achieve Lebanese sovereignty and the establishment of the actual state.

**Q: You have been in power for many years, why didn't you make any change in terms of going to a prosperous civil state?**

**A:** A distinction must be made between participating in some governments and being in power, because the party who holds the decision of authority is the same party that overturned the Taif Agreement since 1990, and until this moment it still refuses to implement the constitution starting with its sovereign aspect, and thus this party prevented the establishment of the state and the achievement of sovereignty. It is impossible to achieve change in any country that has lost its strategic decision, and the "forces", through their participation in some governments, have sought to bring about the required change by introducing transparency in the constitution and the law. Participation in governments is natural for any political group in pursuit of change that takes place either in a way: a coup d'état or through the ballot boxes and participation in governments, and when the "forces" felt that change was impossible with the team that controlled the state's decision, it called for the production of a new authority based on the revolution's requests.

**Q: In your opinion, who is responsible for the current situation in Lebanon?**

**A:** Responsibility rests with two main parties: the team that prevents the establishment of the state and confiscates its strategic decision and turns it into a fictitious state and keeps Lebanon an open arena for its foreign policy, and the team that runs the state, expressing its narrow and authoritarian personal interests over the higher interest of the country and people, and therefore responsibility is shared.

**Q: Are you ready to go for a new constitution that abolishes political sectarianism and the quotas based on it in all state centers and institutions?**

**A:** It is not correct to talk about a new constitution before agreeing on basics that we consider axioms: the state's monopoly on weapons away from false claims about the resistance and others, and that all the Lebanese people's loyalty be shifted to Lebanon first, and the state first. Before discussing any constitution, the issue of state sovereignty must be resolved, and every discussion otherwise has nothing to do with reality and falls within the framework of intellectual luxury and does not lead to the desired change.

**Q: What do you explain why hundreds of thousands of young people and citizens took to the streets and raised unified slogans and demands?**

**A:** Any unity of line and position for the Lebanese that crosses regions, sects and barriers. We consider it a moment of awareness and we support and encourage it and call for its fortification, because Lebanon cannot rise and settle without a unity of position and description among all its components on matters of principle and basics, and therefore the revolution that succeeded in uniting the Lebanese arenas is called upon to translate these Unity in the polls to achieve the desired change.

**Q: You hold each other, as Lebanese parties, responsible for the political and economic collapse. Didn't you join forces and share power for more than 15 years that have passed until now?**

**A:** We repeat the necessity of distinguishing between those who hold the authority's decision in implementation of an external will and prevent change, and between participating in some governments in an attempt to change this reality, because we are against the policy of excommunication and resignation.

**Q: Are you ready to accept an external solution that might impose a group of specialists and technocrats to run the country in the next stage?**

**A:** The required solution is the internal solution stemming from the free will of the Lebanese, and the external role must range between supporting the Lebanese choice, direction and decision, and preventing some foreign countries from hijacking Lebanon's decision and following it. Internal politics is the responsibility of the Lebanese, while the responsibility of the international community is to ensure the implementation of international resolutions and prevent Lebanon from keeping an open conflict arena. Finally, we recall and reiterate that the "forces" called on September 2, 2019 to form a government of independent specialists in order to remove the duo who confiscate the existence of the state and manage it about the decision-making positions, because the real confrontation is between those who want a state and those who do not want a state. Thus, the essence of the crisis is summarized in the barter between those who undertake the absence of the state for ideological considerations, and those who harness the management of the state for clientelist and interest considerations.

Ms. MAY KHREISH

Beirut - 13 May 2021

Vice President-Free Patriotic Movement and deputy chairman for political affairs.

**Q: Where does the Free Patriotic Movement stand from the October 17 revolution and its demands?**

**A:** The demands of the October 17 Revolution were neither strange nor far from the Free Patriotic Movement and its founder, President Michel Aoun. It is the movement for freedom, sovereignty and independence, the movement that fights for social and tax justice and the fight against corruption. We stood and still stand with the rightful demands of the original and real revolutionaries with whom we share the same reform principles in politics, economics and society. However, we and the Lebanese reject the bandits, the curses, the suspects, and the aggressors of private and public property. In any case, we still look forward to meeting with the real revolutionaries seeking reform, modernization and development, at a time when the Lebanese are living the most difficult, delicate and critical moments as a result of the successive collapses that were established and sponsored by a system that controlled the Lebanese over a period of three decades and led to the cracking of the national structure.

**Q: Why do not you pursue the demands of the revolution to go to a new election law and a new production of power in Lebanon?**

**A:** Any electoral law that is not based on the concept of justice, equality and correct representation is not equal as one of the foundations of the constitutional reforms. This was the persistence of the Free Patriotic Movement in its struggle to reach the electoral law in a way that established that three-dimensional equation, relying on proportionality for the first time, which allowed a correct and straight representation of the vast majority of the Lebanese, after long decades of being marginalized, shackled and dispersed as a result of adopting the majority law and what is known by "electoral rollers". The Free Patriotic Movement does not mind any discussion of the election law that stems from what the current Law No. 44 has achieved on June 17, 2017, and certainly in the direction of its development while preserving the essence of representative justice, which is the most important positive reason that motivated the movement.

The ultimate goal of the exercise of the act of election is the constant need to develop public political life, which is a natural need in which all peoples who constantly yearn to develop the system that governs their interrelationships, as well as with the regimes or authorities that emerge from the popular will. The Free Patriotic Movement, as it emerged from the womb of the popular will, lives a tireless dynamism in search of the best way to develop and modernize, in search of the system most capable of managing the complex Lebanese diversity. We believe that the implementation of the reforms stipulated by Taif, and which are still not covered by the Lebanese, is the main building block in the process of modernizing the system.

We mean here, for example, the expanded administrative and financial decentralization, the abolition of sectarianism, the establishment of a Senate with full and informal powers, the adoption of a unified personal status law, and a steadfast launch towards the secular state. We see no reason for the traditional system to neglect the implementation of these reforms without other provisions of the Ta'if, except for the desire of that system to monopolize and nibble on what remains of the state and institutions and perpetuate its gains even at the expense of the constitution and the National Accord Document, and



subsequently disrupt social justice and the conventionally suspended constitutional reforms. This is our modernization proposal, and this is our perseverance at all times, and our hand is extended sincerely and patriotically to meet every desire from the forces of the revolution and others.

**Q: Some of the Lebanese parties accuse the revolution of receiving funding from abroad; is there any evidence for that?**

**A:** The revolution is not a single entity or a monolithic party, but rather diverse and multi-ethnic groups that do not adopt a single discourse nor a single common goal. Some of them are new actors, and they are looking for reform and modernization. However, some of them are suspicious and destructive, with clear external links to the recognition of the real revolutionary groups, which prompted them to reject suspects who are clearly inferred. In any case, this fact is not hidden from the Lebanese, who make a clear distinction between the bad and the good.

**Q: All of you are related to relations with foreign countries; is this not considered a problem as well?**

**A:** The Free Patriotic Movement was never a pawn, neither outside nor inside. No commission on his hands. Its only perseverance is the purely Lebanese interest. Its modest budget is operational, exclusively from the sacrifices of its employees. This is precisely the strength of the current, because its liberation from any internal or external burdens makes it free of mind and hands and acts exclusively according to what is proportional to the national interest.

**Q: You have been in power for more than 15 years. Why didn't they make any change in terms of going to a prosperous civil state?**

**A:** As we have already mentioned, the current struggles to develop the state into a truly secular state that secures true citizenship that relies on equality in rights and duties.

**Q: Who do you think is responsible for the current situation in Lebanon?**

**A:** The economic and financial collapse that occurred was not the result of one hour, but the righteous son of the traditional system that ruled Lebanon, and established the rentier economy based on borrowing, high interest, stifling productive sectors and any entrepreneurial spirit among the Lebanese. That system gradually eliminated the top of the productive economy and marginalized industry and agriculture, focusing exclusively on the malleable but fragile services economy. It was also keen to make corruption an entity, at the core of the system. Therefore, it intended to disrupt the approval of the budget for a whole decade, starting from the year 2005. And if it were not for the Free Patriotic Movement and its efforts and efforts, the public finances would not have been reorganized by imposing the adoption of the budget law. The traditional system wanted from all of that to keep the hand on the state's wealth and waste its capabilities, which contributed to the acceleration of the collapse. From here, the criminal scrutiny has become tirelessly or bored, and the system opposes it for fear of being condemned, the entrance to financial and economic correction to find out who stole the Lebanese money and their deposits, and who caused the tremendous erosion that is paving the way for the great impact.

**Q: As Lebanese parties, you hold each other responsible for the political and economic collapse. Have you not allied and shared power over the past 15 years and until now?**

**A:** The Free Patriotic Movement has been absent from power for a full 15 years since the inception of the Second Republic. In 2005, we entered the parliament through the

big door, which was called the tsunami at the time. However, our change and reform ideas have descended like a thunderbolt over the traditional system that has not yet been digested, neither our existence nor our thinking of change, nor the modernization that we seek through structural reforms at the core of the system, politically, financially, monetarily, economically and socially.

**Q: If you acknowledge the existence of corruption within the state, who is responsible for that?**

**A:** As mentioned above, corruption made the traditional system and its righteous son. It was accepted as one of the means of self-financing during the Second Republic, as compensation for gains achieved in wartime and militia work, and as a main means of accumulating more gains on the margins of the state and the constitution, and contrary to the obligations of its consent to join the nascent state. State-building and corruption cannot coexist, and it is inevitable that one will destroy the other. The fight against corruption is a central issue in the Free Patriotic Movement's policy of state building, despite its high cost to it because it has put it in a bloody confrontation with the entire traditional political and financial system that brought Lebanon, with its non-state practices, to collapse and to the Lebanese losing their jobs and money and reaping their lives. Reforms are based on a central goal, which is forensic scrutiny in preparation for recovering the looted and talented funds, albeit gradually, as well as through a fair distribution of losses. It is based on the obligation to legally declare the recovery of looted and unlawfully donated funds transferred abroad in a discretionary manner, in addition to the Law of the Special Court for Financial Crimes, as well as the adoption of the Law of Accounts and Property Disclosure for each public servant to ensure transparency and clarify the truth of the corrupt. In addition, the Capital Control Law must be passed to stop the leakage of funds abroad, and all structural reforms necessary to secure international support that are conditional on their achievement must be approved. It remains that the sustainable solution to combating corruption is the establishment of an independent, conscientious and effective judicial authority, in conjunction with modernizing state structures, relying on e-government to stop bribery and facilitate and speed up administrative transactions.

**Q: Are you ready to accept an external solution that might impose a group of specialists and technocrats to run the country in the next stage?**

**A:** No one is more distressed by Lebanon than the Lebanese themselves. There is no alternative to the national dialogue which has to lead to a discussion on our differences and reach common points that would enable us to move forward with the rescue plan. The outside is acceptable when it constitutes a facilitating factor for internal reconciliation, but it is definitely rejected if it is acted as tutelage. We approved the French initiative as a facilitator for the national solution and an integrated package that produces a rescue plan. We are still waiting for the parties to fulfill their pledges and what they have committed to do.

MR. ZAFER NASSER

Lebanon

General Secretary of the Progressive Party.

**Q: As a Social Progressive Party, where do you stand from the October 17 revolution and its demands?**

**A:** There is no doubt that the moment of October 17 formed a popular uprising rejecting an existing political and economic reality, and therefore we did not have a negative stance on it at all, but we did not take an official decision to participate in it. And the demands raised are right. We had a movement through a demonstration organized by the Progressive Youth Organization three days ago, that is, on October 14, which raised many demands that converge with the demands of October 17, but many groups went to the slogan "All Means All", that we cannot accept because we have our political, ministerial and parliamentary history and we are proud of it. Despite this, we expressed our willingness to discuss our performance in detail to evaluate it, but not on the basis of generalization. This is what made the distance between us and the movement.

**Q: Why don't you follow the revolution's choices and go to a new electoral law and a new production of power in Lebanon?**

**A:** We are with a new electoral law since before the revolution, and we proposed that the law should be outside the sectarian constraint and that the youth group would give it the opportunity to express themselves.

**Q: Some Lebanese parties accuse the revolution of receiving funding from abroad. Do you agree with these accusations and is there any evidence for that?**

**A:** There is a lot of talk about external funding for some groups, and usually in Lebanon, the external factor enters the internal political game, but for us the most important is the reality of the position of the Lebanese people, which they expressed in this revolution, and the people are the sincerest in relation to some groups that contribute to mobilizing or organizing the movement.

**Q: You all have relations with foreign countries, isn't that also considered a pledge?**

**A:** Communication with abroad is not legally prohibited but working for foreign parties at the expense of the country's interest is rejected.

**Q: You have been in power for many years, why did you not make any change regarding going to a prosperous civil state?**

**A:** We have been participating in governments since after Ta'if agreement, but in Lebanon and because of the sectarian structure, we cannot be asked about change, but rather we can ask about our performance because we are not a ruling party.

**Q: In your opinion, who is responsible for the current situation in Lebanon?**

**A:** The one responsible for what the situation has devolved to is first the sectarian political system, then the political performance of the political forces without generalization because the matter needs a detailed study in this aspect, which adopted the quota approach instead of the rational management of the state and its capabilities.

**Q: Are you ready to go for a new constitution that abolishes political sectarianism and the quotas based on it in all state centers and institutions?**

**A:** There is no radical solution in Lebanon except with a political system that is not sectarian, but realism requires saying that this is difficult and requires collective conviction.

**Q: What do you explain why hundreds of thousands of young people and citizens took to the streets and raised unified slogans and demands?**

**A:** Young people descend with unified slogans and demands that express this generation' rejection of the existing reality, but it failed to find a program and a leadership.

**Q: You hold each other, as Lebanese parties, responsible for the political and economic collapse. Didn't you join forces and share power for more than 15 years that have passed until now?**

**A:** I prefer not to answer.

**Q: Are you ready to accept an external solution that might impose a group of specialists and technocrats to run the country in the next stage?**

**A:** Any external solution imposed on us is evidence of our inability as Lebanese and detracts from sovereignty and national dignity. Helping in the solution is not a defect, but the important thing is that we help ourselves through an internal national will, and this is not impossible if the goal is Lebanon and the Lebanese, their interests and ambitions.

MR. OMAR WAKIM

Beirut - 21 May 2021

Leader in the People's Movement with left wing sensibilities with close ties with Hezbollah. Omar is the son of the People's Movement President Najah Wakim. They have participated to the revolution but remained distant from the other movements and insist on acting alone.

**Q: Why was the fire of the October 17 revolution extinguished?**

**A:** October 17 was not a revolution. It was a cry. And more than one year after it started, this 'cry' must produce a command with a project, capable of turning it into a real movement of change.

**Q: Could we see the resumption of the popular action in the street with the same momentum?**

**A:** In light of the collapse seen in Lebanon, it is natural for the people to return to the street. But without the aforementioned command, their action will once again be a mere cry and will not endure the same momentum.

**Q: Why do the revolutionary forces not unite?**

**A:** Because they have so far failed to agree on a project.

**Q: Could you run in the next parliamentary elections together?**

**A:** This will depend on the project they will present.

**Q: Is it true that the revolution is funded by foreign sides? What about the sides close to the US embassy?**

**A:** There is no doubt that the intelligence services are trying to exploit any popular action, especially if they are affiliated with states that had a key role in the current state of collapse in Lebanon, at the head of which is the United States. Unfortunately, some sides are implementing the American agenda, but they no longer enjoy credibility among the people despite all the money spent. This was clearly seen in the latest attempts to block the roads in the country.

**Q: Is the slogan 'everyone means everyone' not unfair to the Lebanese resistance and its sacrifices?**

**A:** The slogan 'everyone means everyone' is against all those who were part of this ruling class since the civil war until today, and the resistance has nothing to do with them.

**Q: What do you think about the talk surrounding a military government?**

**A:** Once again, it is all about the project not the shape of the government.

**Q: What is the role of the youth in tomorrow's Lebanon if they are all dreaming of leaving?**

**A:** All the burden is placed upon the Lebanese youth and there is great hope in them despite all the difficulties they are facing.

**Q: How can the revolutionary youth achieve victory over the ruling class?**

**A:** Like the youth in any state around the world, they must overcome their sensitivities and work together to produce a project characterized by awareness and patriotism.



# University students and Lebanese political society: tracing roles, attitudes and changes

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## Summary

Since the advent of mass higher education in Lebanon in the early 1960s, university students have represented an integral component of the Lebanese political society. This centrality reconfirmed itself throughout the Lebanese Uprising of October 2019, whereof university students represented one of the most vibrant and active actors.

As part of the IRHAL project, the following paper aims at analyzing the role that the massive participation of university students to the Lebanese Uprising exerted on their political positionalities and its implications for the future of Lebanese politics. To this end, it will first provide a historical overview of the changing patterns of student activism in Lebanon, to then present and analyze the results of the four focus groups carried out by IRHAL in July 2021 to assess the impact of the Uprising on students' political attitudes and behaviour.

## Introduction

Between October 17, 2019 and late February 2020, an unprecedented popular uprising for geographic scope and popular participation took hold of the Lebanese streets demanding, through a variety of claims, practices and solidarities, a radical redefinition of the national socio-economic and political order on more accountable, inclusive and equal bases (IFI 2020). The uprising – or *thawra*, revolution, as labelled by the array of mobilized actors who embodied it – cross-cut geographic, class, sectarian, gender and generational boundaries, and assumed immediately a steady anti-establishment posture, epitomized in the overarching slogan *Killun ya'ni killun*, (*All of them means all of them*) to express both the attribution of the full responsibility for the socio-economic and governance shortcomings affecting peoples' everyday lives to the entirety of Lebanese sectarian forces, and the quest for the latter's immediate resignation from the parliament. This represented a breakthrough of crucial importance with the transgressive protest cycles of the post-war period, where sectarian logics of engagement and exclusion had represented or a distinctive feature (most notably, the so-called "Independence Intifada" or also "Cedar Revolution" of 2005), either, as of the case of the incremental anti-sectarian protest cycles developed from 2011 onwards, an elephant in the room still too incumbent to be overtly challenged (AbiYaghi, Younes and Catousse 2015). Furthermore, while the uprising consistently built on cumulative and incremental dynamics, much of its propulsive force came from the spontaneous and protracted activation of social groups and geographical areas which had so far widely remained on the margins of anti-sectarian transgressive contention, and whose quiescence had represented a fundamental – albeit passive – pillar for the reproduction of sectarian elites' access to political power.

As effectively summarized by Mona Harb, «the 2019 October uprising toppled the government but did not manage to break the entrenched sectarian political system» (Harb 2021). One of the main reasons for this shortcoming has been identified in the loose horizontal structuring adopted by the squares which, if on the one hand contributed to preserve demonstrators from top-down attempts of cooptation, it simultaneously prevented to canalize the array of atom-

ized grievances and actors who reactively took the streets towards a broad-based constituent process projected on the long term.

The uprising demobilized at the end of February 2020, upon the spread of Covid-19 pandemic, and the consequent enforcement of protracted sanitary lockdowns which forbade public gatherings and were conducive to compulsory dismantlement of the permanent mobilization sites mushroomed in the main squares and crossroads of the country. When, during the summer 2020, the containment measures on public gatherings begun to be lifted, the explosion of more than two thousand tons of ammonium nitrate at the port of Beirut provoked the devastation of a consistent portion of the eastern side of the capital, with a final toll of about 220 deaths, thousands of injured, and the forced displacement of about 300.000 households. Meanwhile, the economic crisis which triggered the outbreak of the uprising underwent a steady acceleration to become, according to World Bank estimates, the third harshest one ever experienced at a global level since the late XIX century (World Bank 2021). The progression of the crisis has been further burdened by thirteen months of institutional paralysis, which hindered the delivery of a variety of international donations and loans to address the debt crisis, implement the reconstruction, improve services and infrastructures, and stabilize the currency. This progressively deprived the majority of Lebanese citizens of the material conditions to return to permanently occupy streets and squares, triggering an outstanding migratory exodus. Furthermore, the peaking of the crisis provided opportunity for sectarian elites to reactivate sustained clientelist rewards mechanisms (cash and food donations, targeted distribution of oil and electricity, clientelist distribution of Covid-19 vaccines, to cite the most important) to retrieve consensus among their target constituencies. However, as attested by the continuative persistence of capillary – albeit molecular and dis-organic – protest actions and their anti-systemic framings (Lebanon Support, Mapping of Collective Actions in Lebanon), this operation does not seem to have produced so far effects large enough to mend the deep fracture in the sectarian social contract unveiled by the uprising. Equally important, the demobilization of the squares ignited ex-post a sustained constituent momentum among a variety of opposition actors and networks emerged during the uprising towards the construction of alternative political parties and coalitions through which challenge establishment parties in the upcoming 2022 elections.

Against this backdrop, the IRHAL project aims at analyzing the role that university students might play in the construction of an alternative power block. To this aim, we organized four focus groups to assess how the uprising and its aftermaths impacted on students' political attitudes and behavior, to then explore the role that the latter can exert in the future of Lebanese politics.

In effect, since the very affirmation university students as established contentious actors on their own right in the national political arena throughout the 1960s, university student activism in Lebanon has been constantly characterized by a sharp dualistic structure. As much as university campuses have never ceased to represent one of the major breeding grounds for the radical contestation of the Lebanese sectarian order, in fact, the same campuses have simultaneously represented also a prominent site of partisan activism and recruitment underpinning from below the reproduction of sectarian loyalties and modes of political subjectification. The forms whereby this dualism expressed itself over time have walked hand in hand with the shifting framings, fault-lines and power-balances defining the national political dynamics, whereof students have represented both a mirror and an integral component. Therefore, understanding the political positionalities of university students across time and space, their stratifications, and modes of articulation provides a privileged observation point to grasp the main political ferments at stake within Lebanese society in a given historical moment. More importantly, being university campuses one of the privileged sites of formation of future voters and political leaders, to understand the forms and trajectories of students' engagement to the political offers a particularly valuable vantage point to anticipate the main outlines of the political confrontation to expect in the upcoming future.



## 1. University Students and the Lebanese political society: a historical overview

*From ideology to partisanship: Lebanese university student activism before and after the Civil War (1975-1990)*

Albeit the establishment of the first universities in Lebanon dates back to the late XIX century, university students emerged as prominent contentious actors on their own right in the national political arena on the eve of the 1960s. This emergence was significantly prompted by the educational policies promoted by the president Fouad Chehab (1958-1964) which, by consistently enlarging the scope and the activities of the public Lebanese University,<sup>1</sup> played a pivotal role to democratize and massify the access to higher education, and to disrupt the monopoly held until then by private and elitist university institutions (Barakat 1977). At the center of students' mobilizations stood educational, domestic, and regional questions alike, within the framework of a broader process of rapid politicization and radicalization of the youth population both within and outside educational institutions (Traboulsi 2012, 163–70)

Until the outbreak of the Civil War (1975-1990), the dominant political fault-line dividing the students' political affiliations pitted a right-wing, predominantly Maronite minority of student groups framing their defense of the existing Lebanese sectarian order according to different understandings of the Lebanese Nationalism, against an expanding majority of predominantly Muslim, ideologically heterogeneous leftist groups struggling instead for a radical redefinition of the Lebanese civil order on secular and more equal bases (Farsoun 1973). This division largely reflected the process of political polarization and radicalization that the country was experiencing and which, against the backdrop of an unprecedented socio-economic and political crisis and the propeller of the bulky presence of the Palestinian "resistance", ultimately stemmed in a fully-fledged armed confrontation. Also, the pattern of student politicization reflected the deep crisis that the dominant political structures based on civil leadership were undergoing, and foreshadowed the dominant ideological fault-lines which shaped the political confrontation "by other means" in the first biennium of the Civil War (Barakat 1977; Nasr and Palmer 1977).

Starting from the end of the 1970s, the Lebanese Civil War underwent a steady "sectarianization". This process walked hand-in-hand with the progressive "cantonization"<sup>2</sup> of the national territory into homogeneous sectarian enclaves under the control of sectarian militias, which also took over the management of the administrative, infrastructural and public services, as well as the key economic activities and resources in the respective areas of influence (Picard 2005). This triggered a profound reconfiguration of the university political spectrum in a sectarian sense, according to patterns of adhesion and confrontation mirroring the political-sectarian balances at stake in a given locality. A crucial role in this process was played by the decentralization of university campuses, and particularly of the Lebanese University, which eased the latter's incorporation in the militia recruitment and hegemonic infrastructures through the means of armed protection and provision of scholarships, the imposition of the campuses' directive bodies and teaching staff, the tailoring of academic curricula and admission criteria, and the clientelist distribution of educational benefits to partisans (Bashshur 1988).

On October 22, 1989, the signature of the so-called "Ta'if Agreements" set up the conditions for the end of the Lebanese Civil War. The Agreements established as core initiative for the re-institution of peace a constitutional restoration of political sectarianism readjusted in its power-sharing formula in favor of a greater Muslim representation, by revising the Christian/

<sup>1</sup> The Lebanese University was formally established in 1951, and reached full operationality only by 1959, thanks to the efforts of President Chehab. Up to today, it represents the only Lebanese public university.

<sup>2</sup> The term "cantonization" is used here to indicate the process of division of the Lebanese territory into self-governed, contiguous and bordered territorial units under the control of a distinguished militia or coalition of militias which occurred during the Lebanese Civil War.

Muslim allocation of the parliamentary seats from a 6:5 to a 50%-50% ratio, and by transferring part of the executive and legislative prerogatives of the President of the Republic (Maronite) in favor of the executive (Sunni) and the Parliament speaker (Shi'i). Equally important, the Agreements put Lebanon under a strict Syrian tutelage, which turned soon into an occupation *manu militari* holding almost complete control over the domestic and foreign affairs.

As stressed by Nagle and Clancy (Nagle and Clancy 2019), the Agreements largely reflected the “no victor and no vanquished” outcome of the conflict, and *de facto* formalized the sectarian structures emerged during the war by providing the new sectarian elites produced by the hostilities with the enabling institutional infrastructure to capture political power and reproduce in both state and society the path-dependent mechanisms of sectarian governance set up throughout the conflict. These elites included, among the most important, a tiny but powerful Sunna oligarchy of “contractor bourgeois” epitomized in the figure of Rafiq Hariri who took the leadership of the community (Baumann 2012), and, above all, former militias and warlords which, thanks to the general amnesty of 1991, were able to easily reconvert themselves into political parties and recapitalize in and through the state the political and economic power acquired by weapons. The means whereby this recapitalization occurred consisted first and foremost in the structural transformation of the state apparatuses (ministries, state-owned enterprises, public agencies and institutions, etc.) into instruments of self-serving economic appropriation and political patronage through the clientelist or personalistic distribution of procurements, workplaces, and resources according to distribution criteria superseded by the politics of allotment of the spoils of office bequeathed by the Ta'if Agreements (Baumann 2019). This transformation was compounded by the strategic maintenance of a minimal state provision of basic and welfare services, which left the field open to politically-connected or controlled sectarian institutions to fill the void (Cammatt 2014; Cammett 2011) religious parties such as Hezbollah play a critical role in providing health care, food, poverty relief, and other social welfare services alongside or in the absence of government efforts. Some parties distribute goods and services broadly, even to members of other parties or other faiths, while others allocate services more narrowly to their own base. In *Compassionate Communalism* (Cammatt 2014), Melani Cammett analyzes the political logics of sectarianism through the lens of social welfare. On the basis of years of research into the varying welfare distribution strategies of Christian, Shia Muslim, and Sunni Muslim political parties in Lebanon, Cammett shows how and why sectarian groups deploy welfare benefits for such varied goals as attracting marginal voters, solidifying intraconfessional support, mobilizing mass support, and supporting militia fighters. Cammett then extends her arguments with novel evidence from the Sadrist movement in post-Saddam Iraq and the Bharatiya Janata Party in contemporary India, other places where religious and ethnic organizations provide welfare as part of their efforts to build political support. Nonstate welfare performs a critical function in the absence of capable state institutions, Cammett finds, but it comes at a price: creating or deepening social divisions, sustaining rival visions of the polity, or introducing new levels of social inequality. *Compassionate Communalism* is informed by Cammett's use of many methods of data collection and analysis, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS, and hence to penetrate and regulate every ‘nook and cranny’ of the life of Lebanese citizens.

This war-inherited patterns of persistence and reproduction did not left immune university campuses which, along with remaining prominent sites of sectarian incorporation from above, saw student clubs and associations progressively affirming themselves as prominent sites of sectarian partisan activism and recruitment (Harik and Meho 1996). Also, the reproduction of sectarian loyalties among youth was significantly underpinned by the state-sponsored post-war “politics of amnesia” which, by preventing from above the elaboration of a collective memory of the conflict first and foremost by hindering the integration of Lebanese post-independence history in the official school programs, bounded youth's historical knowledge and *mise-en-sense* of the country's recent past to the sole familial memories and communal narratives (Haugbolle 2010; Barak 2007).

The result was to cement and structuralize the political-sectarian fault-lines, loyalties, and modes of political subjectification emerged in the terminal phase of the conflict, which remained henceforth the basic blueprint of the post-war national socio-political fabric.

*From the "Independence Intifada" to the October 17 Uprising: patterns and trajectories of university student activism in post-war Lebanon*

The consolidation of sectarian loyalties notwithstanding, during the period of the so-called "Pax Syriaana", students and youth remained generally absent from the national political arena. One of the main reasons for this absence was strictly related to the tight repressive control exercised by Syrian authorities over Lebanese political and civil life, which stretched from the ban over demonstrations and opposition political parties, to the enforcement of press censorship and electoral frauds, up to the extensive penetration of the structures of civil society and the murder of political dissidents. The second one was the widespread feeling of distress, disillusionment and alienation which caught the silent majority of the student population, resulting in a general disenfranchisement from active student politics (Harik and Meho 1996). This did not prevent anyway underground anti-Syrian student networks to emerge and operate. The earliest and most combative front was represented by the student groups affiliated to the banned Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)<sup>3</sup> and Lebanese Forces (LF)<sup>4</sup> which, despite the close monitoring of the Syrian intelligence, managed to use the safer space of private universities as prominent alternative sites of organization and mobilization in absence of – and autonomously from – the respective party leaders (Bray-Collins 2016, 154-164). This front came to progressively incorporate also the student groups of the PSP<sup>5</sup> (Druze) and the young partisans of Prime Minister Hariri<sup>6</sup> which, especially after the withdrawal of the Israeli occupation troops from South of Lebanon in 2000, felt increasingly free to publicly express their looming anti-Syrian stances.

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<sup>3</sup> The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) emerged in the first half of the 1990s as an underground anti-Syrian organization aiming at pushing forward the political project of the exiled leader General Michel Aoun. Its social base accounted predominantly Christian middle classes, and combined overt anti-Syrian stances with a loose Lebanese nationalist ideology. After the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005 and the consequent return of Aoun to the homeland, the movement turned into a formal political party. In defiance of its sharp anti-Syrian history, in 2006 Michel Aoun signed a memorandum of understanding with Hezbollah whereby the FPM became the major Christian force within the pro-Syrian March 8 coalition (Helou 2020).

Currently, the FPM represents the largest Lebanese Christian party present in the Parliament. In 2016, Michel Aoun has been elected President of the Republic.

<sup>4</sup> The Lebanese Forces (LF) were established in 1976 as an informal coalition of Christian right-wing militias under the leadership of the Kataeb Party. The two organizations definitely split in 1985, to become after the war two distinct political parties. Following the strong opposition to the Syrian control over Lebanon, in 1994 the party was compulsory dissolved and its leader Samir Geagea put under arrest for war crimes. After the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005, Geagea was released and the party was legally reconstituted (el-Husseini 2012, 49-58). Currently, the LF represent the second major Christian force of the country, and the leading Christian party of the March 14 coalition.

<sup>5</sup> The Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) was established in 1949 by the charismatic Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt. From the short Lebanese civil war of 1958 until the Jumblatt's assassination in 1977, the party affirmed itself as the leading force of the Lebanese left, taking the head of the Lebanese National Movement, i.e. the umbrella organization coalescing the heterogeneous array of leftist groups who took the weapons in the first phase of the Civil War. After Kamal Jumblatt's assassination, the leadership of the party was taken by his son Walid who, while managing to keep the party's military hegemony, progressively shifted its ideological discourse towards sectarian positions. During the Pax Syriaana, the party was fully integrated in the Syrian-backed ruling apparatus, to progressively shift towards overt anti-Syrian positions after the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000 (el-Husseini 2012, 58-64). Currently, the party represents the main Druze force of the country and is part of the March 14 coalition.

<sup>6</sup> After the initial marriage of convenience, from 1998 the relations between Hariri and Syria began to rapidly deteriorate. The definitive breakout occurred in September 2004, as a reaction to the Syrian sponsored imposition of a constitutional reform to extend the mandate of the outgoing president Emile Lahoud. It is widely considered that his spectacular assassination was backed by the Syrian regime (International Crisis Group 2010)

Besides this majoritarian partisan stream stood a minoritarian, but not least important, array of independent secular and leftist collectives pairing the firm opposition to the Syrian occupation with an equally firm rejection of the post-war sectarian and neoliberal order (Gambill 2003). These groups matured in the shadow of the wave of civil activism and leftist revival developed throughout the 1990s as oppositional counter-reaction to the implementation of the Ta'if Agreements, and partially built on the leftist experiences and the anti-war civil society networks of the 1980s (Hagbolle 2016; AbiYaghi and Yamine 2019). As much as their sectarian counterparts, they represented a prominent incubator for a new generation of political and social activists, and actively participated to a variety of mobilizations and campaigns dealing with both domestic (municipal elections, civil marriage, post-war neoliberal reconstruction) and regional questions (e.g., 2003 US invasion of Iraq).

Starting from late 2000, partisan and independent anti-Syrian student networks began to increasingly cooperate both within and outside of the campus in the common struggle against Damascus hegemony. The cooperation further accelerated from the end of 2004, as the Syrian-sponsored amendment of the constitutional chart to extend the presidential mandate of Emile Lahoud sparked widespread outrage all over the country. This played an important role to lie the grassroots foundations for the broad-brand coalition which, after the tremendous assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005, took the streets and prompted the definitive withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon (Bray-Collins 2016, 164-167).

The so-called "Independence Intifada" represented a fundamental moment of participation and politicization for the post-war student generation, and marked a crucial turning point in the development of post-war student politics. From the point of view of partisan activism, the major outcome was to foster and consolidate the full integration of student groups in the militant structures of the respective parties. The integration walked in parallel with the sharp polarization of the national political spectrum into two rival coalitions defined by the respective regional alignment: on the one hand, the Saudi and Western-aligned March 14 coalition, led by Hariri's *Mustaqbal* movement<sup>7</sup>, the Lebanese Forces, and Jumblatt's PSP; on the other, the Syro-Iranian-aligned March 8 coalition, led instead by *Amal*,<sup>8</sup> Hezbollah,<sup>9</sup> and Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement who, after his return from exile, shifted his political orientation from anti-Syrian to pro-Syrian positions.

The first consequence of this integration was to shift the main focus of university partisan activism from student issues to the expansion of the respective militant bases and the parties' in-campus presence. This double work was carried out primarily by capillary penetrating the student socializing structures, most notably the student clubs, which became henceforth powerful platforms of recruitment and mobilization thanks to the numerous academic and social benefits associated to the affiliation (Lefort 2013). Second, several independent groups and first-timers which had participated to the Intifada got absorbed in the sphere of influence

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<sup>7</sup> The *Mustaqbal* movement was born throughout the 1990s as a political current revolving around the personality of Rafiq Hariri. After his assassination, his political legacy was continued by the son Saad who, in 2007, structured the current into a formal party. Currently, *Mustaqbal* represents the most important Sunna political force and the leading group of the March 14 coalition.

<sup>8</sup> The *AMAL* movement was established in 1974 by the Imam Musa al-Sadr, from the pre-existing Movement of the Dispossessed. The movement aimed at empowering the living conditions and the political weight of the Shia community in Lebanon, and participated to the civil war. After the mysterious disappearance of al-Sadr in 1979, the leadership of the party was taken by the current secretary Nabih Berri, and became one of the most influential militias of the Civil War (Norton 1987). Thanks to its longstanding close alliance with Syria, in the post-war period it was able to retain and further consolidate the prominent position acquired by weapons. Currently the party represents the second most important Shia formation in Lebanon and is part of the March 8 coalition.

<sup>9</sup> Hezbollah was officially born in 1985 from a splinter of the *AMAL* movement. During the Civil War, it played a prominent role in resisting the Israeli invasion of the South of Lebanon, and rapidly expanded its presence and operations among the Shia community. Thanks to the post-war re-alignment with Syria and the protraction of the Israeli occupation of the South of Lebanon, the party represented the sole post-war militia allowed to retain its military arsenal. Since its very foundation, the party has been organically linked to the Iranian regime, whereof it still represents one of the major regional allies (Norton 2007)

of March 8 or March 14, at the expenses of the consolidation of independent networks. Last but not least, university student elections turned into increasingly relevant and competitive testing grounds for the measurement of the political weight of the two coalitions on a national scale. This relevance peaked particularly after 2012, as the postponement of the parliamentary elections for five consecutive years made university ballots the sole terrain of national electoral confrontation. Furthermore, security accidents among partisan student groups on the election days became increasingly recurrent (Gatten 2013).

Against this sharp sectarian re-entrenchment of university politics, starting from 2009 the explosion of a succession of contentious cycles challenging at different levels Lebanese sectarian neoliberal order gave new impetus to the rise of independent student groups. The most important ones included: a) the *Laique Pride Movement*<sup>10</sup> of 2009-2010, advocating for the secularization of the state; b) the *Anti-Sectarian Movement* of 2011,<sup>11</sup> which enlarged the scope of the quest for overthrowing the sectarian system to the endemic corruption and the rejection of neoliberal policies; c) the mobilization against the postponement of the Parliamentary elections of 2012-2013, where the quest for political accountability was also consistently present; d) the *You Stink* movement of 2015,<sup>12</sup> whose early environmental trigger quickly escalated into an overarching contestation of the political and economic status quo.

Reflecting the socio-geographical scope of the aforementioned mobilizations, these networks took root particularly in the major private universities of the capital, such as the American University of Beirut (AUB),<sup>13</sup> the Lebanese American University (LAU),<sup>14</sup> and the Saint Joseph University (USJ)<sup>15</sup> where, especially from 2016 onwards, independent student organizations experienced a consistent expansion. The important growth notwithstanding, however, on the eve of the October 17 Uprising, the established sectarian hegemony within campuses was still far from being consistently scratched. In the 2017 AUB elections, for instance, albeit the independent list guided by the Secular Club earned the historical record of six seats, these seats represented anyway only one third of the overall council (Parreira, Tavana, and Harb 2019). Furthermore, outside of the aforementioned socio-geographical cluster, the growth of independent groups remained marginal and scarcely visible. This anticipated to a greater extent the results of the 2018 parliamentary elections which, against the historical performance scored by the independent lists stemmed from the aforementioned anti-systemic contentious cycles, saw independents earning only one seat in the East Beirut constituency (el-Kak 2019).

<sup>10</sup> The *Laique Pride* movement was born between 2009 and 2010 from social media talks among activists to promote secular change in Lebanon. The first demonstration took place on April 2010, and included among its main claims the secularization of the personal status law. The movement was predominantly composed by collectives, organizations and NGOs advocating for the secularization of Lebanon, including AUB's Secular Club.

<sup>11</sup> The *Anti-Sectarian Movement* was launched by a coalition of Leftist collectives in the vein of the first wave of Arab Uprisings. The movement touched its zenith between February and March, with a succession of participated demonstrations taking place in the major Lebanese cities. The movement quickly faded upon internal divisions concerning its political agenda and the positioning of its components towards the Syrian uprising.

<sup>12</sup> The *You Stink* movement unfolded throughout the spring and summer 2015, against the backdrop of a severe trash crisis which caught Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The crisis was ignited by the saturation of the main landfill serving the capital and the parallel expiring of the contract of the society charged of waste collection, to whom the government failed to find a prompt solution. The movement debuted as a NIMBY mobilization, to quickly escalate into a mass contestation advocating for systemic change (Abu Rish 2015).

<sup>13</sup> The American University of Beirut was established in 1866 under the name of Syrian Protestant College per initiative of American protestant missionaries. Since its very foundation, it has represented one of the most prominent and prestigious academic institutions of the Arab Levant, attracting students from all over the region. Since the 1940s, it has constantly represented a major node of radical student activism.

<sup>14</sup> The Lebanese American University was established in 1992 under the original name of Beirut University College (BUC). Its earliest nucleus was set up in 1833 as a female Women's College per initiative of American Evangelical missionaries. Currently, LAU represents the second most prominent anglophone Lebanese university after AUB, and attracts students from all over the region.

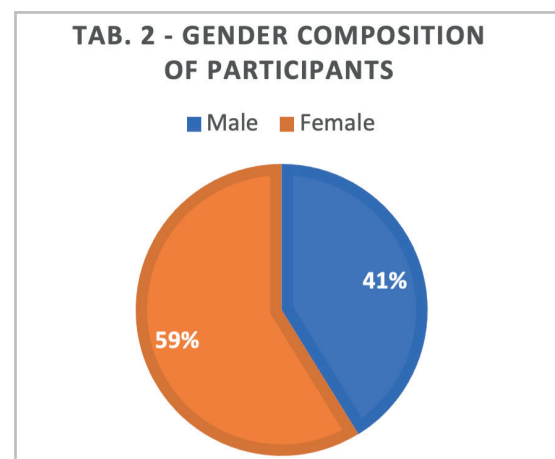
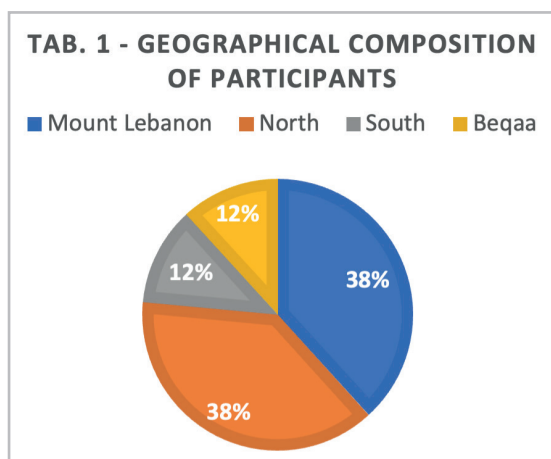
<sup>15</sup> The USJ was established by French Jesuite missionaries in 1874. Currently, it represents the second most prominent Lebanese university institution and the main francophone one. Historically, it has represented the main site of formation of the Maronite ruling elites.

## 2. Towards a generational breakthrough? Assessing the impact of the Uprising on the political positionalities of the Lebanese youth

As stressed by a several observers, university students played a central role in the making of the October 17 Uprising as both organized collective actors and individual participants. This centrality has been particularly evident in Beirut, where university students and collectives represented the most vibrant animators of the debates, the mobilizations, and the multitude of innovative cultural, social, political and citizenship practices which inhabited Martyr's Square. The uprising played also a pivotal role to boost the expansion, the institutionalization and the networking of independent student organizations all over the national territory.

The most important incubator in this sense is the MADA network.<sup>16</sup> MADA network was established in 2017 per initiative of the Secular Clubs of the AUB and the USJ, with the double aim of enhancing the rootedness of independent groups within the campuses, and integrating university youth in the national social, political, and economic arena. On the onset of the Uprising, it played a central role to help the capillary organization of new secular clubs in the major universities of the country, and to coordinate and enlarge the scope of their political action towards (Chehayeb and Majzoub, 2021). As of September 2021, MADA-linked secular clubs were present in ten out of forty accredited Lebanese university institutions. These universities include AUB, USJ, LAU, Université Saint Esprit de Kaslik (USEK), Notre Dame University (NDU), Sagesse University, Antonine University, the Beirut Arab University (BAU), the Lebanese International University (LIU), and the Lebanese University. Last but not least, in the Autumn 2020, independent student organizations reported a series of sweeping victories in the university elections of AUB, USJ, NDU and the Rafic Hariri University.

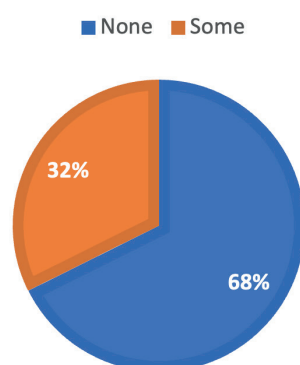
Both the results of 2020 student elections and the steady expansion of independent student networks undoubtedly represent an important breakthrough with the past. On the other hand, they are not alone self-sufficient to give back a picture representative and thorough enough of the overarching political impact that the Uprising exerted on the ensemble of the student population and its future implications. The IRHAL focus groups aim at filling this gap, by providing a first comprehensive qualitative investigation of students' engagement to the political before, during and after the Uprising and its potential impact. To this end, the project selected a sample of thirty-four students from the three local partner universities, designed to mirror as much as possible the overall socio-geographical composition of the Lebanese youth population.



To result consistent with the turnout of 2018 parliamentary elections and enable future projections, the sample privileged the inclusion of participants who had not actively engaged politics before October 2019.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MadaNetwork/>

**TAB. 3 - ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT TO THE POLITICAL OF PARTICIPANTS BEFORE OCTOBER 17, 2019**



The focus groups have been organized according to four clusters based on the students' Alma Mater, and were carried out online during the second half of July 2021 as follows:

Groups and Clusters	Date	Nr. of Participants	Moderator
LIU – Beqaa and South Campuses	July 16, 2021	8	Dr. Assaad Sadaka
LIU – Beirut and Tripoli Campuses	July 16, 2021	10	Dr. Walid Raad
Lebanese University – Tripoli Campus	July 22, 2021	8	Dr. Noma Ziadeh-Mikati
USEK – Kaslik Campus	July 23, 2021	8	Dr. Francisco Barroso Cortes

The decision to hold the focus groups online was strictly related to the Covid-19 restrictions and the severe fuel shortages that Lebanon began to experience since the beginning of the month, compromising the possibility for the majority of students to move from a locality to another. Furthermore, the coeval sharp degradation of telecommunication services hindered at the last minute the participation of a total of four students out of the 38 originally identified.

The focus groups revolved around twelve main common questions elaborated by UNIMED, the University of Cagliari and the local partners during three virtual preparatory meetings, and were designed and organized according to three macro-thematic areas of investigation:

1. *Triggers, forms and trajectories of students' participation to the Uprising (3 questions)*
2. *Attitudes and perceptions towards the Lebanese political system before and after the Uprising (6 questions)*
3. *Post-uprising Youth and the future of Lebanese politics (3 questions)*

So, to put at ease students and facilitate the discussion and interaction, the focus groups were moderated by the local partners, who also took charge of selecting the participants for the respective clusters according to the established sampling criteria. The role of observer was filled instead by myself on behalf of the University of Cagliari, who took record of the modes of interaction and the non-verbal communication of participants for all the four clusters. Exception made for the USEK focus group which was held in English, all the focus groups were

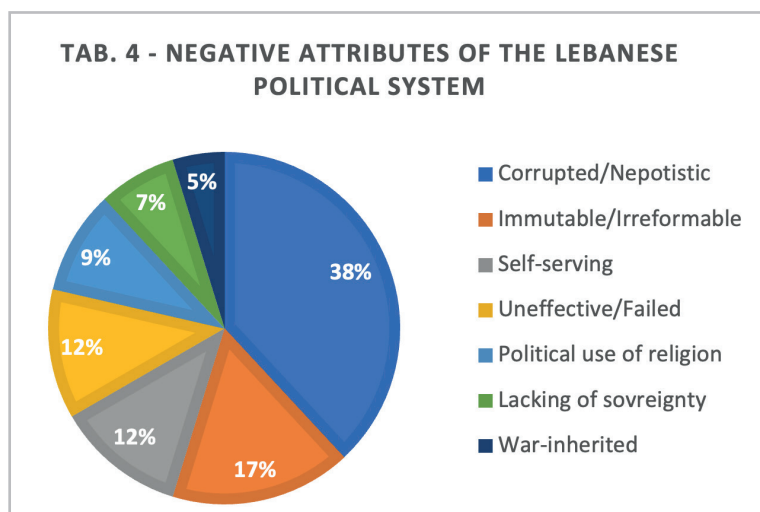
held in Arabic. In both cases, the choice of the language was oriented to address at best the communication exigencies of all the involved participants. Finally, before, during, and after their unfolding, the focus groups respected the strictest ethical criteria.

The coding and data analysis have been elaborated following the method of constant comparison (CC) (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009). The CC method consists in a three-phased analysis where data, after having been chunked into small units according to their content under thematic labels (open coding), are grouped into categories (axial coding), to enable the development by the researcher of one or more themes expressed (elective coding). Moving from these findings, it will draw the conclusions vis-à-vis our main research questions: how and to what extent has the Uprising impacted on the political positionalities of educated youth? Against this impact, can university students represent a site for the emergence or the consolidation of a counter-hegemonic power block?

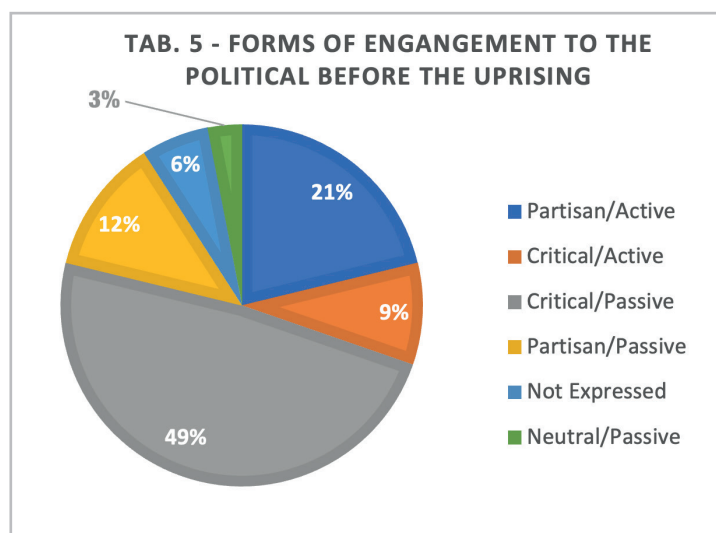
*Before the Uprising: students and the Lebanese political system*

Independently from the initial political positioning of the sample, all the participants to the focus groups shared a deeply negative perception of the existing Lebanese political system. The negative attributes the most recurrently used were related for the most part to the rampant corruption and nepotism permeating state institutions and the state-society relations alike, the self-serving use of power by the ruling elites, and the lack of elite-change. These findings resonate with the trends detected by the Arab Barometer survey on the eve of the Lebanese Uprising (Arab Barometer 2019), which registered a general perception of political institutions as corrupted or highly corrupted by about 90%, and a distrust in the government institutions by about 80%. It should be noted that for the majority of our participants the notion of Lebanese political system (*nizam siyasi lubnani*) is strongly identified with the system of allotment of the spoils of office among ruling elites (the so-called *dawlat al-muhasasa*) bequeathed by sectarian power-sharing.

Within the framework of this dominant understanding, the major discriminant subsisting between partisan and non-partisan students lies in the different degree of responsibility attributed to each party in the making of Lebanese governance and institutional shortcomings. In particular, while for non-partisan students this responsibility is attributed to the entirety of Lebanese ruling parties with no distinctions, the partisan ones tend to absolve their party of reference, which is generally portrayed as the only one really caring about the destiny of the country against all odds. This self-absolatory attitude is usually compounded by the otherization of the main root of state corruption to the rival coalition. During the realization of focus groups, these conflicting opinions represented a major source of debate.







### EXCERPT SERIES 1 – FRAMING THE LEBANESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

*«The Lebanese state is a failing state with a big decay in democracy. [...]*

*We are a nation with regular electoral frauds, with a lot of corruption infiltrated in every inch of the government and in every infrastructure. [...] We don't have free and fair elections when electing new political leaders. We always have the same elites because they are paying for these votes. [...]*

*Plus, the judiciary system lacks of credibility» NS (18, f)*

*«I've always perceived our political system as an ineffective one and a sectarian one where we have a lot of inequalities. Based on that, I've always perceived the system as a bad one. Regarding all the political parties that are operating under this corrupted system, most of them aren't inclined for change» GS (20, m)*

*«We thought that everything in the state institutions was wrong, the public management and the management of public institutions and I thought that we should change things [...] There was no political plan for the future no strategy and everything was about "muhasasa" and corruption so there was no way for change» IM (22, m)*

## EXCERPT SERIES 2.I – DEBATING PARTY RESPONSIBILITIES

### • Discussion 1

- **G., FPM supporter:** *«I blame Thawra people that when political parties' supporters were on the streets they should've accepted them and they should've worked to reach a common ground together. A revolution without political parties is useless. They may be traditional political parties but they are subject for a change. Thus, Thawra people should accept their presence and should accept the fact that political parties' supporters have their own opinions and beliefs. [...] Therefore, this is a big stepping stone that Thawra didn't take in hand»*

- **N., Independent:** *«I'd like to comment on what G said. Everyone was on the streets protesting against those traditional political parties because we're fed up from them. They had a lot of time to work and make a change. They had about 15 to 20 years to make some progress and to make the situation better. However, they weren't inclined for change. People were fed up from them and they were protesting against them to overthrow them so the minimum was that they will reject any form of cooperation. No negotiations between Thawra people and political parties' supporters' was going to happen. All political parties with no exceptions had several years to make a change but they didn't. We can clearly see right now where we're heading and all of it is because of them».*

- **G.:** *«N., I really do understand your point of view and where it's coming from. However, what I am trying to say is that those political parties in our conservative society where it's really hard to implement change throughout new ways without those traditional political parties in order to raise the effectivity rate of Thawra, political parties' supporters should've been included. A change from the inside should have been made, from the heart of these political parties. Everyone in this country is facing the same daily struggles, even political parties' supporters. They are living the crisis and they are jobless like Thawra people. Therefore they should've been involved in the process and negotiations should've been made between both parties»*

- **R., LF supporter:** *«Not all political parties had the chance to be in power and to implement change. In reply for some comments, I will say that Thawra is for everyone, and everyone could participate. However, you can't be part of the process and at the same time you're part of the system, part of the corrupted establishment and friends with Hezbollah who destroyed the country. If you really want to help the Thawra, you should start the change from the inside»*

- **J.S., Independent:** *«I highly disagree that anyone can join. R. gave the example of Hezbollah but it could be applied on the Lebanese Forces as well, his political party. You can't join the revolution when it's against you».*

EXCERPT SERIES 2.II – DEBATING PARTY RESPONSIBILITIES

• Discussion 2

- **J.I., Independent:** *«From the beginning, I did not have a political affiliation, and thank God, I also do not belong to any of them [the ruling political parties, n.b.A.]. I always support the national discourse and act on the basis that we are one people. The revolution did not change much in my convictions, although I pondered a little on its beginnings on the level of our future, and now it does not exist at all»*

- **Z.A., Hezbollah supporter:** *«Frankly, I have increased my confidence in my political line because I see with my own eyes that the party to which I belong is making great efforts and providing many services in order to alleviate the suffering of the people. But I admit that the existence of a strong state is better than relying on limited party services. I see that my party works for the developed country but the state does nothing»*

- **I., Independent:** *«I would like to ask my colleague Z. about the nature of the services provided by her party? We are practically deprived of all kinds of services.*

- **Z.A.:** *I see how the party provides food or medicine to the needy. As for finding jobs, they are more than the party's capacity because it is not the state, but rather secures what it can according to its capabilities*

- **H., Independent:** *«If I was a Shiite pro-Hezbollah, I might have supported it because it has weapons, protects me, and benefits from aid to distribute it to its audience. But I do not want a sectarian party to which I belong. I want to belong to a homeland. Look what is happening around us in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and the economic conditions they are going through»*

- **Z.D., former Hezbollah supporter:** *«I support what my colleague H. said. Yes, I belonged to the Hezbollah party before, and I want to make it clear that some people think that Hezbollah helps all Shiites, and this is not true. I had a personal experience that prompted me to abandon belonging to this party. The party serves the interests of some beneficiaries, close associates and affiliates only»*

- **Y., Mustaqbal supporter:** *«It must be recognized that all the existing parties are components of the state and at the same time contribute to weakening the state, and we know who is the controlling party in this country [referred to Hezbollah, n.b.A.]»*

- **H.:** *«As Y. said, the parties are the state, and I see that they all participated in corruption, and an example of this is Hezbollah, which protected the corruption of the Free Patriotic Movement in exchange for silence on its weapons. Therefore, it can be said that everyone contributed to bringing down the state and bringing us to what we have reached today, and this is all the result of cumulative years»*

*The students and the uprisings: triggers, perceptions, participation, and assessment of the outcomes*

*Attitudes and participation*

Due to the widespread dissatisfaction with the existing status quo, when the uprising broke out, most of the focus groups participants opted for taking the streets. The participation to street protests involved also most of the students with partisan sympathies who, along with sharing the overarching claims and grievances expressed by the squares, felt encouraged to take the streets by the cross-cutting composition of the occupiers.

Another major trigger for the participation of both groups was related to the effects of the incipient socio-economic crisis on their average living conditions, most notably on the growing difficulty to find employment, especially outside from politically connected networks.

Independently from the political positioning and the active participation to the mobilizations, the dominant attitude pervading students when the Uprising broke out was that of a widespread hopefulness.

This positive attitude was predominantly propelled by the outstanding and non-partisan scope of the popular participation, and the resonance of the claims and grievances with their own desire for a systemic change. Other sources of encouragement for joining street protests came from the festive atmosphere of the early days and the extensive mediatic coverage.

At the center of students' expectations stood the hope of an overarching systemic change, starting from the uprooting of systemic corruption and the unseating of sectarian elites from power.

The dominant forms of participation combined altogether street protests and media activism. Due to the diffused geographic scope of the protests, the choice of the squares answered predominantly to criteria of geographical proximity. Also, several students participated to more than one square. Media activism alone was adopted instead predominantly by the sample participants who, at the moment of the outbreaking, were not in Lebanon, or were prevented from joining. On the other hand, one of the sample participants quit the job to be able to physically participate to the mobilizations. Against the outstanding initial participative upsurge, within the space of a few weeks the overwhelming majority of participants stepped back from street protests.

The refraining from squares involved for the most part the first-timers of direct participation to contentious politics, which stepped back in consistent proportions.

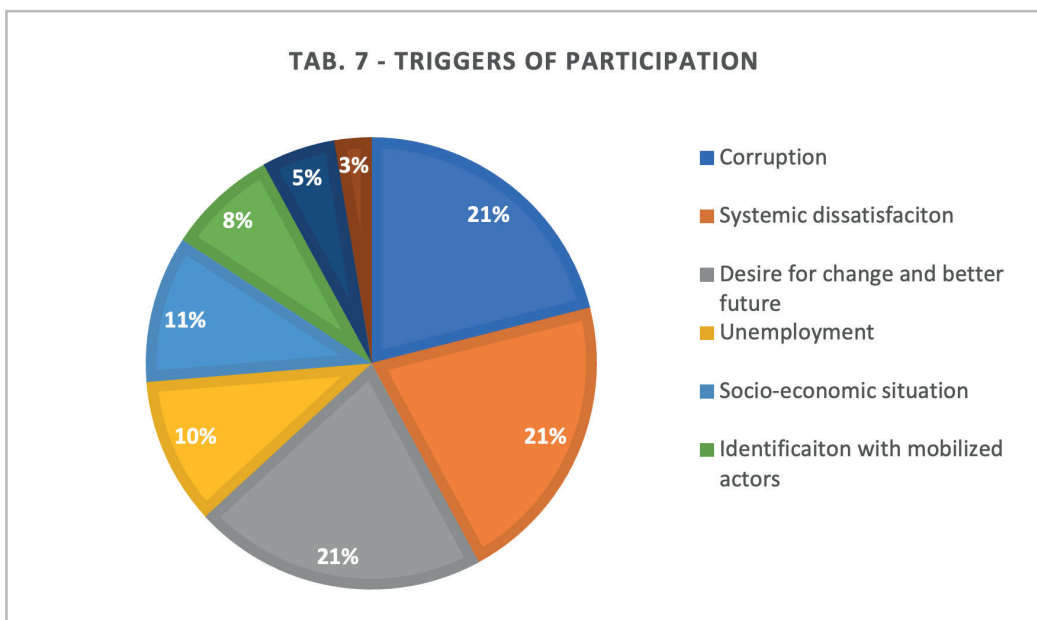
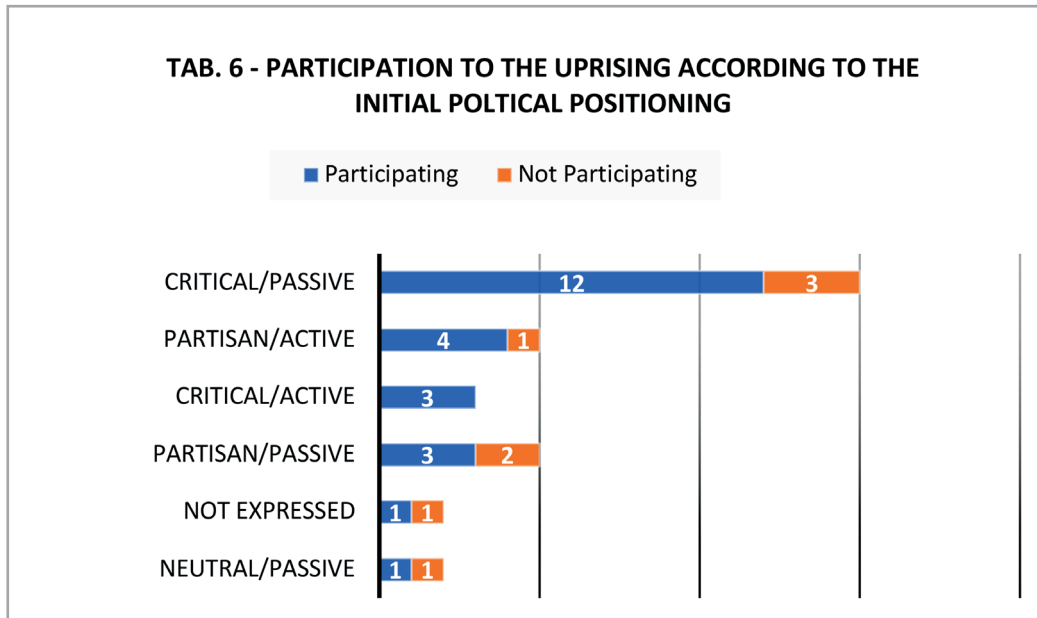
In the case of non-partisan students, the two main reasons expressed by participants were related to the inconsistency of the modes of mobilization, including the lack of genuine commitment of many mobilized actors, and the perceived large infiltration of political parties among the demonstrators. Violence and the state coercion also played a role. To push partisan students back was instead predominantly the hostile attitude adopted by the squares towards partisan participants and the respective political leaders, judged in turn as divisive.

The massive stepping back demotivated over time also part of the minority who remained in the streets, which likewise diminished their everyday participation compared to the initial phase. On the other hand, it should be noted that out of the entirety of participants abandoning the squares, only one declared having changed his attitude and commitment towards the uprising, while most of them continued to mobilize through social media or other forms of activism.

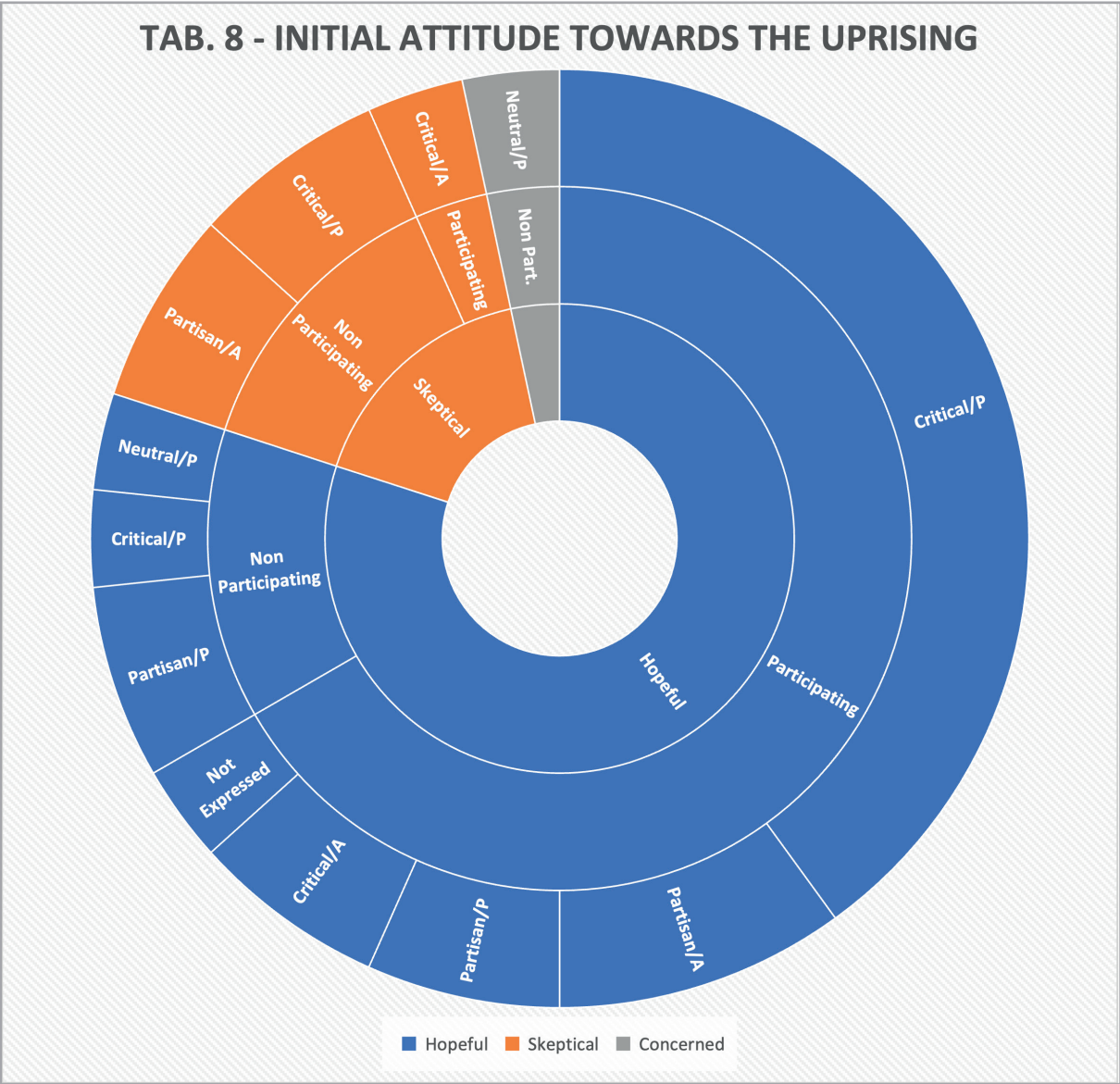
The last element worth of being underlined is the large coincidence between the reasons expressed by students for stepping back from street protests, and the ones expressed by the students having welcomed the outbreak of the Uprising with skepticism or having opted for non-participation.

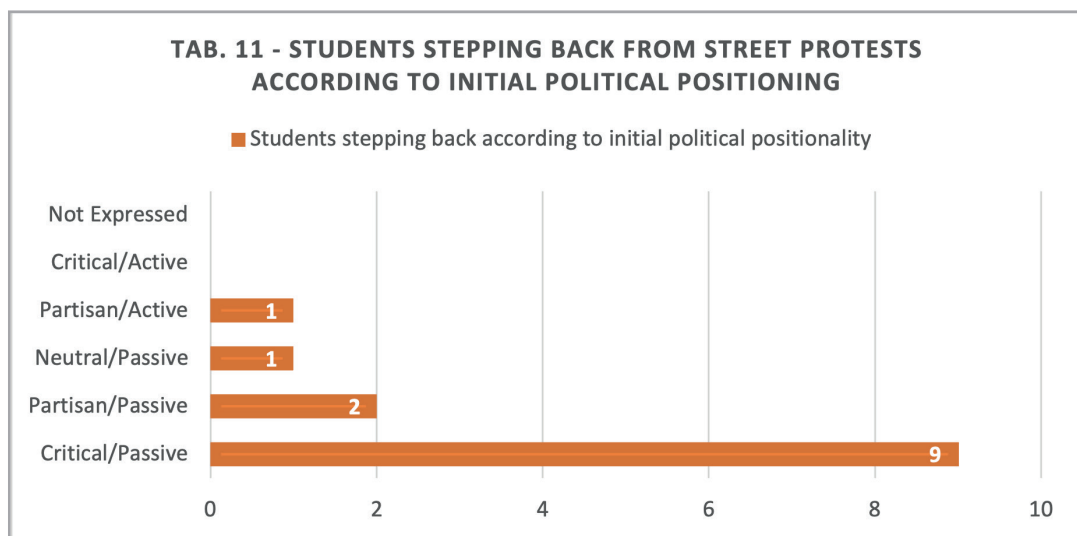
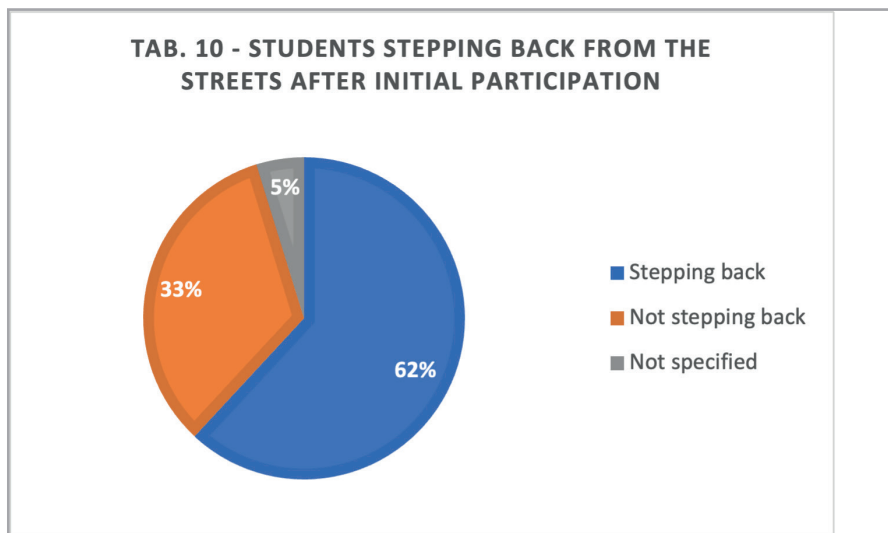
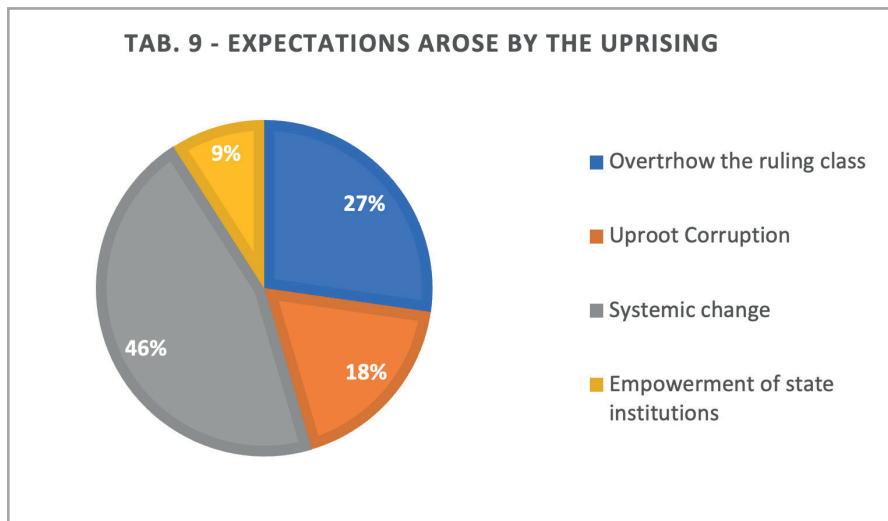
This coincidence pertains the accusation of "divisiveness" risen by partisan students against the hostile attitude adopted by the squares towards the participation of partisan elements, and the specular accusation of "infiltration" arose by non-partisans against partisan participation. This corroborates both the assumption identifying in the lack of structuring, programming

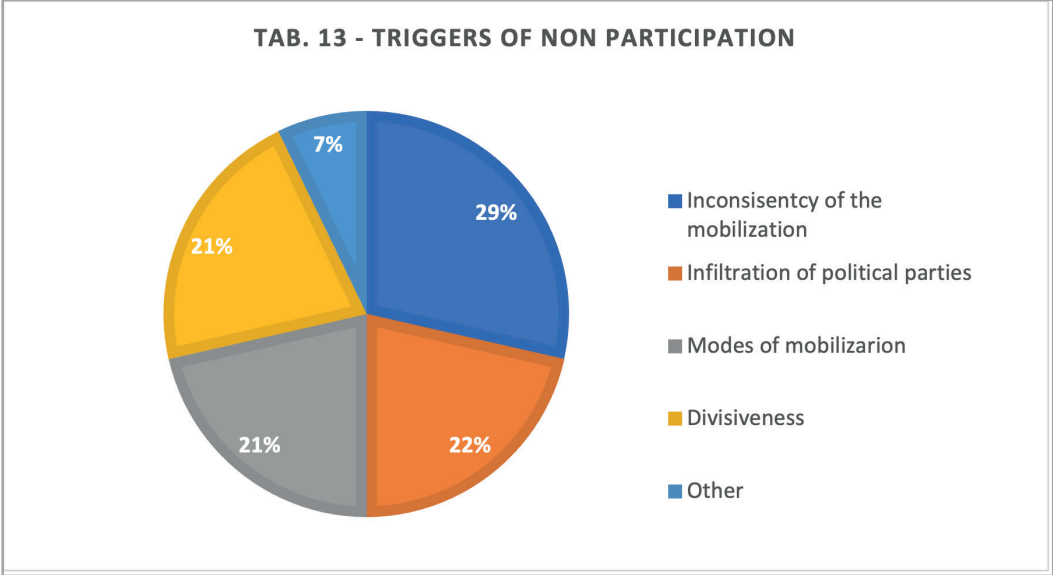
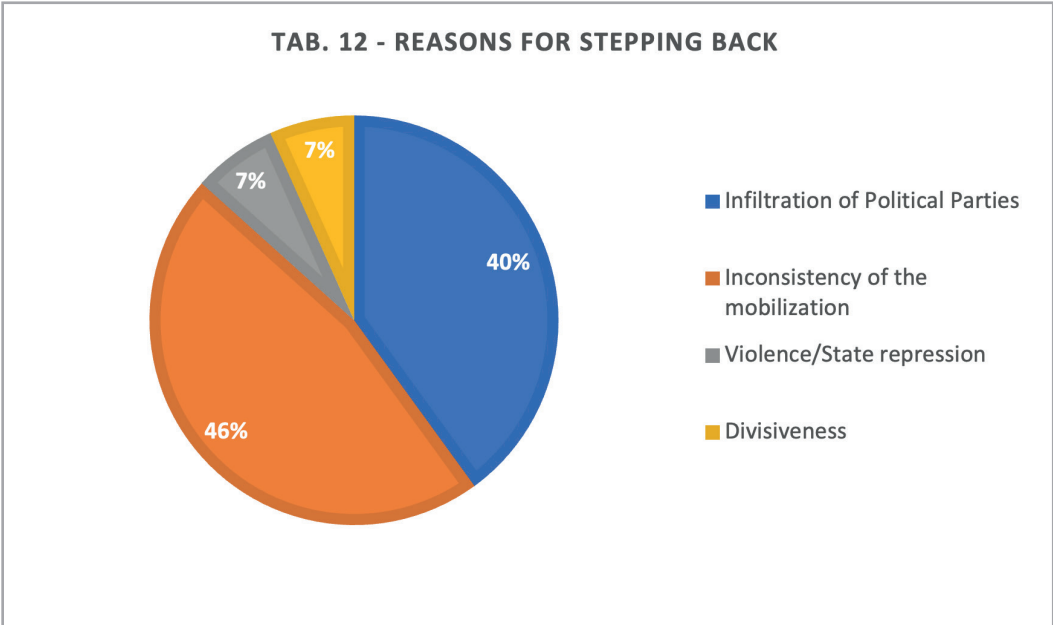
and leadership one of the main reasons for the failure of the Uprising, and the deep divisiveness sparked by the question of the entitlement of partisan elements to participate to the mobilization attested in the Excerpt Series 2.II.



**TAB. 8 - INITIAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE UPRISING**









**EXCERPT SERIES 3 – FRAMINGS OF THE PARTICIPATION**

*«I found that the people in the Thawra are normal people, not mobilized people by political parties, so that's what made us feel that the Thawra represents us. That's why I went down to the streets and I participated every day in it. I saw that a lot of people that where down were thinking like me, they wanted the same things as I wanted so I found it the right place to make a change»*

(R, 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

*«I was with the revolution from the beginning, and I was among the first to take to the streets, thinking that all those who took to the streets were aiming for change»*

(C, 21, Female, Critical/Passive)

*«I support what both C. and I. said, that I supported the revolution in its beginnings and was optimistic after seeing these huge numbers of demonstrators»*

(Z, 19, Female, Partisan/Passive)

*«When the revolution broke down, I went to the streets like everyone. We were enthusiastic and full of hope. We wanted to get rid of all the political parties. [...] Basically, we went down because we were fed up from the system»*

(N., 22, Male, Critical/Passive)

*«I support what my colleagues said. I used to live in a sectarian-diverse area, and they all protested at first against corruption, and this matter encouraged me to participate and take to the streets»*

(A, 26, Male, Partisan/Passive)

*«I participated from the second day because I did not think it had anything to do with the 6\$ fee. This fee awakened us. What made me participate is to change the situation and the political class that has been in power for 30 years»*

(H., 26, Female, Critical/Active)

*«At the beginning we were attracted by the ambiance, how everyone joined and our friends. At the beginning I didn't understand the revolution deeply and I wasn't aware of the main reasons for it, but after the beginning of the revolution I begin to read and to understand its reasons»*

(A., 23, Female, Critical/Passive)

*«At the beginning we were watching the TV all the time, and a lot of people on TV were talking about their problems, their poverty about how the situation is. [...] I mean, we didn't have the motivation to mobilize but when the problem was more obvious and when the media has played a role, so we really had to participate in such a revolution!»*

(C., 23, Female, Neutral/Passive)

#### EXCERPT SERIES 4 – CHANGING ATTITUDES AND MODES OF MOBILIZATION

*«I didn't use the social media, so I joined street for a period of time but when I noticed that political parties infiltrated the streets and these parties in Lebanon with thirty years of experience they know how to change things for their own interest, so, when I noticed that these things are not representing me anymore I retrieved from streets, but this doesn't mean that I am not with the revolution anymore, in fact I tried to meet with people who are affiliated to political parties and I tried to convince them and to discuss with them and convince them that you are following a wrong path and we, as Lebanese people, are all having the same problems so what I tried to do is talking with these people affiliated to political parties to convince them the leave these parties and to join the revolution that represent us without the infiltration and the violence»*

(W., 26, Female, Critical/Passive)

*«Yes, in the beginning I was very active and enthusiastic for the revolution but after a while my participation and my passion decreased [...]. Then, when we noticed that there is infiltration from political parties I retrieved from the streets and I participated through social media and through TV shows but I didn't join the street mobilization after that. I only re-joined streets to participate in the cultural debate and talks that were organized there»*

(I., 22, Male, Critical/Passive)

*«My participation decreased over time. When the revolution started I used to go on a daily basis then I stopped. However, when they started doing a violent revolution I was excited a little bit to rejoin. In sum, I stopped participating because I found that the people that were there, they weren't down to fight for a cause. They were there to have fun and to enjoy their free time and to skip school or work. Plus, I was really disgusted from political parties that were protesting beside us on the streets. They were riding the wave of the revolution so all of our efforts and hard-work was useless»*

(J., 22, Male, Critical/Active)

*«After I stopped going down the streets, I continued my Thawra on social media and from my own political party. I never stopped protesting. I am always active on social media especially on Clubhouse where I hold brief conferences and I talk about the revolution. Thawra isn't only about protesting but it's a full mindset and a lifestyle»*

(R., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

*«I was surprised by the transformations that occurred in the following days, as I noticed that many people came to serve the agenda of the parties to which they belong. From there, my position on them changed and I no longer support what is happening on the ground, because change must start from within each individual first»*

(C., 21, Female, Critical/Active)

*«After a few days I began to feel that the divisions among the revolutionaries became clear and they no longer joined hands in their struggles, and this is what turned my position to be against this revolution, which no longer represents me»*

(A., 26, Male, Partisan/Passive)

EXCERPT SERIES 5 – REASONS FOR STEPPING BACK

*«Unfortunately, I stopped going down the streets because, at some point, I felt it was leading to nowhere and it was like a play. [...] I realized after going down many times to the streets that not everyone is really inclined for change. Most of the people that were down and mainly young people, they were only there to have fun, to hop on the trend and to skip classes and not go to school. On the other hand, we had also, some people on the streets protesting that were politically affiliated to those traditional political parties that are poisoning our system which was irritating, because we were going down the streets to protest against those same traditional political parties and to eradicate them since they are leading us to nowhere»*

(N., 18, Female, Critical/Passive)

*«I participated in the Thawra the first few days but then I realized as N. said that it was a play so I stopped. I noticed that people were getting on the streets to hop on the trend and have fun. What was a revolution turned into a party. People were getting there to party and enjoy the music played by DJs. It was a useless revolution so I stopped taking part in the protest»*

(C., 20, Female, Critical/Passive)

*«I know that usually revolutions are chaotic but here in Lebanon it was a clear organized chaos. It was clearly manipulated so I stopped going down. I saw politically affiliated people on the streets protesting with us, chanting beside us that they want to get rid of the political parties however, ironically they were part of those parties so I was lost I didn't quite understand what was happening. Plus, I didn't like the shape of the Thawra and where it was heading. At first it was chaotic and then it turned into a concert venue. People were getting down to have fun. It was useless»*

(N., 22, Male, Critical/Passive)

*«However, we discovered with the passage of time that everything that happened was not true, but rather intangible slogans, and the evidence for that is the place we have now reached in terms of difficult political and economic conditions»*

(I., 28, Neutral/Passive)

*«With time, I began to notice how they started uploading pictures of their leaders and heads of their parties, which proved to me that all their slogans were false, until today we hope that the situation will return to before the revolution, when the situation was much better than it is today»*

(Z., 19, Female, Partisan/Passive)

### EXCERPT SERIES 6 – MODES OF PARTICIPATION

*«Mainly Martyrs Square and Riad Solh [in Beirut city center, n.b.A], also Zouk, Jal el-Dib and Tripoli. I participated on the street and social media. I met people and we created groups not for sabotage purposes, but to hold meetings and plan ahead»*

(H., 28, Female, Beirut resident)

*«I participated by taking to the squares in my town of Koura where there were actions and protests in many places. Also, on twitter and Facebook»*

(D., 20, Male, Kura resident)

*«I joined the street at “al Noor Square” [in Tripoli, n.b.A] where people were gathering»*

(I., 22, Male, Deir Ammar resident)

*«I am among the people who didn't join the revolution directly, first I was a little in shock I was working and I begin to watch and follow what is happening, I decided to leave my job because in my work I was forbidden to participate in any kind of mobilization, so I decided to resign and I joined the revolution»*

(W., 23, Female, Tripoli resident)

*«Honestly, I couldn't take to the streets for certain reasons. I participated on social media and especially twitter»*

(J., 21, Female, North Lebanon resident)

### EXCERPT SERIES 7 – FRAMING SKEPTICISM AND NON-PARTICIPATION

*«Frankly, I did not participate in the revolution, but from day one I was in favor of people taking to the streets and in favor of raising the voice against the prevailing conditions. But day after day, I began to notice that the course of the revolution began to shift towards other matters, including blocking the roads. I felt that the demonstrators had begun to divide against each other and that their goal was no longer directed against the corrupted in the state. Everyone is defending their leader, and this is what made me feel that what is happening on the ground is just wrong and untrue»*

(Z., 22, Female, Partisan / Active)

*«The original reason, i.e. the 6\$ fee on WhatsApp, was not a good enough reason for me to participate in the revolution. This caused the eruption of the revolution, which was politicized. This is why I did not participate, but I wanted to hear what the people had to say. At first they all had the same cries, and later, each started defending his own leader»*

(N., 24, Female, Partisan / Passive)

*«I didn't participate in the revolution because maybe the first 5 days in the squares it was a true revolution but when the revolution began to cut streets in my village preventing me from going to my university, from joining classes in order to get my degree and contribute positively in my country, what revolution is that? A revolution that prevents people from joining their work in order to enhance the country specifically for businesses that bring dollars to the country, the revolution in Lebanon is responsible of making the crisis worse»*

(M., 20, Male, Critical / Passive)

*«I noticed that what was going on was different from what was going on before. I hesitated a little, fearing that we would go to what the Syrians had reached in their revolution, and I did not like the idea of cutting off roads. In short, I was in favor of the revolution, but I was afraid of going to a different place far from the goals of the revolution»*

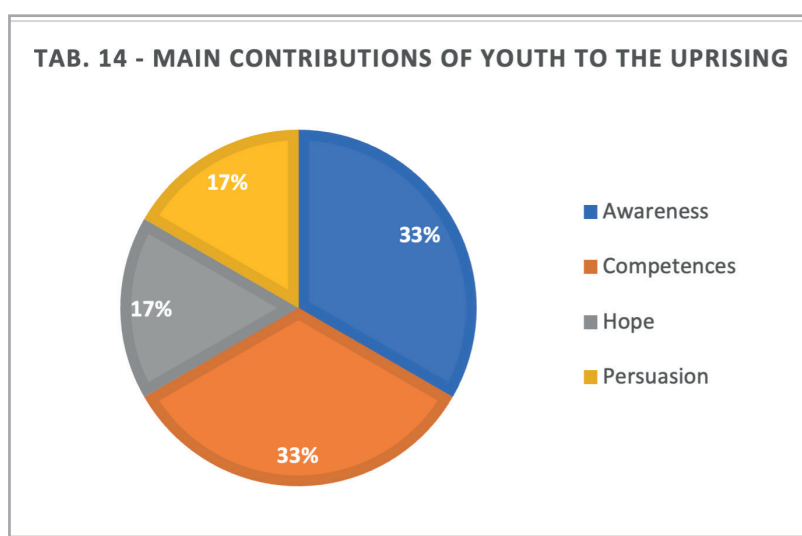
(Y., 19, Female, Partisan / Active)

*Role of youth in the Uprising*

All the participants to the focus groups agreed in considering educated youth the main engine of the mobilization.

According to the participants, the main value-added provided by educated youth consisted in their greater awareness and capacity of critical thinking compared to the so-called War generation, which played a pivotal role to both unveil the real nature of the Lebanese regime and ignite a virtuous snowball effect boosting participation, awareness and hope in a better future.

Several participants stressed also the importance of the everyday work of persuasion engaged by educated youth with their partisan proxies, including parents, despite the conflicts that this engendered, testifying both the creation of a profound generational fracture between their engagement to the political and that of their parents (see *Infra*), and a commitment to change involving also the participants' private sphere.

*Students' evaluation of the outcomes and shortcomings of the Uprising*

When arrived to the evaluation of the outcomes of the Uprising, all the respondents agreed in identifying as main achievements the greater political awareness of citizens about the problems affecting the country, the breaking of sectarian legacies and of the wall of fear inhibiting rebellion against political leaders, and, above all, the unveiling of the real the self-serving nature of the Lebanese regime, including the structural corruption.

Equally important, the majority of the respondents attested the fundamental role played by the Uprising in changing the political positionalities and forms of engagement to the political of their generation in a more conscious, active, and anti-systemic sense. In this respect, it is worth underlining that several participants with partisan sympathies before the Uprising have openly declared to have changed their political orientation.

Two further generational implications strongly emphasized by respondents included the emancipation from the familial political legacies, and the education to say "no".

For these reasons, while the overwhelming majority of respondents recognized the blatant failure of the Uprising in effectively pursuing the political goals that it had set at the moment of its outbreak, the overall assessment of its political impact remains – albeit with different shades of pessimism, optimism, and pragmatism from one respondent to another – more positive than negative.

### EXCERPT SERIES 8 – FRAMING THE ROLE OF YOUTH

*"Honestly I think that the youth and students are the cornerstone of the revolution. They have higher education and cultural levels. Participation of youth was better and can induce change because we are the most harmed because of our education, work, future. They are all at risk if there is no change. This will force us to leave the country. Revolution was made for the youth as someone else said. Our parents are still traumatized from the war and fear for us. [...]. The revolution will continue with the youth".*

(D., 20, Male, Critical/Passive)

*"I think the revolution was made for our generation. Our parent's generation lived in divide for 30 years between the parties. To our generation, the parties are corrupt and taking without giving. And we want change so that the future generation can lead a better life and does not have to worry about the things we worry about today. We will proceed with the revolution, maybe not me, maybe others"*

(N., 24, Female, Partisan/Passive)

*"I think the youth had a huge impact on the revolution because we were all united and full of hope and ambition and seeking a better future and getting rid of the corrupt gov. but we were paying for a mistake that was not our making. I would like to call it a cultural revolution against segregation of sect, gender, economic background."*

(N., 22, Female, Critical/Passive)

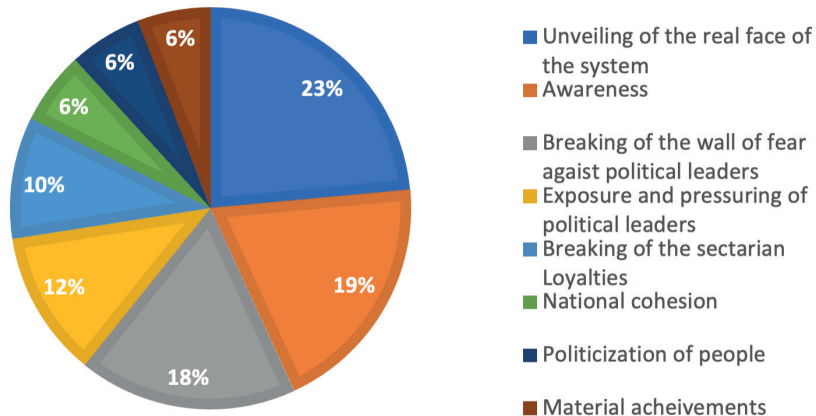
*"Youth generation were a main pillar of the revolution because the most of older generation were really affiliated to the traditional regime and few of them really thought about the need to change; because we begin to influence our family our entourage our relatives and as a result they were also encouraged to participate and join the revolution"*

(I., 22, Male, Critical/Passive)

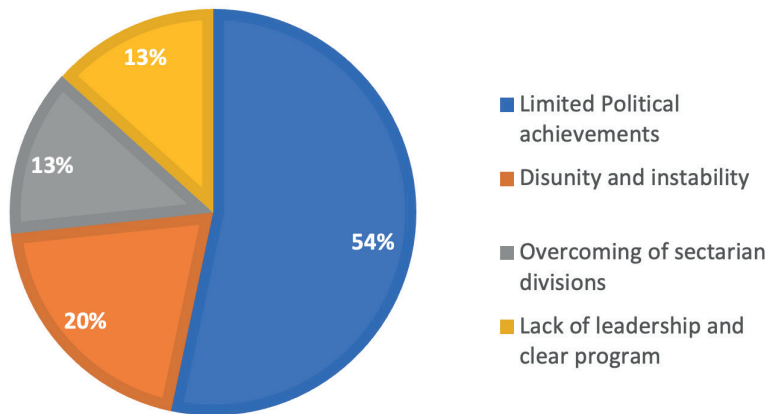
*"On role of students in the revolution: I highly appreciate when cultivated people participate to raise awareness and induce change and make demands, and I was hoping they would be the front of the revolution and stay in the revolution"*

(M., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

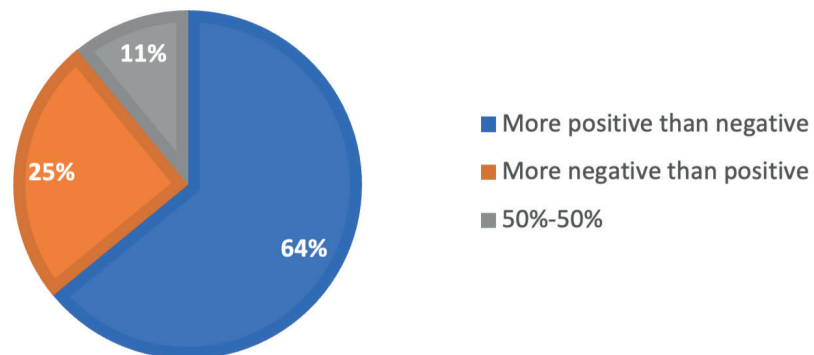
**TAB. 15 - MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE UPRISING**



**TAB. 16 - FAILURES OF THE UPRISING**



**TAB. 17 - OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE OUTCOMES OF THE UPRISING**



**EXCERPT SERIES 9 – IDENTIFYING THE GENERAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE UPRISING**

*“Revolution broke the barrier of fear with dominating parties on the political or security level. Now people are attacking, even if on social media. It also awakened some people about what is right and what is wrong”*

(D., 20, Male, Critical/Passive)

*“I think the main thing the revolution did was raise awareness. It stopped people from following their corrupt political system blindly”*

(N., 22, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“In my opinion, the only great achievement is that it presented awareness within our society. In fact, it shows the people how bad our situation is, it gave hope and awareness to the young adults and guiding them in order not to follow their parents’ old parties. In addition to this, it made our voice heard to the international civil society and represented the true situation transparently”*

(J., 18, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“It [the Uprising, n.b.A] only affected the mentality. People were now more courageous they were able to criticize their own political parties on their own. People started to think critically. People became more engaged and interested in politics”*

(G., 20, Male, Partisan/Active)

*“The most important achievement is that a lot of people who used to be affiliated to specific political parties left these affiliations and they begin to think more objectively! So not because we are taking patronage resources from a specific politician that we should follow him: no! We must think logically and independently from any representative and from any political party”*

(N., 23, Female, Partisan/Passive)

*“Politicians take into consideration much more now than before the repercussion of their discourse on people, they will think twice before taking decisions they are really afraid from peoples’ reactions and they are no more able to pass their own projects: everything is more controlled by the people. [...] The revolution also strengthened and gave more confidence to those who expose the files of corruption of the authority, now they have more confidence because of the public support and because of the revolution”*

(A., 23, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“In short, the positive thing is the quality of the people who want change. They will no longer remain silent about theft or corruption. Maybe they can’t hold them accountable, but they no longer remain silent or submissive. The results cannot be judged before the elections”*

(M., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

*“Achievements: The revolution allowed us to yell that we have demands though we are partisans”.*

(N., 24, Female, Partisan/Passive)



**EXCERPT SERIES 10 – ASSESSING THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE UPRISING**

*“I found a lot of failures in the revolution. The whole point of the revolution was to overthrow everyone in power but after it we still have them in the system. It’s like a game. We didn’t have a concrete solution to everything”*

(C., 20, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“I will talk a little bit about the failures. We saw the creation of new political organizations and new political parties from the revolution. However, most of them were created by the traditional political parties. So traditional political parties are trying to infiltrate the revolution by creating new political parties so they can have a longer lifespan. Another failure for me that emerged from the Revolution was the radicalism that is found in the new political parties. Radicalism leads us to nowhere. You can’t generalize that everyone is bad. You can’t say that we have to eradicate every political party. We should accept them”*

(R., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

*“In reality we still have a lot of political cleavages that divide the Lebanese people into many political interests which results into many political conflicts. Even though we saw a united front, but deep down we are divided into many sects. At the end of the day we will have most of the people that will act for the interest of their confessional group. We can clearly see a lot of people that are still till this day applying the agendas of those confessional groups. We are still shifting our loyalties to those confessional groups instead of destroying them. That is mainly destroying Lebanon. It created a hole in the system. I don’t think there is a big achievement that was made. If you dig deep in the situation and analyze it there isn’t an effective change”*

(N., 18, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“To be pragmatic and realistic at the same time, the revolution didn’t achieve much on a governmental and political level. [...] However, achievements should be also made on a political level. We have to wait for the next elections to see some improvements and to find out if the revolution really achieved something”*

(G., 20, Male, Partisan/Active)

*“The Thawra failures are related to its instability, disunity, and the lack of awareness. In fact, the Thawra was unstable for a while, with each event we hear nowadays that the Thawra is back but actually nothing is truly happening. In addition to this, there is a lack of awareness and some ignorance without a clear planification, that’s why PM Saad Hariri for instance was designated all over again, seems like the Thawra did not change anything. Also, the Thawra failed to pick a leader, each person wanted something regarding their needs. Some wanted coup d’état, others wanted the government’s resignation, etc...”*

(J., 18, Critical/Passive)

*“There were many failures and the revolution did not achieve anything. But we still have the idea that many took to the streets. If only they stayed and were truthful. The circumstances in the last 1.5 years revealed we are hypocrites and we hate each other. Prices rose with the dollar, we don’t love each other, we monopolize medicine, we are criminals like the rulers we have chosen. 90% will choose the same people again”*

(H., 28, Female, Critical/Active)

### EXCERPT SERIES 11 – ASSESSING THE GENERATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE UP-RISING

*“Revolution permitted us to increase our political awareness and enhanced our capacity to analyze the situation. Before the revolution our parents used to think that youth generation doesn’t have any political culture and that youth doesn’t really understand politics. After the revolution we are much more capable of discussing these matters and convince others so it changed our culture and permitted us to express ourselves in a better way”*

(I., 22, Male, Critical/Passive)

*“There is no doubt that this revolution has created a kind of awareness among the youth, and this will appear in the upcoming elections, and each of us will remember this while voting in the upcoming elections. Perhaps the revolution was the necessary thing for change and to create awareness among the people. Of course, the revolution played a major role in changing the convictions of young people”*

(A., 26, Male, Partisan/Passive)

*“The most important achievement is that it gave hope in a better future among Lebanon’s youth regardless of my religion, sect, faith. I am a believer but this should not affect how the state is run”*

(A., 21, Male, Partisan/Active)

*“To me, it affected me by not accepting corruption and seeing something wrong. If my children, ask me why I did not change I can tell them we tried at least. It did not change much on the ground, but at least the students’ actions are taken into account now, and many are interfering in the student elections because they constitute the future of the parties. Many students were arrested because of their activities”*

(M., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

*“Its effect is positive in terms of giving us a dose of hope towards change. I am well aware that change will start with us, the youth, and without the youth, no change will happen. I hold foreign citizenship and I can leave this country whenever I want, but I will never do that because I believe in my right to live in this country”*

[...]

*“There is no doubt that our political convictions have changed after the revolution, and we know that every political component in this country bears a primary responsibility for what we have achieved. This only increases our determination to work for change, especially after we discovered their corruption and affair. We no longer have this blind dependence towards any of them, and we have become convinced that any of these parties is innocent and different from the others”*

(I., 28, Male, Neutral/Passive)

*“I am not sure about the degree of awareness that the revolution brought about among other young people, but there is no doubt that it left something behind, especially after the recent developments and the explosion of the port of Beirut and all the calamities that we have experienced. But certainly there is a group of people who are still in their place in terms of their political alignment”*

(C., 21, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“Because of the revolution we learned to say “No”. It encouraged us to express ourselves using the “NO” word. Many among us maybe not the majority but many among us were very influenced by their parent’s opinion and affiliations. So, the revolution was a new platform where we were able to say no we have our own ideas and our parents do not represent us they do not think in the same way, we are a different generation! so to learn how to say No is very important specially with this government, we should always say no for this government, they tried to teach us to say Yes like our parents but we learned during the revolution that we should say No for everything that is corrupted and doesn’t represent us”*

(W., 26, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“In my opinion, the only great achievement is that it presented awareness within our society. In fact, it shows the people how bad our situation is, it gave hope and awareness to the young adults and guiding them in order not to follow their parents’ old parties”*

(J., 18, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“We see now much more than before the new freedom that people have! A new mindset away from sectarianism that used to prevail Lebanese mindset. Also, maybe we are still young to run for election, but of course we have a different mindset*

*in comparison with those who used to vote during the last thirty years.*

*[...] we won't vote anymore for those from our sectarian communities that our parents used to vote for, instead we will vote for people whose ideas reflect our own ones"*

(C., 23, Female, Neutral/Passive)

*"Now they [sectarian elites, n.b.A.] are not even able to control us, so you will still maybe see some people who have affiliation to specific parties among this generation but of course this will be inexistent for the future generations [...] Our generation and future generations won't be as conformist as our parents' generation. Given the civil war context, maybe they were in a situation where they were obliged to follow a specific sectarian party, but we are a new generation. We saw that political/sectarian parties brought damage for the country, so I don't think that youngest generation will have this affiliation to political parties as their parents do"*

(A., 23, Female, Critical/Passive)

*"We were all politicized at home. Shortly before the revolution, I decided there should be no partisan divide at home. After the revolution, I became ashamed to say I supported this or that party"*

(N., 24, Female, Partisan/Passive)

### EXCERPT SERIES 12 – DRAWING THE FINAL ASSESSMENT OF THE UPRISING

*"Although we have a little bit of achievements, the failures are way more than the achievements. It has been the biggest disappointment to the youth. A lot could have been achieved and could be achieved but the revolution isn't going in the right path. It should be a lot more organized. A lot of actions should be taken to take a step forward. It failed to talk about solutions for current problems and it failed to attract the youth that are politically affiliated to it"*

(G., 20, Male, Partisan/Active)

*"The revolution did not fail because its positive points were more than its negative points. But the stay of the corrupt politicians in parliament is a setback. But this needs time.... After two rounds, the youth might elect different people"*

(A., 21, Male, Partisan/Active)

*"I see that there have been changes, among the most important of these changes is the cancelation of the Bisri Valley dam, the revolution was able to put pressure and resulted in cancelling this project knowing that the regime was very supporting for this project so despite the fact that the project was a pure corruption it represent a great waste of money and with bad environmental impact but at the end the revolution succeeded and leded to the project cancelation and this was possible through the pressure so I think that now it is possible by going back to street we can put pressure on the interior minister to lift immunity for officials, besides the election of Melhem Khalaf, an independent person, as president of the lawyers' syndicate so we were able in some way to make changes. Of course, this change is not as big as the amount of corruption but we are all able to change if we believe and work for it but how much are we able to be perseverant. This relies on the people"*

(W., 26, Female, Critical/Passive)

*"First of all, I do not like to use the term failure. The revolution did not fail despite the reservations. We cannot blame the people because the political system is controlling everything, from the smallest institution. All are held by the parties. In addition, securing medicine has become a priority for example. A positive point is that no one is afraid to talk, and the engineers' elections achieved a great result. I did not go to media school at Lebanese University because it is controlled by a certain side, while today, they have a secularist club. This is very important. People have also learned their rights. No one can offer you a service. You know this is your right. In 30 years, the militias have learned how to control everything. The fact that the revolution erupted is an accomplishment in itself"*

(A., 23, Male, Partisan/Active)

*"We didn't see any kind of change, and this is why many Armenian people went back to Armenia. Lebanon was our main land and Armenia came second. But because of this, more than 20,000 Armenians came to Armenia from Lebanon"*

(P., 19, Female, Critical/Passive, Armenian)

*"True the people took to the streets to demand their rights, but the revolution did not achieve anything"*

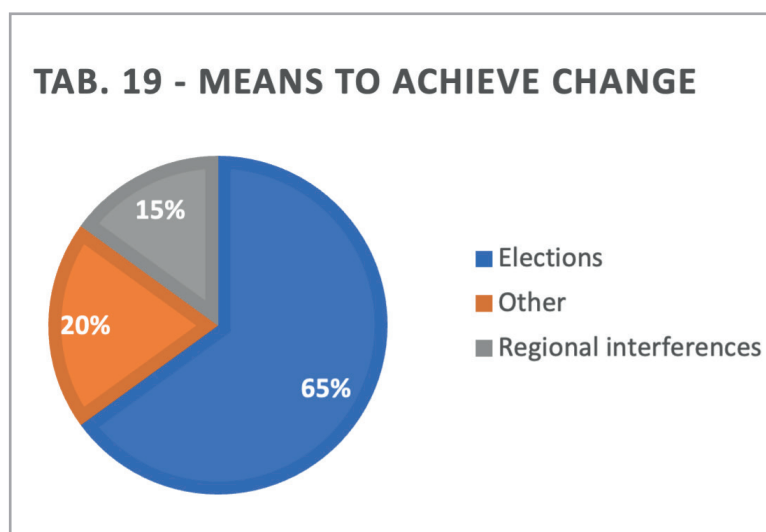
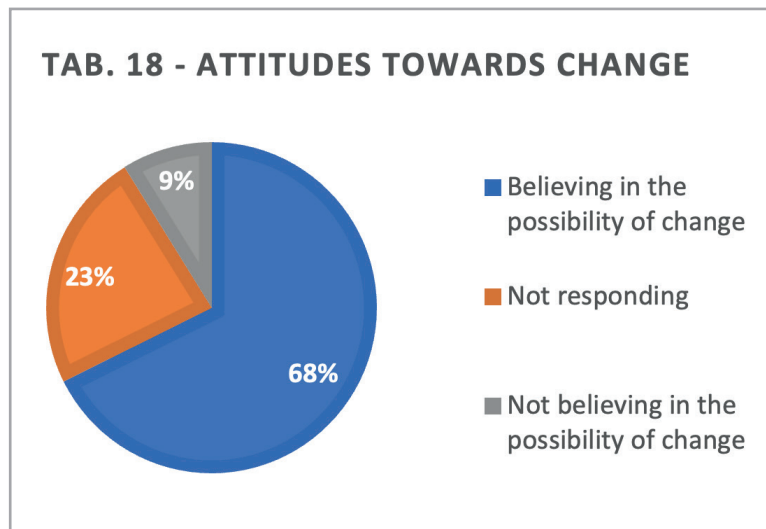
(T., 24, F., Critical/Passive)

*Students after the Uprising: current attitudes towards politics and political change*

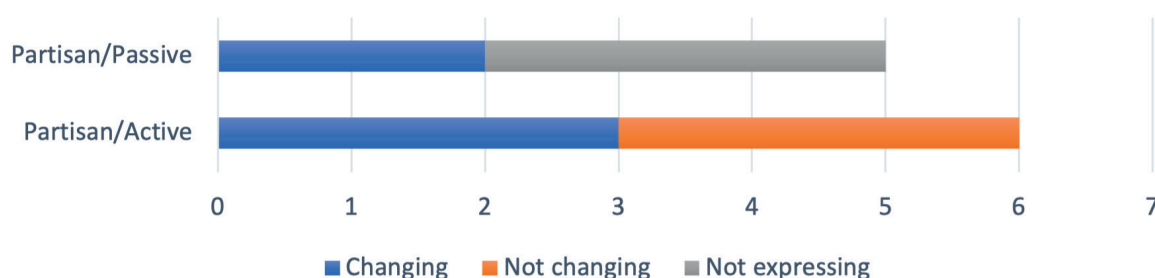
Two years ahead from the Uprising, the net majority of the focus groups, respondents still believe in the possibility of change and the prominent role that youth can play in it, despite the numerous political and economic shortcomings that the country has been experiencing. The main variation pertains rather the way in which the road for change is now predominantly conceived, with a clear shift from the initial revolutionary utopias to a more pragmatic and long-term-projected electoral gradualism.

Both phenomena have been encouraged by the successful performances scored by independent candidates and coalitions in the elections of several professional union bodies, the last one unfolding concurrently with realization of the focus groups. The victory of independent candidates in the 2020 university elections also boosted optimism, despite none of the three partner institutions held its own ones.

It should also be noted that throughout this period the anti-systemic positions of a consistent portion of the sample have further radicalized. To trigger the radicalization was the enduring persistence of the governance and socio-economic criticalities which had ignited students' transgressive activation and, above all, the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020, which was seen by most of the respondents as the latest, murderous outcome of the system's corruption. Last but not least, the necessity of a change in pace in terms of policies and ruling class was remarked also by partisan students who remained firm in their political positioning.



**TAB. 20 - CHANGING POSITIONING OF PARTISAN STUDENTS**



**EXCERPT SERIES 13 – FRAMING THE ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHANGE**

*“Although I did not participate in the revolution, I am very hopeful there will be change in the elections because we cannot go backward or continue living in the current situation: no medicines, no electricity, no water. From all the demands we made during the revolution, now we are hoping for four hours of electricity. By the next elections, we will be the ones voting, regardless of what our parents think. We want to get our voices across and demand our rights”*

(N., 24, Female, Partisan/Passive)

*“I don’t think there is room for change. The people that are making the decisions do not want change, for now at least. I hope there will be change and that people who are worthy will rise. Impact: all of us are seeking immigration right now and none of us is thinking about a future in Lebanon is they want to be successful”*

(N., 22, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“If in these difficult times we cannot induce change, when will we?”*

(D., 20, Male, Critical/Passive)

*“I see that change is very difficult in Lebanon through the revolution to change the reality of which we caused a large part. We have to work on creating awareness for the coming years so that we can bring about gradual change through parliamentary elections and other things by bringing some secular candidates to their knowledge to make some change”*

(H., 27, Male, Critical/Passive)

*“Change needs time, it’s not in one or two or five years that we can implement changes. It has been only two years since the outbreak of the revolution so we cannot expect the change to be on the spot we need to implement some reforms in order to get changes in the future. This system exists since thirty years and led to the current crisis”*

(M., 20, Male, Critical/Passive)

*“I believe that change is process, a long process that may not be soon. However, this change is not impossible, maybe not during these elections since some people are still following their leaders and old traditional political parties, without neglecting the people who gave up on them. Hope is here, change is possible but not anytime soon”*

(J., 18, Female, Critical/Passive)

*“There will be change, but for better or worse? No one can answer that until before the elections. We adapt to our crises. Today the dollar is 23,000 and we are fine. Had the elections been held after august 4, not one bloc would have remained in parliament. If they give us little things, by then, people will reelect them”*

(M., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

#### EXCERPT SERIES 14 – ENHANCING HOPES FOR CHANGE

*“I still have hope, even small hope, and the proof is the change that is happening in the election at the union level, lawyers, engineers, doctors syndicate, so I think that there is hope of change in that matter”*

(M., 23, Female, Not expressed)

*“The engineers’ elections achieved a great result. I did not go to media school at Lebanese University because it is controlled by a certain side, while today, they have a secularist club. This is very important”*

(A., 23, Male, Partisan/ Active)

*“There is no hope in seeing change. But I don’t know why I regained hope during the last few days, through the families of the August 4 martyrs with our help. In the elections, we must wait to see if those who took to the streets and in light of the humiliation we are living, if people will become more aware”*

(H., 28, Female, Critical/ Active)

#### EXCERPT SERIES 15 – FRAMING THE ROAD TO ACHIEVE CHANGE

*“In regard to the elections, we might infiltrate the council through non-partisan figures with 10-15 figures who have a program, not just in civil society by name”*

(D., 20, Male, Critical/ Passive)

*“I consider that regardless of all the bad things we are living. The situation will not remain as it is today. Settlements and changes are affecting regional powers and Lebanon is naturally impacted. These new alliances and powers will have positive repercussions on Lebanon because its collapse is in no one’s interest. In regard of the elections, we will see how the people will act then”*

(J., 21, Female, Critical/ Passive)

*“I see that change is very difficult in Lebanon through the revolution to change the reality of which we caused a large part. We have to work on creating awareness for the coming years so that we can bring about gradual change through parliamentary elections and other things by bringing some secular candidates to their knowledge to make some change”*

(H., 27, Male, Critical/ Active)

*“There is no room for change in the elections. First, we need to see if the election will be held at the first place! Most probably the regime will try to postpone it. And I already mentioned that it is more the foreign forces and not local forces that may influence for change in Lebanon. I don’t see that the elections will bring other people than those from the current regime”*

(T., 23, Male, Not expressed)

*“I think that there may be changes in the deputies during the next elections, but most importantly what we should try to change is those in the state positions in judiciary because they have a state inside the state and it is those people who have the most important influence over the state”*

(I., 22, Critical/ Passive)

*“We discovered that change need work, persistence and perseverance and we need to stick to these demands of change because if we do not have this will we won’t be able to make big difference”*

(W., 26, Female, Critical/ Passive)

### EXCERPT SERIES 16 – FRAMING RADICALIZATION

*“I always opposed them all [sectarian ruling elites, n.b.A] because the political system did not represent or serve me. After August 4, this turned into hatred on the street and on social media. I am also talking about all those who stood against us, i.e. the security forces, the army, the parliament guard. They were supposed to protect us”*

(H., 28, Female, Critical / Active)

*“After the revolution, I started perceiving it [sectarian ruling elites, n.b.A.] in an even worse way, based on the way they dealt with the demonstrators, how they detonated Lebanon. I felt less respect for them and became spiteful because they killed us”*

(A., 23, Male, Partisan / Active)

*“After the revolution and August 4, I became more disgusted, because not only were they [sectarian ruling elites, n.b.A] collecting money and stripping us of our most basic rights, but they were also killing us. The officials are persecuting their people and starving them”*

(D., 20, Male, Critical / Passive)

### EXCERPT SERIES 17 – FRAMING THE CHANGING POLITICAL POSITIONS

*“Of course, my political convictions changed after this revolution. We have seen many painful scenes of poor and old people searching for their livelihood and their medicine. At the youth level, they are unable to find jobs or realize their dreams of building a family. It all leads me to give up all parties and everyone should do it. On a personal level, I had a political affiliation before the revolution and I gave it up”*

(Z., 19, Female, Partisan / Passive)

*“Frankly, I have increased my confidence in my political line because I see with my own eyes that the party to which I belong is making great efforts and providing many services in order to alleviate the suffering of the people. But I admit that the existence of a strong state is better than relying on limited party services. I see that my party works for the development of the country but the state does nothing”*

(Z., 22, Female, Partisan / Active)

*“Of course, the revolution played a major role in changing the convictions of young people. Yes, I changed my way of thinking and the issue of my affiliation, which should be to my state and not to any party. I am no longer that partisan of his party, and I am no longer provoked by criticism of Hezbollah, as I used to be. There is no doubt that the revolution gave us a dose of hope, and the new generation began to change and change. We are really tired and it is time for a change”*

(A., 26, Male, Partisan / Passive)

*“Before the revolution I wasn't completely belonging to a specific party but I was following a specific party, but after joining the revolution we begin to discuss, to read and to open up to other political parties, to see what they accomplished, so of course I have dramatically moved away from politics in many ways but at the same time, politics has become much closer to me the revolution permitted me to hear to read to understand more I also understand much more about economics of course”*

(N., 23, Female, Partisan / Passive)

## Conclusions and concluding remarks

According to the findings emerged from our focus groups, despite the limited immediate political achievements, the October 17 Uprising has marked a crucial breakthrough in the political attitudes and the modes of engagement to the political of the post-war generation. In particular, against the backdrop of a pre-existing widespread dissatisfaction for the status quo molding unexpressed and unsocialized, the Uprising acted as a detonator and a major forge to exit passive quiescence and propel cross-fertilizing dynamics enhancing political awareness, maturity, and a large-scale reassessment of their political orientations towards active, anti-systemic positions. This double shift has walked hand in hand with a broader transgressive dislocation from the discursive and symbolic legacies whereby sectarian elites had built up a consistent part of their hegemony, most notably in their parents' generation. Both trends have been further enhanced by the post-Uprising return to power of sectarian elites and their incumbents, the dramatic peaking of the economic crisis and, above all, the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020 which, for the majority of students who had taken the streets, played a prominent radicalizing (or re-radicalizing) role. Last but not least, the disenchantment towards the early revolutionary utopias left room to a more pragmatic, electoralist and long-term approach to political change, alimanted by the positive results scored by opposition groups in the renewal of the directive bodies of several professional associations (El-Kak 2021).

The combination of these findings with the results of the latest round of student elections offer altogether enough elements to assert that, while the revolutionary ambitions of the October momentum revealed ephemeral, the revolution has propelled among educated youth a process of dislocation from the dominant political structures based on sectarian patronage endowed with the potential to make them a prominent site of transformative counter-hegemony.

In this respect, the upcoming 2022 elections will represent altogether a moment of truth and a crossroad of crucial importance. A central role in this sense will be played by the capacity of the emerging opposition parties to exploit the window of opportunity of the electoral campaign to activate virtuous constituent and participatory practices able to canalize the widespread, yet still atomized dissent against the political status quo towards a concrete and viable alternative agenda. In particular, before than the scope of the bailout victories *per se*, the bulk of the game for the long-term capitalization of educated youth's propension to change will revolve around the capacity of opposition groups to define a counter-hegemonic political project perceived as solid and realistic enough to generate hope and commitment beyond the electoral moment. As a result of the awareness and pragmatic shift triggered by the Uprising, in fact, students are well aware of the structural, political and material constraints hindering the affirmation of opposition forces. At the same time, while for most of them a "return to sectarianism" does not represent an option, the lower predisposition to blindly follow alternative political projects lacking of concrete and clear goals might realistically run the risk to be conducive to a widespread return to disillusioned quietism in case opposition forces fail to present candidates, projects and imaginaries resonating with their expectations.

The second and most important variable is represented by the short and mid-term evolution of the economic crisis. Currently, Lebanon is caught in a dramatic brain drain, within the broader framework of a sustained emigratory wave triggered by the harshening of the crisis. Although detailed statistics are lacking, a glimpse of the extent of the phenomenon can be deduced by a number of collateral disaggregated data on migration published in the past year. Again in 2020, for instance, about 70% of Lebanese youth expressed the intention to emigrate abroad in search for better economic and living conditions, with a turnout higher Libya and Yemen and the highest in the region (ASDAA - BCW 2020). Since the sole spring 2021, the daily average number of passports issued or renovated by the General Security has reached quota 6000 (Antonios 2021), and about 40% of specialized doctors has left the country (WHO 2021). These data are particularly alarming, for the depth of the crisis and its durability drastically reduces the margins of return for young and skilled adults finding abroad a stable professional



position. Equally important, the rapid pauperization of the middle classes increases the vulnerability of educated youth against nepotistic or clientelistic practices. Therefore, loose the window of opportunity of the 2022 elections might concretely trigger a hardly recuperable setback against the advancements scored by the Uprising.

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## Conclusions

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[...] the 2019 October uprising toppled the government but did not manage to break the entrenched sectarian political system. (Harb 2021).

This book, the main result of the IRHAL project, had the scope of analyzing the role that university students might play in the construction of a Lebanese alternative power block after October 2019 protests. The main idea behind this publication, was to understand their potential involvement in drawing “a new trajectory for the country” (Fakhoury 2019). More generally, in our view it was necessary to understand and evaluate the protest’s “proactive attitude” by specifically focusing on active youths, namely university students. So, IRHAL research group (composed by both European and Lebanese academicians, under the management of UNIMED) decided to divide the research in two distinct and recognizable parts, completely reproduced during the book writing process.

As showed in the index, the first part of the book is mainly focused on reasons behind the protests (with contributions coming only from Lebanese colleagues) while the second one is focused on youths’ involvement in the protest by exploring their aspirations and experiences. This second unit is the result of an in-depth field research conducted in the country and probably represent the most original section of this book. As recalled by Tufaro in her article, four different focus groups in different locations have been organized to assess how the uprising and its aftermaths impacted on students’ political attitudes and behavior, to then explore the role that the latter can exert in the future of Lebanese politics.

I would like to clarify that in any moment both the IRHAL project and the book intended to represent an exhaustive analysis of the 2019 protests, neither to systematically address the debate around the October 2019 uprising or more generally the so-called Arab springs. On the contrary, our international research group had the objective of contributing to debate around both subjects. Mostly important, in doing that we adopted a multidisciplinary and multi-faced approach by including scholars from different scientific sectors and countries with a different point of view on the research subjects. In doing that, we also had in mind the importance of providing to other researchers, national institutions and the general public first-hand materials to be further explored and analyzed in future research (e.g. the role that higher education and university institutions may play in shifting youth energy away from sectarian politics). In this specific regard, I think we succeed in achieving our goals: providing original research results, integrating also a Lebanese perspective coming from Lebanese academicians by providing first-hand resources.

Resources that I am sure, it would be extremely useful in the forthcoming months in understanding Lebanese events and especially considering the upcoming May 2022 election. In that occasion it could be interesting to analyze the performances of new actors (such as Minte-

shreen<sup>1</sup>, the LANA social democratic party<sup>2</sup>, the democratic progressive secular party Taqaddom<sup>3</sup>, just to mention three of the new actors originated after 2019) against the old traditional parties as well as to investigate which role the Lebanese diaspora will play.

This last point is of peculiar interest, especially because IRHAL focus groups results suggested that October 2019 failed in empowering University students as concrete alternative to the status quo leading most of them to leave the country. As their aspirations have been frustrated by ruling elites, the majority of youths decided (if possible) to flee away to Europe. This mainly because, as recognized in this book and in line with well distinguished scholars such as Mona Harb, the status quo has been partially (and until now eventually only on short term basis) affected by 2019 road protests. This is also indirectly confirmed by the fact that, rather than being capable of overthrowing the “old regime”, new political and social actors decided to try a different pathway by integrating themselves in the Lebanese political system and trying to change it from within.

One point must be clarified here. The Lebanese reality (as well as other MENA countries realities) seems to be more complex to be investigate through a simple “success Vs failure” scheme. In this sense we cannot agree more with Rivetti and Cavatorta in their analysis of “the complex processes of transformation taking place in the region” recognizing the potential value (on long term) of 2019 protests. As for other Arab countries affected by turmoil and protests, “[...] a binary analysis would not be able to capture and examine the seemingly contradictory reality [...]” (Rivetti and Cavatorta 2021). On the other side, I think it is also necessary to avoid naïve analyses of the Lebanese reality ignoring reasons behind the old regime resilience (especially in its nepotistic and/or clientelist practices) and the weaknesses lying in the acephalous nature of these movements. In my view, it is fair to assume that in 2019 Lebanese protests movements have been capable of revolt and not revolution as well as it is undeniable that 2019 protests fueled a positive sense of retaliation by people that have been socially and political excluded in the past years. How this “positive retaliation” will evolve in a solid, political, alternative by facing the ruling confessional system, it is still uncertain and should be evaluated in the forthcoming years. In doing this, a crucial passage it will be the evaluation of “opposition movements and parties” performances in penetrating, for examples, students but especially labor unions. Some signal in this sense can already be analyzed:

The organizations are progressively eroding the hegemony of sectarian forces within professional orders (Bou Khater 2020). The first victory in this sense was scored in November 2019, with the election of the independent Melhem Khalaf as new president of the Lebanese Bar Association (Abi Raad 2019). Another important victory was scored by the opposition list “Naqaba Tantaqid” in the Order of Engineers of Beirut in July 2021. This has certainly been marking an important breakthrough with the recent history of Lebanese organized labor (Tufaro 2021).

But at the same time, we cannot ignore that:

On the other hand, no substantial organizational developments have been observed on the front of waged and informal labor, which remain mostly atomized and/or underorganized (Tufaro 2021).

Again, we find ourselves in a complex, multifaced, scenario where seeds for a profound, structural, change have been probably planted but have not flourished yet. The 2022 elections will be a test but will probably not represent the decisive shift. Other revolts, protests and uprisings will take place in the country because the reasons behind the 2019 protests are still there: a deep economic crisis, nepotism, corruption, institutional weaknesses, old war lord presence on the political playground, foreign countries inference in local politics. Other revolts, protests and uprisings will take place in the country because riots and uprisings, strikes and turmoil have always been part of the country narrative even if surely driven by different (sectarian) factors. Revolution, intended as a total shift of local economic, political and social

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1 <https://minteshreen.com> (Last access March 2022)

2 <https://lnalebanon.org/> (Last access March 2022)

3 <https://taqaddomlb.org/> (Last access March 2022)

structures coming from the masses, needs a project (that acephalous movements cannot guarantee) and represent an exception in the history not only of Middle east, but on the level of global history.

For Lebanon we are in a different situation. We are still many steps back. In this sense, as stressed by LIU colleagues, “we should have a clear idea of why and how the old sectarian regime was able to overcome a huge popular uprising and remain in place as if nothing had happened and its business as usual”. As recalled by Noma Ziadeh in the first pages of this book, this is probably due to the fact that “a major part of the Lebanese society is still not ready to overcome the role of sects in politics and in everyday life”. This must be considered when we take into consideration the Lebanese reality, or even better “realities”.

The pre-condition for any analysis of the present and future of Lebanon, should be based on the understanding of the complexity of such country, without providing for granted that a grass-root movement from below must (only because the poor economic condition of the country are causing people sufferance) immediately generate a valid, political, solid alternative. As explained in Barroso essay, the sense of “intra-community loyalty”, the “communitocracy”, the *zu'ama* solidarity, just to make few examples, are not elements that can be changed in few weeks and neither a confessional system ran by well-established politicians can be overthrown by (quoting a former young protester interviewed during IRHAL focus groups) “people were getting there to party and enjoy the music played by DJs” during the crucial days of the revolt. I am certainly exaggerating here by criticizing and highlighting these weird aspects of the 2019 protests, but again during IRHAL activities and interaction with colleagues and students in Lebanon these characteristics have been continuously repeated and underlined as strong weaknesses. Immaturity, inexperience, lack of vision, silliness, are words that we have continuously heard when describing some (several?) protesters attitude.

But again, this does not mean that we are witnessing a total failure. Zafer Nasser said that “Young people descend with unified slogans and demands that express this generation’s rejection of the existing reality, but it failed to find a program and leadership”. This is a big point, but does it mean that 2019 protesters failed on the whole line? Absolutely not. Because even if hopes have been frustrated, there is still room to upscale “the political imaginaries instigated by the moment of uprising”<sup>4</sup> (Fawaz 2020). It is on the positive evolution imaginary that new generations are called to invest their energies and enthusiasm. *Irhal* can be a slogan but cannot represent the answer because *leaving* it is not a durable option neither a long term solution.

In which direction and which forms this upscaling process will lead Lebanese society is not determined yet and it will be exactly the new research flow, benefiting from this book results, that could help in understanding country future trajectories. Lebanese youths will try and probably will fail again and again, will suffer, will be desperate and will run away but they should look back in their culture and recall in their memories an old Arabic proverb: *The time which teaches does not causes losses*.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ijurr.org/spotlight-on/urban-revolts/urban-revolutions-lebanons-october-2019-uprising/>

## Conclusions

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