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# PROTESTING SECTARIANISM

LEBANESE REGIME RESILIENCE  
AND *THAWRAT TISHREEN*

**Jinan S. Al-Habbal**



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Protesting Sectarianism: Lebanese  
Regime Resilience and *Thawrat*  
*Tishreen*

Jinan S. Al-Habbal

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## Abstract

The October 2019 protest movement in Lebanon attracted an unprecedented number of people from all walks of life. But protesters were met with co-optation, coercion, counter-narratives, repression, threats and violence meant to suppress the protests' challenge of the regime's footing. This paper argues that along with sectarian political leaders' counter-revolutionary tactics, the consociational power-sharing political system has proven resilient over the decades despite its shortcomings and even when faced with popular protests. By relying on foreign support and entrenching a patronage system, sectarian elites have maintained their positions and hegemony within this system, becoming immune to accountability. Notwithstanding their sectarian, political and ideological differences, leaders united to block anti-sectarian efforts that could have led to reforms and overhaul of the political system. The paper contends that despite regime resilience, the 2019 uprising produced political contestation by independent and secular individuals and emerging political movements that achieved small-scale gains in parliamentary, syndicate and university student council elections, paving the way for a reimagining of political life in Lebanon.

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## Introduction

On 17 October 2019, protesters took to Lebanon's streets in the aftermath of the government's proposal to increase taxes, including a \$6 monthly fee on WhatsApp calls. Dubbed *Thawrat Tishreen* (the October Revolution), these leaderless protests witnessed an unparalleled number of people from all walks of life and spread nationwide within a few days. Chanting '*killon ya'ne killon*' (all of them means all of them), protesters denounced the ruling elites and demanded an overhaul of the sectarian political system amid a deteriorating socioeconomic crisis in the country. Protesters also decried the rampant corruption, which has deprived the population of basic services, including uninterrupted electricity, access to health care and job opportunities.

Nevertheless, protesters were met with leaders' seeming willingness for open dialogue and claims to reform, while also being cautioned against causing a potential political vacuum and instability. Some Lebanese media, which is monopolised by the sectarian elite, also used discourses to blame protesters for the economic crisis. Additionally, established political parties took advantage of the protests' lack of organised leadership to co-opt the movement, which decreased the number of protesters. But these were not the only methods utilised by the regime. State military and security forces and mobs of sectarian parties used overt violence against the protesters.

The frequency and size of the protests slowly decreased in 2020, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns. Yet, efforts reignited after the deadly Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020. Two governments have since resigned as a result of the protests, neither bringing about any political or economic reforms or change. Smaller sporadic protests continue as an extension of the uprising. Along with the regime's counter-revolutionary reactions against the anti-sectarian collective action, what explains the decades-long resilience of the Lebanese regime despite all its deficiencies?

Since its formation, the Lebanese consociational power-sharing political system has stood resilient through institutional and clientelist practices that produce and reproduce sectarian modes of subjectification.<sup>1</sup> As the system divides political positions among sects, the *zu'ama* (leaders) join forces to impede any initiatives that could otherwise undermine their hegemony and the larger political system. They have created and spread a web of neo-patrimonial networks that ensure citizens depend on them to access services and benefits. In return for this access, citizens are expected to remain loyal to their leaders by answering sectarian calls for mobilisations and repeatedly voting for them. Citizens' dependency on their respective sectarian elites has thus allowed the latter to monopolise state resources and profit from the neoliberal economic structure without any accountability. Moreover, politicians have welcomed foreign intervention and the use of Lebanon as a pawn in exchange for financial and political support to buttress their interests.

<sup>1</sup> Consociationalism is defined as a 'government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy', see Arend Lijphart, 'Consociational Democracy', *World Politics* 21/2 (January 1969), p. 216. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009820> (accessed 24 October 2011). The four principles of consociational democracy are grand coalition, proportionality, segmental autonomy and mutual veto, see Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).



Faced with a resilient regime unshaken by protests, some activists organised politically to defy the sectarian system from within. Although they failed to form a unified coalition of opposition groups due to their diverging objectives, strategies and ideologies, emerging political groups born out of collective action and mass mobilisations have since succeeded in garnering 13 seats in the May 2022 parliamentary elections. Emerging groups and independents also resisted the establishment by obtaining victories in syndicate and university student council elections, which are usually reserved for traditional parties. The parliament's governance by sectarian parties, along with disunity and internal fragmentations over significant issues, have affected the progress of independent lawmakers.

This paper draws on primary and secondary sources and eight in-depth interviews conducted in Arabic and English with anti-establishment individuals and members of political groups that emerged in the wake of the 'You Stink' movement in 2015 and *Thawrat Tishreen* in 2019. It begins by investigating the October 2019 mass protests, the largest in size and scope, and the tactics and strategies deployed by the regime against the movement. The second section provides an overview of the factors that explain the resilience of the Lebanese consociational power-sharing political system and its shortcomings. The third part examines the challenges emerging groups face and their successful experiences in resisting the ruling elite. The paper closes by pointing out the research findings and their implications on Lebanese politics.

### *Thawrat Tishreen: The October 2019 Uprising and Regime Reactions*

Although not fully immune to the Arab Uprisings, Lebanon's regime and ruling elites remained unscathed by the intermittent protests. But the 2011 protests were not the last attempts at socioeconomic reform and political change. Following years of corruption that hampered proper waste management, a garbage crisis occurred after the government failed to find an alternative for a main landfill that closed in July 2015. With mountains of waste piling up in Beirut and the Mount Lebanon region, an anti-establishment social movement called '*til'et rihetkum*' (You Stink) – a tongue-in-cheek slogan highlighting the literal stink of the garbage and politicians' corruption – emerged. Using the hashtag #YouStink, activists mobilised thousands of protesters within the next few months. They called on the government to resign and demanded politicians take action to end the crisis.<sup>2</sup> The movement eventually lost momentum, having been centred around Beirut's middle class. However, it emphasised civil society's ability to establish emerging political groups, like Madinati (My City) and LiHaqqi (For My Right), that can seek to oppose the regime in municipal and parliamentary elections.

On 17 October 2019, a few dozen people protested outside the government's headquarters in central Beirut after the then government of Sa'd al-Hariri introduced new taxes on petrol, tobacco and WhatsApp calls. Although the government retracted its tax proposal within hours, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese took to the streets of Beirut, the south, the north and the Beqaa' Valley, urging the government to resign. The protests, dubbed

<sup>2</sup> Paul Chaderjian, "'You Stink' Protesters Return to Beirut Streets', *Al-Jazeera*, 21 September 2015. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/9/21/you-stink-protesters-return-to-beirut-streets> (accessed 24 October 2021).

*Thawrat Tishreen*, followed a scarcity of US dollars in Lebanon's commercial banks that plunged the value of the Lebanese pound against the dollar for the first time since the post-war era. Concomitantly, citizens were angered by the state's failure to battle wildfires in the western mountains on 14 October as consecutive governments had failed to fund the maintenance of three firefighting aircrafts. The fires that burned through hundreds of hectares of forest were finally extinguished three days later with assistance from Jordan, Greece and Cyprus.<sup>3</sup>

While mainly triggered by the government's proposed taxes, the 2019 protests swiftly turned into calls to topple the confessional political system and the intertwined sectarian political and economic elite. Echoing the Arab Uprising's slogan '*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nitham*' (the people want to overthrow the regime), demonstrators also chanted '*killon ya'ne killon*' from the 2015 protests and '*Thawra, Thawra*' (Revolution, Revolution). Not only did protesters demand an overhaul of the corrupt *zu'ama*, but also the financial elite, banks and the central bank responsible for the socioeconomic situation in the country under the banner '*yasqot yasqot hokm al-masref*' (down with the rule of the central bank).<sup>4</sup> They also denounced deteriorating living conditions, high unemployment, austerity measures, poor public services and growing public debt.

The 2019 popular movement was hence a continuation of previous mobilisation efforts against the sectarian-neoliberal system. Indeed, the protests were 'part of a broader revolutionary process' that began with protests in 2011 and the 2015 'You Stink' movement before peaking in 2019.<sup>5</sup> The previous mobilisations were a build-up to the 2019 protest movement, particularly since, according to co-founder and member of LiHaqqi Adham Al Hassanieh, the sectarian capitalist system at the forefront of the crisis works in favour of oligarchs' interests rather than that of the people.<sup>6</sup>

Despite being leaderless and adopting an informal horizontal organisational form, the peaceful protests that cut across class, sectarian and regional affiliations garnered an unprecedented number of citizens compared to previous protest movements. It was reported that on 20 October around two million people participated in the protests nationwide.<sup>7</sup> Struggling to afford university fees and find proper employment that would allow them to meet skyrocketing living expenses, a record number of young people mobilised and participated in *Thawrat Tishreen* in their pursuit of a better country. High school and university students, who constituted the majority of the participating youth, went on strike to take part in the nationwide demonstrations. They also organised daily educational ses-

<sup>3</sup> 'Lebanon Protests: How WhatsApp Tax Anger Revealed a Much Deeper Crisis', *BBC*, 7 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50293636> (accessed 7 November 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Rima Majed and Lana Salman, 'Lebanon's Thawra', *Middle East Report* 292/3 (Fall/Winter 2019). Available at: <https://merip.org/2019/12/lebanons-thawra/> (accessed 1 September 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Rima Majed, 'Lebanon and Iraq in 2019: Revolutionary Uprisings Against "Sectarian Neoliberalism"', *Transnational Institute*, 27 October 2021. Available at: <https://longreads.tni.org/lebanon-and-iraq-in-2019> (accessed 29 October 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Adham Al Hassanieh, co-founder and member of LiHaqqi, via Zoom, 20 September 2022.

<sup>7</sup> 'Ongoing Post on Protests in Beirut/Lebanon', *Jadaliyya*, 18 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40115/Ongoing-Post-on-Protests-in-BeirutLebanon> (accessed 20 November 2021).



sions with professors, activists and journalists in public spaces, known as ‘protest schools.’ Students advocated for merit-based employment, the payment of tuition fees in Lebanese pounds rather than US dollars at private institutions and the independence of the public Lebanese University from political intervention.<sup>8</sup> But the movement was not restricted to residents in the country: the diaspora also voiced their disillusionment with the ruling elite outside Lebanese embassies in foreign countries, such as the UK and France.

The ruling elite, however, utilised counter-narratives and co-optation tactics as well as resorting to systematic violence and repression to quell the demonstrations. During the early days of the protests, al-Hariri’s cabinet passed a package of economic reforms that encompassed cutting parliamentarians’ salaries, halving ministerial salaries, offering financial aid to underprivileged families and measures to reduce the country’s huge deficit. In a televised announcement, al-Hariri claimed the reforms were not a trade-off to stop demonstrators from expressing their grievances.<sup>9</sup> President Michel Aoun even declared his readiness to meet with representatives of the protest movement and discuss the best solution for the economic crisis. But Aoun insisted that political change can only occur through state institutions rather than the streets and warned, like al-Hariri, that a government resignation would engender a political vacuum.<sup>10</sup> The securitisation of the protest movement and linking it to political stability was reverberated by Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Nasrallah went even further by declaring the protests were funded and organised by foreign actors wishing to destabilise Lebanon, a claim strongly refuted by protesters.<sup>11</sup> Some Lebanese media owned by or associated with the establishment also used narratives to portray protesters as disruptors of daily life and blamed them for the economic crisis.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, other anti-government sectarian parties sought to align themselves with the protests’ demands and urged their followers to take part in them.<sup>13</sup> The absence of organisational structures in the protest movement enabled ‘those *uber*-organized sectarian parties to intimidate or coopt what with time became an assembly of disorganized non-, anti-, or cross-sectarian groups.’<sup>14</sup> By relying on the credibility of the protests and lack of

<sup>8</sup> Adnan El Amine, ‘Youth Protests in Lebanon: “All of Them Means All of Them”’, *International Higher Education* 101 (Spring 2020), pp. 6–7. Available at: <https://www.internationalhighereducation.net/api-v1/article/!/action/getPdfOfArticle/articleID/2878/productID/29/filename/article-id-2878.pdf> (accessed 24 January 2021).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Lebanon Protests’, *BBC*.

<sup>10</sup> “‘I am Waiting for You’: Lebanon’s Aoun Invites Protesters to Talk’, *Al-Jazeera*, 24 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/24/i-am-waiting-for-you-lebanons-aoun-invites-protesters-to-talk/> (accessed 25 October 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Abbie Cheeseman, ‘Hizbollah Leader Warns of Civil War after Days of Lebanon Protests’, *The Telegraph*, 25 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/25/hezbollah-leader-warns-civil-war-weeks-lebanon-protests/> (accessed 28 October 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Jana El Amine and Claudia Kozman, ‘Framing and Sourcing the 2019 Lebanese Protests on Local Television’, *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023), pp. 4997–5016. Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/21049> (accessed 23 November 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Zeina Karam, ‘AP Explains: Lebanon’s Protests could Head into Dark Turn’, *Associated Press*, 13 November 2019. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/ao4f393a2d764cbcbc3608353deb45a4> (accessed 24 November 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Ibrahim Halawi and Bassel F. Salloukh, ‘Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will after the

organised invitations to protest, established political parties utilised ‘the same methods to call for anonymous protests that subtly make sect-related claims, exposing, in the process, the inconsistency of anti-sectarian performances.’<sup>15</sup> This co-optation and politicisation of the protests succeeded in reducing the number of ‘loyalist’ protesters – those affiliated with sectarian traditional parties like the Maronite Free Patriotic Movement or Shi‘i Hizbullah – who participated as individuals rather than party members in the early days of the protest movement before backing away when their rivals, like the Maronite Lebanese Forces, sought to control the protests.<sup>16</sup>

While these methods lowered the number of protesters, they still failed to end the protests. State military and security forces frequently used water cannons, rubber bullets, teargas and, at times, pellets and live ammunition against the protesters. They also beat, tortured and detained hundreds of protesters without being held accountable.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, a mob of followers of Hizbullah and the Amal Movement chanted sectarian slogans while attacking protesters and ravaging stalls and tents they had set up. Several hours after this chaos, al-Hariri was forced to resign on 29 October.<sup>18</sup> The protests, however, continued into 2020.

A few months later, the size of the demonstrations shrank, and their frequency decreased before ultimately waning. As the main objective of some protesters was to force al-Hariri’s government to resign, they believed their demand was met. They now wanted to give the new ‘technocratic’ government of Hassan Diab a chance, mainly due to their reluctance to organise politically and the absence of a clear plan and direction of what should come after this resignation. Faced with a deteriorating socioeconomic situation, the cost of protesting became too high, seen as a luxury or privilege by some who had to continue their daily lives to earn a living. Activists also became wary of the regime’s tactics, which included ‘psychological and professional pressure, pressure on their families and relatives and at their workplace, universities and schools. There was a crescendo of pressure before the establishment deployed means of direct violence and intimidation.’<sup>19</sup> Not only did these methods hinder participation, but ‘some completely refrained from wanting to be activists because of the direct threat to them or their families.’<sup>20</sup>

With the rapid spread of COVID-19, the government imposed the first lockdown in March

17 October Protests in Lebanon’, *Middle East Law and Governance* 12/3 (2020), pp. 329–30. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-12030005> (accessed 20 December 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Ibrahim Halawi, ‘Lebanon’s Political Opposition in Search of Identity: He Who Is without Sect among You Cast the First Stone’, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* (2023), p. 10. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2023.2189084> (accessed 14 May 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Mortada Alamine, ‘Lebanon’s Loyalists: The Other Side of Change’, *Synaps*, 14 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.synaps.network/post/lebanon-uprising-revolution-loyalists-parties> (accessed 16 June 2023).

<sup>17</sup> ‘Lebanon Protests Explained’, *Amnesty International*, 22 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/lebanon-protests-explained/> (accessed 24 October 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Martin Chulov, ‘Lebanon’s PM Saad Hariri Resigns as Protesters Come Under Attack’, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/29/lebanons-pm-saad-hariri-resigns-amid-angry-protests> (accessed 30 October 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Hussein El Achi, secretary general of Minteshreen, via Zoom, 23 March 2022. Since the interview, El Achi has joined the National Bloc.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

2020, thus limiting citizens' right to protest. Security forces even forcibly removed a protest camp in downtown Beirut to curb cases.<sup>21</sup> Yet, activists raised their concerns that these measures were a government attempt to target dissent and increase its powers. Others quickly shifted their focus to social media to live-stream political discussions, organise campaigns and raise donations for the underprivileged.<sup>22</sup> But protesters broke lockdown by returning to the streets after the deadly Beirut port blast – one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history.

On 4 August 2020, around 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, which authorities had unsafely deposited in a warehouse, detonated, killing at least 218 people, wounding over 6,500 and displacing thousands. Protesters expressed anger towards the political elite whose negligence and corruption were to blame for this disaster. Eight lawmakers, including three from the established anti-government Maronite al-Kataeb Party, resigned – a move which protesters saw as political theatre and a strategy to be associated with the protests' calls despite being part of the sectarian system. Although Diab's government resigned on 10 August, people, especially families of the victims, are still waiting for accountability and justice.<sup>23</sup> But since the consociational power-sharing political system implements sectarian identities in the judiciary and allows political leaders to assign their clientelist judges to key positions, the principle of judicial independence and transparency remains absent in Lebanon.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, families of the victims continue to organise protests and sit-ins outside government institutions to seek justice and support Judge Tarek Bitar – who was appointed to head the investigations after another judge had been dismissed. After Bitar filed charges against senior officials, a demonstration by Hizbullah and Amal Movement supporters urged his removal on 14 October 2021. Shortly after, the protest escalated into armed clashes with members of the Lebanese Forces in the Tayouneh neighbourhood of Beirut, leaving seven people killed and dozens injured.<sup>25</sup>

Against this backdrop, the political system 'privileges a class of politicians who share power based on exclusionary pluralism that shields national political institutions from meaningful accountability and that limits the representative depth of these institutions.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Sunniva Rose, 'Lebanon: Decision to Dismantle Protest Camps over Coronavirus Fears Causes Controversy', *The National*, 1 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/lebanon-decision-to-dismantle-protest-camps-over-coronavirus-fears-causes-controversy-1.999165> (accessed 13 January 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Michal Kranz, 'Coronavirus Forces Lebanese Protesters into New Posture', *Al-Monitor*, 26 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/03/lebanon-protests-coronavirus-support-poor-economy.html> (accessed 13 January 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Timour Azhari, 'Lebanon PM Hassan Diab Expected to Announce Resignation', *Al-Jazeera*, 10 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/10/lebanon-pm-hassan-diab-expected-to-announce-resignation> (accessed 10 August 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Jinan S. Al-Habbal, 'Lebanon Needs the Rule of Law, not the Rule of Sect', *LSE Conflict and Civiness Research Group Research (CCRG) Blog*, 18 December 2019. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2019/12/18/lebanon-needs-the-rule-of-law-not-the-rule-of-sect/> (accessed 18 December 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Najia Houssari, 'Military Court Charges 68 over Deadly Beirut Clashes', *Arab News*, 25 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1954921/middle-east> (accessed 30 October 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Lina Khatib, 'Cycles of Contention in Lebanon', in Lisa Blaydes, Amr Hamzawy and Hesham Sallam (eds), *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), p. 177.

The frailty of state institutions and the absence of accountability and good governance have drastically aggravated corruption. According to Transparency International, a non-governmental organisation combatting corruption, Lebanon scored 24 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 2023, which is the perceived level of public sector corruption, with zero being highly corrupt.<sup>27</sup>

Without an official mandate, the caretaker cabinet, in place since the May 2022 parliamentary elections, has been unable to deal with the country's economic crisis, which is a direct consequence of decades of corruption and mismanagement of state institutions, but which worsened in 2019 with the collapse of the Lebanese pound that recently lost almost all its value and forced over two-thirds of the population into poverty. Amid this crisis, the state has failed to procure fuel, medicines and essential food staples, thus plunging the country into darkness and precluding the population's access to proper basic services and commodities.<sup>28</sup> The 2019 protest movement led to the resignation of two governments, albeit without any real political change or socioeconomic reforms being adopted. Other sporadic, but minimal, anti-government protests are viewed as an extension of the 2019 mobilisation and continue to occur as citizens grapple with Lebanon's dire political and economic reality. Besides the leaders' counter-revolutionary methods focused on squashing protest movements, how has Lebanon's political system that is fragile and dysfunctional remained intact and maintained its resilience for so long?

## The Resilience of Lebanon's Consociational Power-Sharing

Being the only consociational democracy in the Arab world, along with post-2003 Iraq, Lebanon differs from many of its authoritarian neighbouring countries. As the system divides political power among the country's main sects, no individual or main group can rule in Lebanon. This is unlike other monolithic Arab countries whose power revolves around leaders who were overthrown during the Arab Uprisings, leading to rapid regime changes following popular protests – such as in Tunisia and Egypt. However, the Lebanese political system features a type of 'sectarian authoritarianism' that hinders reforms and enables the same political elites – many of whom were warlords during the civil war – to rule for decades.<sup>29</sup> The Taif Accord of 22 October 1989, also known as the Document of National Reconciliation which ended the Lebanese civil war, stipulated that the first post-Taif parliament would take appropriate measures to abolish political sectarianism based on a transitional plan, albeit without providing a timeframe. Despite declaring their commitment, sectarian leaders have not implemented this objective. They do not wish to change the status quo that maintains their interests, particularly because the Lebanese demography has vastly changed since the last official census was conducted in 1932, with Christians losing their pre-war demographic dominance to the Muslim majority.

<sup>27</sup> 'Corruption Perceptions Index', *Transparency International* (2024). Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/lbn> (accessed 7 June 2024).

<sup>28</sup> 'Lebanon Government Failing to Uphold 'Right to Electricity': HRW', *Al-Jazeera*, 9 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/9/lebanon-government-fails-to-uphold-right-to-electricity-hrw> (accessed 10 March 2023).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Dixon, 'Power-Sharing in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism and Sectarian Authoritarianism', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 20/2 (October 2020), pp. 117–27. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12327> (accessed 30 October 2021).

Ussama Makdisi argues that sectarianism in Lebanon is a product of foreign intervention, being ‘a nationalist creation that dates back no further than the beginnings of the modern era when European powers and local elites forged a politics of religion amid the emerging nation-state system.’<sup>30</sup> The sectarian political system makes the country vulnerable to external intervention and regional power struggles, especially the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In fact, it encourages the *zu‘ama* to seek and depend on foreign assistance to guarantee their survival, turning Lebanon into a playground for tug-of-war and opening its corridors for proxy wars and geopolitical battles. Several countries, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, have supported local politicians in elections and provided funds to augment their authority. Reliance on foreign powers increased following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri on 14 February 2005 and the withdrawal of Syrian troops, who had been in Lebanon since the civil war, on 26 April in light of the Independence Intifada or Cedar Revolution.<sup>31</sup> Tensions over opposing visions of Lebanese internal and foreign politics emerged, but most importantly a Sunni-Shi‘i sectarian power struggle over dominance in Lebanon led to the formation of the Iran-backed 8 March coalition and the 14 March coalition that is backed by the West and Saudi Arabia.<sup>32</sup>

The sectarian/political divergence has often engendered stalemates between the different parties, such as their inability to elect a new president as of 30 October 2022, a déjà vu of presidential vacuums in 2014–6 and 2007–8, and failure to agree on a new coalition to replace the caretaker cabinet. In July 2023, the five-nation group on Lebanon, which includes the US, France, Qatar, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, announced its plans to penalise Lebanese politicians and groups who were impeding the election of a new president.<sup>33</sup> This external interference, in turn, has undermined the sovereignty of the Lebanese state while warranting the subsistence of the *zu‘ama*. Notwithstanding, those wishing to protest the political system and its elites are thus disadvantaged because the latter have had time and history to cement their interest groups, form political coalitions and economic networks regionally and internationally and accumulate resources to protect their counter-revolution.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, consociational power-sharing possesses counter-revolutionary structures that

<sup>30</sup> Ussama Makdisi, ‘Reconstructing the Nation-State: The Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon’, *Middle East Report* 200 (July–September 1996), p. 26. Available at: <https://merip.org/1996/09/the-modernity-of-sectarianism-in-lebanon/> (accessed 24 May 2024).

<sup>31</sup> The Independence Intifada or Cedar Revolution was a series of mass rallies and demonstrations organised by anti-Syrian Lebanese parties who suspected Syria’s involvement in al-Hariri’s assassination.

<sup>32</sup> The 14 March coalition includes the Sunni-dominated Future Movement, Maronite Lebanese Forces and al-Kataeb Party, and other Christian groups and individuals. The alliance originally included the Maronite Free Patriotic Movement and Druze Progressive Socialist Party, which left the alliance before the 2005 parliamentary elections and in 2009, respectively. The name refers to the mass demonstration in downtown Beirut that commemorated the ‘monthiversary’ of al-Hariri’s assassination. The 8 March coalition includes Shi‘i Hizbullah and Amal Movement and Maronite Marada Movement and Free Patriotic Movement. The name refers to the mass demonstration in downtown Beirut in response to the Cedar Revolution.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Five Nation Group on Lebanon Says to Penalise Those Obstructing Presidential Election’, *Reuters*, 17 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/five-nation-group-lebanon-says-penalise-those-obstructing-presidential-election-2023-07-17/> (accessed 18 July 2023).

<sup>34</sup> Ibrahim Halawi, ‘Consociational Power-Sharing in the Arab World as Counter-Revolution’, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 20/2 (October 2020), p. 133. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12328> (accessed 30 October 2021).



alienate those outside the sectarian cartel from any significant economic and political participation and hinder any attempt at inclusionary cross- and anti-sectarian mobilisation.<sup>35</sup> Sectarian personal status laws and sectarianised educational policies, citizenship laws, military and welfare allocation are only a few examples of how the consociational power-sharing political system and its institutions produce and reproduce sectarian modes of subjectification. Anti-sectarian efforts to reform the system, such as campaigns to implement an optional civil personal status law that would allow civil marriages to be conducted in Lebanon, were blocked by sectarian elites.<sup>36</sup> They also impeded alternative forms of political identification and oppositional organisation by co-opting and dividing professional associations and labour movements to guarantee working and professional classes ‘did not organize as classes and professional groups.’<sup>37</sup>

Political leaders also use their hegemony over ministries to funnel funding and resources to their cronies and ‘to create “ghost employees” – paid positions for people who do not exist so the salaries can be either pocketed by the politicians or disbursed to their followers to maintain loyalty.’<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Lebanon’s post-war neoliberal economic structure is characterised by a regressive tax system, monetary policies and public expenditures that deepen inequality between the rich sectarian and economic elites and the impoverished middle and lower classes. It financially rewards the political elite who syphon state resources and enables their control over the economy’s lucrative sectors. This, in turn, forces the economically underprivileged to rely on the patronage system to obtain social services and basic goods amid the failure of the state to provide those.<sup>39</sup> For instance, several sectarian political parties have distributed aid and food baskets to residents of poor neighbourhoods during the economic crisis. Hizbullah even went a step further by opening grocery shops that sell basic goods like oil and flour in Lebanese pounds at lower prices and a 30 percent discount.<sup>40</sup>

Citizens are thereby trapped in a sectarian prison from birth to death and reduced to members of their sect rather than their country while simultaneously perpetuating the confessional system through loyalty to their respective sectarian elites and not holding them to account. To this end, the survival of the political system equates to the resilience of its leaders – rather than its stability and adaptability to challenges and new crises – who establish a society dependent on their clientelist system that weakens state institutions and is often endorsed by the international community.<sup>41</sup> But it is not all gloom and doom, as the protest movements have produced secular emerging groups, organising based on

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>36</sup> Bassel F. Salloukh et al., *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Bassel F. Salloukh, ‘The State of Consociationalism in Lebanon’, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* (March 2023), pp. 12–3. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2023.2187970> (accessed 16 June 2023).

<sup>38</sup> Lina Khatib and Jon Wallace, ‘Lebanon’s Politics and Politicians’, *Chatham House*, 11 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/08/lebanons-politics> (accessed 1 February 2022).

<sup>39</sup> Salloukh et al., *The Politics of Sectarianism*, p.174. Neoliberalism was adopted by Rafiq al-Hariri’s government following the end of the Lebanese civil war.

<sup>40</sup> Hanan Hamdan, ‘Lebanese Parties Distribute Food Baskets as Economy Continues to Sink’, *Al-Monitor*, 10 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/lebanese-parties-distribute-food-baskets-economy-continues-sink> (accessed 16 June 2021).

<sup>41</sup> Jamil Mouawad, ‘Unpacking Lebanon’s Resilience: Undermining State Institutions and Consolidating the System?’, *Istituto Affari Internazionali Working Papers* 17 (October 2017), p. 10. Available at: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/unpacking-lebanons-resilience> (accessed 24 January 2019).



shared aims, which have achieved significant, albeit minor, victories against the resilient regime and a shift in public discourse.

## Aspirations for an Anti-Sectarian Lebanon: Challenges and Success Stories

Emerging political groups in Lebanon can be divided into those that formed before the 2019 protest movement, such as Madinati, LiHaqqi and Mouwatinoun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla (MMFD/Citizens in a State), and those that sprung out of the 2019 mobilisation like Minteshreen (From October/Spread) and Taqaddom (Progress) – albeit many of their members are veteran activists. Following the ‘You Stink’ protest movement in 2015, several activists and civil society actors established new political parties to challenge the regime in the 2016 municipal and 2018 legislative elections. Since then, they have improved their hierarchical structures to prepare for mass mobilisations. These emerging groups were swift in urging citizens to take to the streets once the proposed tax hikes became public in 2019. As key organisers, they played a significant role in ‘leading tasks,’ such as mobilising protesters, setting up debate tents and preparing banners despite the leaderless format of the protests.<sup>42</sup>

Established as a youth-led opposition campaign for the 2018 elections, LiHaqqi soon turned into an anti-establishment political organisation and played a vital role in the 2019 protest movement. About three months before the protests started, LiHaqqi formed the Direct Action Working Group that specialises in organising protests. Its members realised a protest scenario ahead of the imminent economic collapse and austerity measures. On 17 October 2019, LiHaqqi’s members created an online petition, quickly reaching around 7,000 signatories within a few hours, calling for people to protest the tax increase in Riad al-Solh Square (the main protest area in downtown Beirut). In the early days of the protests, they demanded the resignation of the ‘unjust taxation government’ and used their crowd-funding money to buy and set up tents that promoted political dialogue and discussions.<sup>43</sup>

Demonstrators sharing common objectives and ideologies galvanised opposition movements to confront the sectarian establishment while vowing to remain apolitical. But as the protests progressed, many activists grouped to create political parties. Laury Haytayan, the general coordinator of Taqaddom (which emerged from the 2019 protest movement) emphasised:

When we took part in the 2019 protests, we already had extensive backgrounds in political activism and experiences. At the time, we thought that 2019 was an extension of all the previous protests we had participated in. But the beauty of 2019 was the talks, discussions and tents where all knowledge-building and political education took place. Young people in the streets wanted to understand politics and how the country runs, and people from different backgrounds were explaining how they see Lebanon [...] We felt it was time for us to have one political entity that represents our views so we can play that role. It was not enough to take to the streets and then return home.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Earl, ‘Leading Tasks in a Leaderless Movement: The Case of Strategic Voting’, *American Behavioral Scientist* 50 (2007), p. 1327. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764207300161> (accessed 6 June 2023).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Adham Al Hassanieh.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Laury Haytayan, general coordinator of Taqaddom, via Zoom, 30 August 2022.

But it was the Beirut port blast and subsequent brutality of security forces against protesters that motivated other groups to organise politically, advocating accountability for the explosion as part of their manifestos. As Hussein El Achi, Secretary General of Minteshreen, a youth-led movement born out of *Thawrat Tishreen* that turned into a political party, indicated:

We always wanted to be a youth movement, a movement on the street with a political nature. We did not want to be partisan. We did not want to get into the game of political parties. At the time, there was a stigma about political parties, and it stayed for a while. The explosion and, specifically, the protest on 8 August 2020 in which we were met with brutality, ultimately made us realise we could not continue relying on the street, which we had expected was the tool for change. Of course, we can keep it as a tool, but we had to go into organised political action by joining political parties or creating new ones. So, we decided to establish a political party.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, Minteshreen signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Bloc in June 2021 and later merged with them.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, when France's President Emmanuel Macron visited Lebanon in the aftermath of the port explosion, it contributed to the increase of emerging groups and their political involvement. According to Haytayan:

The moment of truth was when Macron said: 'You elected those people' and 'who is this revolution?', so he only met with some people he and the French embassy considered representatives of the protest movement. Or even when he met with political leaders and told them they needed to do something.<sup>47</sup>

Since many activists have acknowledged that fighting the regime and achieving real change can only occur through organised political action within the system, 'belonging to political parties is now no longer frowned upon or given negative connotations.'<sup>48</sup> Without access to state resources and external funding, emerging groups have focused on citizenship and nation building. They have also emphasised that Lebanese should have access to basic services, including employment, education and healthcare, as citizens rather than members of sectarian communities who rely on the patronage system.<sup>49</sup>

Emerging groups have adopted varying leadership structures; for many of these groups, their authority lies in a steering committee or an executive body. LiHaqqi, however, adopts a decentralised, collective council-based leadership that 'grants autonomy to smaller

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Hussein El Achi.

<sup>46</sup> For more information on the National Bloc, see Anne-Marie El Hage, '#3 The National Bloc in Search of its Lost Identity', *L'Orient Today*, 7 April 2022. Available at: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1296127/3-the-national-bloc-in-search-of-its-lost-identity.html> (accessed 9 October 2023).

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Laury Haytayan.

<sup>48</sup> Maria El Sammak, 'Rethinking the Impact of the 2019 Popular Protests in Lebanon', *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 8 July 2022. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2022/07/08/rethinking-the-impact-of-the-2019-popular-protests-in-lebanon/> (accessed 8 July 2022).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

elected councils with different roles and tasks,' albeit requiring 'high levels of consistent commitment and engagement' by all council members and disrupting decision-making regarding contentious matters.<sup>50</sup>

Nonetheless, internal conflicts around leadership and organisational structures have tainted some emerging groups. Citizens in a State – a political party founded in 2016 by former Minister of Telecommunications and Labour, Charbel Nahas, to champion a civil, democratic Lebanese state – grew organisationally following the 2019 protests, but eventually faced obstacles. In December 2022, around two dozen members resigned from Citizens in a State following amendments to the party's bylaws that could enable its leaders to serve a third term, including Nahas who remains the Secretary General after his second term ended in January 2024.<sup>51</sup> From this perspective, the political system is not the sole dynamic impeding collective action, but 'oftentimes, strategic choices adopted by the mobilising actors themselves, who end up contributing to the shrinking space and to reproducing the status quo, while mobilising against it.'<sup>52</sup>

Despite uniting under the umbrella of political change and advocating similar themes – such as sovereignty, judicial independence and a secular civil state – emerging political groups have different visions, strategies and modes of action for bringing about political and socio-economic change. Without a common approach, polarisations and dissensions have marred these groups and affected their anti-establishment efforts. On 13 April 2021, a coalition of 16 groups, including Minteshreen and Madinati, launched an initiative to unify the 'forces of change and the different revolutionary groups' to work towards creating a potential opposition bloc to defy the sectarian political system.<sup>53</sup> The attempt, however, eventually failed due to the groups' different approaches as the parliamentary elections loomed.

Among the disagreements between emerging groups is whether they should coordinate and align with traditional political parties that currently have anti-government sentiments – such as al-Kataeb, Lebanese Forces and leftist groups – or exclude them and abide by the notion of '*killon ya'ne killon*' to maintain their objectivity and credibility. For instance, Madinati – a political party established as an urban movement in 2016 in the wake of the garbage crisis to participate in the Beirut municipal elections and has since expanded its scope and regions – refused to work with traditional parties. As Tarek Ammar, a member of Madinati who ran as a candidate in the 2022 parliamentary elections, argued:

<sup>50</sup> Nadim El Kak and Sami Atallah, 'Lebanon's Political Alternatives: Mapping the Opposition', *The Policy Initiative* (April 2022), p. 6. Available at: <https://api.thepolicyinitiative.org/content/uploads/files/Lebanon%E2%80%99s-Political-Alternatives-Report.pdf> (accessed 6 June 2022).

<sup>51</sup> Mohamad El Chamaa, 'Mass MMFD Resignations after Amendments Allowing Leader's Term Extension', *L'Orient Today*, 27 December 2022. Available at: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1322795/mass-mmfd-resignations-after-amendments-allowing-leaders-term-extension.html> (accessed 28 December 2022).

<sup>52</sup> Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi and Léa Yammine, 'The October 2019 Protests in Lebanon: Between Contention and Reproduction', *Civil Society Knowledge Centre, Lebanon Support*, 1 July 2020. Available at: <https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/october-2019-protests-lebanon-between-contention-and-reproduction> (accessed 24 October 2021).

<sup>53</sup> 'Lebanon Opposition Wants Joint Election Push to Oust Elite', *France 24*, 13 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210413-lebanon-opposition-wants-joint-election-push-to-oust-elite> (accessed 14 April 2021).

We cannot cooperate with those responsible for the 4 August explosion and looting the entire population [...] We cannot isolate ourselves, however, there is no partnership. We cannot co-exist in a government with them, for instance. They are obstructing investigations and our calls for state-building, knowing that what we are calling for will at least lock them up.<sup>54</sup>

Rania Masri, a member of Citizens in a State, questioned how one can work with leaders who only see others as members of certain sects or continue to speak about reforming rather than transforming the banking system. They can ‘still exist as sectarian political parties under a secular system, but not in charge.’<sup>55</sup> Conversely, Minteshreen, emphasised the need for dialogue, arguing that it cannot behave in a similar manner to the sectarian political establishment that has an exclusionary and abolitionist thought based on fear of the other.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, another initiative to form a single coalition failed in the run-up to the May 2022 legislative elections due to ideological disparities, and emerging groups eventually formed several competing alliances to guarantee parliamentary seats.<sup>57</sup> For instance, Taqaddom candidates formed an electoral coalition with al-Kataeb, insisting on the need for dialogue and expanding the opposition to be effective. On the other hand, Citizens in a State learned from its previous experience during the 2018 parliamentary elections. It built the Kulluna Watani (We Are All Our Nation), the largest electoral coalition which saw 66 independent candidates run in nine districts across the country, though only one candidate won a seat. As the coalition crumbled after the elections, Citizens in a State decided not to participate in electoral coalitions anymore but sought to build a political alliance. They also openly stated their willingness to withdraw their 2022 parliamentary candidates and, instead, discuss political discourse, strategy and vision. Besides, ‘personality differences matter in organising’ and have hindered the formation of an opposition with a united vision in favour of ‘oppositions.’<sup>58</sup>

Opposition candidates, however, reportedly faced systematic attacks – including beatings, threats, online hate campaigns and vandalism of their campaign billboards – by supporters of sectarian parties.<sup>59</sup> A few weeks before the elections, at least five candidates running on opposition electoral lists withdrew their nominations in response to intimidations by traditional parties, mainly in Shi‘i-dominated districts. Citing social or family pressure as the catalyst for their withdrawal, the candidates even encouraged their supporters to vote for those parties.<sup>60</sup> Established political parties also deployed ‘electoral armies’ who used

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Tarek Ammar, member of Madinati, via Zoom, 13 April 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Rania Masri, member of Citizens in a State, via Zoom, 25 March 2022. Since the interview, Masri has resigned from the party.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Hussein El Achi.

<sup>57</sup> Wael Taleb, ‘The Possibility of a Single Alliance: Lebanon’s Opposition Groups Ponder how Viable a United Front is in Upcoming Polls’, *L’Orient Today*, 3 February 2022. Available at: <https://today.lorientjour.com/article/1289767/the-possibility-of-a-single-alliance-lebanons-opposition-groups-ponder-how-viable-a-united-front-is-in-upcoming-polls.html> (accessed 5 April 2022).

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Rania Masri.

<sup>59</sup> Kareem Chehayeb, ‘Lebanese Opposition Election Candidates Face Threats and Attacks’, *Al-Jazeera*, 23 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/23/lebanon-opposition-election-candidates-threats-attacks> (accessed 24 April 2022).

<sup>60</sup> ‘Lebanese Forces Candidate Announces Withdrawal from List in Bekaa II’, *L’Orient Today*, 7 May

astroturfing on social media to manipulate voters and public opinion, as well as relying on vote buying to guarantee their seats in Parliament. Amid the economic crisis, they exchanged food, fuel, medicines and other provisions for votes, unlike the use of cash in previous elections.<sup>61</sup> This underscores the tactics used by established parties that have had decades to build clear organisational hierarchies and clientelist networks, undermining any potential opposition by emerging groups and shrinking citizens' voting choices by making a vote for independent candidates costly.

Regardless of these impediments and the regime's tactics, candidates of some emerging groups and independents unexpectedly garnered 13 out of 128 seats in Parliament and formed the Forces of Change bloc. A breakthrough was their ability to form opposition electoral lists and win seats in districts that historically belonged to traditional parties. For example, the independent candidate Firas Hamdan won the Druze seat in the South III district in a face-off against a candidate on the list of the Shi'i duo of Hizbullah and Amal Movement – a scenario unheard of.<sup>62</sup> Their victory delineated a shift in voters' behaviour to elect new faces and the possibility of alternative candidates attaining political positions, paving the way for a reimagining of political life in Lebanon. According to Haytayan, those 13 members of Parliament (MPs) are 'almost a representation of the street and its diversity and divisions in 2019' (women, youth, leftists, rightists, centrists, etc.), and 'there is value in calling them "Change MPs" that came out of the revolution'.<sup>63</sup>

While the influence of these 13 legislators, whose victory was bolstered by the expatriate vote, remains minimal in a parliament dominated by traditional parties, they have been attending parliamentary sessions and engaging in debates. However, their pre-elections disunity has followed them into Parliament, impeding chances of effectively pushing towards change. The lack of coordination and internal fragmentations over priority issues, such as their failure to agree on who to back for the presidency, led two MPs, Waddah Sadek and Michel Douaihy, to leave the Forces of Change bloc in October 2022. Those remaining 'have struggled to work with other MPs or coordinate internally to stay politically relevant'.<sup>64</sup> It thus remains to be seen whether they can ultimately unite despite their differences and transform from being activists to full-time politicians who can change the political system from within.

Emerging groups and independents also challenged the sectarian regime in syndicates and universities. The election of Melhem Khalaf as president of the Beirut Bar Association in November 2019 was the first success for the anti-establishment. Although Khalaf

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2022. Available at: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1298715/lebanese-forces-candidate-announces-withdrawal-from-list-in-bekaa-ii.html> (accessed 14 May 2022).

<sup>61</sup> Clement Gibon, 'Lebanon's Election Sees Political Vote Buying and Intimidation', *Al-Arabiya English*, 26 May 2022. Available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/05/26/Lebanon-s-election-sees-political-vote-buying-and-intimidation> (accessed 30 August 2022).

<sup>62</sup> Caroline Hayek, 'Firas Hamdan, a Bullet and Politics in the Heart', *L'Orient Today*, 23 May 2022. Available at: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1300492/firas-hamdan-a-bullet-and-politics-in-the-heart.html> (accessed 24 May 2022).

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Lairy Haytayan.

<sup>64</sup> Ibrahim Karkouti, 'The Legacy of Lebanon's October Revolution', *Fikra Forum*, 3 November 2022. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/legacy-lebanons-october-revolution> (accessed 24 October 2023).

announced his independent candidacy before *Thawrat Tishreen* started, his victory was welcomed by the protest movement. People believed that the winning of ‘an independent candidate, outside the traditional political class and cadres, is actually possible, and that this person would be able to present a unifying and inclusive image.’<sup>65</sup> Under Khalaf’s leadership, the association supported the uprising and defended detained protesters. And in the aftermath of the Beirut port blast, it championed the rights of the victims’ families and filed a lawsuit with four of the families against a London-based company that delivered the ammonium nitrate.<sup>66</sup> However, this successful experience did not materialise as political divisions and the absence of a unified opposition led to the victory of traditional parties in the association in 2021 and 2023. Khalaf argued that the emerging anti-establishment power should integrate and accumulate through frameworks that need to be established. But these were impeded by the COVID-19 lockdowns and Beirut port explosion, which eclipsed the association’s accomplishments during his presidency.<sup>67</sup>

In June 2021, al-Naqaba Tantafid (The Order Rises/Revolts), an anti-establishment coalition comprising of 20 groups, swept the majority of seats in the Order of Engineers and Architects elections, normally controlled by traditional parties.<sup>68</sup> Notwithstanding, the coalition was fragile and lasted around two days following the elections, having repercussions on other syndicate elections, such as the elections of the lawyers’ syndicate in 2021.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, Marianne Geagea, co-founder of Independent Engineers and Architects which was part of al-Naqaba Tantafid, stressed that the coalition was successful because of its representative diversity and ability to reach all types of groups, a model that could be adopted in all elections. She added that the coalition did not disintegrate but stopped being as active when its members became occupied with the 2022 parliamentary elections and could not commit to volunteering in the current economic crisis. ‘Al-Naqaba Tantafid was an electoral coalition that fulfilled its purpose when the elections ended. Those who won needed to uphold its mission from the inside.’<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, students’ political participation was not only on the streets. Secular and independent nominees won most of the seats in student council elections at the American University of Beirut, Lebanese American University, Rafik Hariri University and Université Saint Joseph in 2020.<sup>71</sup> As Verena El Amil, a youth activist who was active in student

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Melhem Khalaf, member of parliament and former president of the Beirut Bar Association, Beirut, 22 December 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Bassem Mroue, ‘British Court Orders Company to Compensate some Beirut Port Blast Victims’, *Independent*, 13 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ap-british-beirut-london-lebanon-b2356740.html> (accessed 14 June 2023).

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Melhem Khalaf.

<sup>68</sup> Tala Ramadan, ‘Opposition Topples Traditional Political Parties in Order of Engineers Elections’, *L’Orient Today*, 18 July 2021. Available at: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1268887/opposition-topples-traditional-political-parties-in-order-of-engineers-elections.html> (accessed 19 July 2021).

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Hussein El Achi.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Marianne Geagea, co-founder of Independent Engineers and Architects, via Zoom, 6 January 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Houshig Kaymakamian, ‘Lebanese Secular Groups Give Hope for Future with Student Election Wins’, *Al-Arabiya English*, 8 December 2020. Available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/12/08/Lebanon-crisis-Lebanese-secular-groups-give-hope-for-future-with-student-election-wins> (accessed 9 December 2020).



movements at her alma mater Université Saint Joseph and other universities and ran as a parliamentary candidate in 2022, contended:

To break a system, you must wage different battles to penetrate it, destroy it and then rebuild something better in its place. Among those battles are university elections, which are the most important, in my opinion [...] The main goal of university elections is to redefine politics, show the meaning of the politics we dream of in the country [...] and build a sense of citizenship [...] The youth are an indicator of where society is heading in a few years.<sup>72</sup>

But the protest movement did not translate into a victory at Notre Dame University, where the students affiliated with the Lebanese Forces achieved sweeping triumphs in recent years. El Amil, however, attributed this to the lack of diversity, independents and secular clubs on campus.<sup>73</sup> And unlike previous years, independents failed to secure any seats in the October 2023 student elections at both campuses of the Lebanese American University, putting the momentum of the protest movement to the test.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

Unlike previous protest movements and mobilisation cycles in recent years, the October 2019 protest movement in Lebanon was unique in terms of the unprecedented participation of different societal backgrounds, nationwide scope and lack of formal organisation. The protests also underscored the willingness of the Lebanese to coalesce around non-sectarian national interests. Protesters demanded abolishing the sectarian system and overthrowing those corrupt leaders who led the country into economic degradation. Political leaders, however, deployed overt and covert violence, repression, intimidation, counter-narratives and co-optation to thwart the protests that challenged their standing. The elites' counter-revolutionary responses along with decades of neopatrimonial networks and foreign intervention have made the regime resilient in the face of popular protests.

Regardless of these regime tactics and resilience, activists chose to organise politically and establish political parties to defy the system internally. Emerging political groups have achieved small but significant victories against the regime despite facing disagreements regarding their visions, approaches and ideologies, along with internal organisational and personality differences. The elections of independent and secular individuals in Parliament, syndicates and student councils give hope for bottom-up desectarianisation and political change in Lebanon, which are urgently needed amidst the financial meltdown and political vacuum. But it is still early to judge the long-term ramifications of the 2019 protest movement and ability of emerging groups to unite and change the system from within, and to see whether independents can achieve greater success in future elections. The fight against the resilient regime and its *zu'ama* will require time and concentrated efforts.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Verena El Amil, youth activist, via Zoom (12 September 2022).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> 'LAU Students Elections: Amal Claims Win on Beirut Campus, Lebanese Forces Take Victory in Jbeil', *L'Orient Today*, 7 October 2023. Available at: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1351748/lau-students-elections-amal-claims-win-on-beirut-campus-lebanese-forces-take-victory-in-jbeil.html> (accessed 12 December 2023).



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Protests in Beirut, October 2019.

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