A Path for Political Change in Lebanon? Lessons and Narratives from the 2018 Elections

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The latest Lebanese parliamentary elections took place a little over a year ago. In May 2018, eleven groups, comprised of 66 candidates (including 19 women) from independent and secular segments of civil society, formed a coalition called *Kulluna Watani* (we are all our nation) to challenge the hegemony of traditional political parties. Considering the increasing inefficiency and unaccountability of state institutions, and widespread public frustration with the performance of public institutions, one may have expected Lebanese voters to want to vote in a few fresh faces. Nonetheless, they overwhelmingly chose to re-elect the same parties and leaders. This paper examines why activists and progressive opposition groups who try to challenge entrenched sectarian politics have been failing. It analyses the institutional and repressive mechanisms, exercised by political elites, that determine patterns in voting behaviour and thwart the emergence of alternative forces. It also looks at shortcomings of political efforts by opposition groups and outlines recommendations for the future. The findings rely on fourteen original interviews with political activists conducted in December 2018 as well as a review of scholarship on sectarian politics.

**Entrenching Power: Lebanon’s Post War System**

Several of the main impediments to achieving political change in Lebanon lay in the foundations and *modus operandi* of its political system. The underpinnings of the power-sharing system (also known as confessionalism) date back to the late Ottoman period, when “sectarian identity [became] the only viable marker of political reform and the only authentic basis for political claims.” The National Pact of 1943 establishing the political foundations of the sectarian system turned out to be quite fragile. Periods of crises culminated in a 15-year civil war, which ended in a novel redistribution of power amongst sects through the 1989 Taef Accord. The Accord was mostly a deal between former warlords to trade their military fatigues for ministerial jobs. The former warlords then became the gatekeepers to access government jobs and services and, in the process, developed extensive clientelistic networks. These networks operated largely on a sectarian basis with each leader servicing “his” community. Business elites were closely allied to these networks and a new class of wealth grew around these
political leaders enabling them to distribute private sector jobs. The net outcome was that citizens were increasingly dependent on their leaders to obtain jobs, get hired by certain companies, or simply gain access to hospitals and schools.³

Political elites were not just content with using state resources to further their interests. They made sure that electoral laws and voting districts were designed in a way to favour traditional sectarian leaders and prevent the rise of cross-sectarian or secular movements.⁴ Each election would thus be preceded by a period of intensive bargaining between the traditional political leaders to ensure that the electoral law and the voting district boundaries would benefit them. In many ways, these negotiations often predetermined the outcome of elections.

In 2013, the existing political class could not agree on a new electoral law and ended up postponing elections for five years instead of risking elections under a law that would weaken their traditional hold on power. They finally came to an agreement in June 2017 and adopted a new electoral law which introduced for the first-time proportional representation in the 2018 elections.⁵

While in theory, the introduction of proportional representation should have allowed new parties to enter the fray, in practice, Lebanon’s complicated new law further entrenched sectarian politics. As some commentators wrote at the time, the law’s “soul is majoritarian, and its districts are crafted according to a political and sectarian calculus.”⁶

Sectarian gerrymandering reaches new heights under the new law. Major constituencies are clearly drawn along sectarian demographics, which all but guarantees getting homogeneous sectarian political blocks. For instance, Beirut was comprised of two electoral districts rather than the traditional three, thus dividing the capital into predominantly Christian East Beirut and Muslim West Beirut – bringing back memories of the infamous line of demarcation that symbolizes the civil war. In addition, the law did nothing to curb abusive behaviour by traditional parties as it failed to create an independent electoral commission or impose adequate limits on campaign spending.

Instead of being used to increase representation and reduce the salience of sectarian politics, the 2017 electoral law should instead be understood as part of
political elites’ toolbox of mechanisms to consolidate power. Indeed, what made the law so appealing to politicians is that, on the surface, it could be branded as a proportional representation law, but the discussed mechanisms make it more of a one-man-one-vote, majoritarian system with some symbolic proportionality.\(^\text{7}\)

**Resistance to the System Intensifies: The Re-emergence of Collective Action**

Various groups tried to mobilize against the crony elites and their clientelistic system over the years. In the early post-war period (1990s), such mobilization was mainly led by the labour union movement and continued with a wide range of collective actions led by various civil society groups. Authors note several key junctures that shape mobilization efforts in the aftermath of the war: the assassination of former PM Rafic Hariri in 2005, the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, and the 2015 garbage protests. Harb identifies three types of political engagement that mark this period: i) ‘conformist’ organizing, within which people privilege their sectarian belonging; ii) ‘alternative’ NGOs that provide services and fill gaps the state fails to meet, and iii) ‘progressive” activism where organizers privilege loose organising centred on progressive and radical issues.\(^\text{8}\) The latter group marks a “shift from the formal venues of ‘old’ opposition parties and civil society groups,” and relies on “more horizontal ways of engagement, with multiple leaders and loose organisational systems, where social media play an important role in communication and decision-making”.

We start seeing the seeds of this new form of mobilization in the collective action that organized in 2006, with Samidoun, a large grassroots solidarity movement which provided relief support to the thousands of displaced who came to Beirut escaping Israeli attacks on their homes in Dahiya and South Lebanon. Samidoun worked across sectarian lines, and operated as a network of activists grouping progressive political groups, environmentalists, students, as well as the LGBTQ community.\(^\text{9}\) Onwards to 2011, when Arab uprisings began, thousands of citizens took to the streets, demanding to overthrow the sectarian regime.\(^\text{10}\) Although the movement was short-lived and could not attract the critical mass needed to effect any tangible change, it reinvigorated Lebanese civil society and set the stage for
numerous direct action initiatives to emerge in years to come. In summer 2015, protests against the government for its inability to resolve a re-emerging waste-management crisis mobilized around 100,000 people at its peak, as huge amounts of trash flooded Beirut’s streets.¹¹ The movement, also known as al-Harak, explicitly called out the system for its failures to provide citizens with basic public services despite accumulating the third largest debt to GDP ratio in the world, and denounced its corruption. Protestors demanded political reforms, elections, accountability and social justice. However, the movement gradually faded away, largely due to violent police repression and to efforts by the political elites to undermine the movement by infiltrating its meetings, claiming that protestors are being violent, and attacking it in the media.¹² Still, what distinguished these new forms of mobilization was their cross-sectarian and overwhelmingly anti-establishment character that rejected all political elites, demonstrating that a new generation of political activists was visibly consolidating and was keen on pursuing its organizing work.

Some of that energy continued in the 2016 Beirut Madinati (“Beirut is my City”) municipal campaign which, although unsuccessful, had significantly rekindled hopes for change as the group came close to defeating an opposing list of candidates backed by some of the country’s strongest political parties.¹³ Beirut Madinati sets an important precedent for anti-sectarian groups, and encouraged new ones to form and participate in the 2018 parliamentary elections. For the first time in Lebanon’s modern history, a national coalition named of Kulluna Watani (we are all our nation) comprised of 66 candidates from 11 independent civil society groups (including 30% women) and running in 9 of the 15 electoral districts formed to challenge the hegemony of traditional parties and leaders. While they revived some sense of hope amongst the middle class, reality proved to be complicated and frustrating as Kulluna Watani only managed to win one seat. The real winners were the traditional political parties which won 103 out of the 128 seats.

The “Dirty Campaigns” of Traditional Sectarian Parties
Aided by a carefully crafted electoral law and a clientelistic political economy, political elites have been managing to squash most mobilization attempts over the years, and/or co-opt them by integrating members of these movements into their ranks or outright buying their loyalty. They also elaborated a range of repressive practices to ensure that citizens do not “forget” their loyalty during election time. One of the most explicit of such practices pertains to vote buying and voters’ intimidation. During campaigning seasons, parties deploy their *makanat* (machines), which are comprised of various *mafath* (keys), operating in specific neighbourhoods. A *muhfah* (singular for *mafath*) is typically a well-connected member of a political party in charge of swaying voters. A *muhfah* gets in touch with families in the neighbourhood and either reminds them of the services they received (such as a relative obtaining a government job) or distributes payments or services to supporters while noting down the names of defectors or opponents. Essentially, *mafath* are parties’ eyes and ears on the ground, and the linchpins of their success at the grassroots level. The party’s *makana* (singular for *makanat*) is the overarching apparatus that counts voters, draws up lists, maps neighbourhoods, and oversees this process. As one of my interlocutors, a *Kulluna Watani* activist, noted: “The *makana* divides the city into neighbourhoods and they know who each person is going to vote for. Each person gets a service [in exchange]. They divide people into loyalists and defectors. The ones who won’t vote for them will either be offered a service [to lure them into voting for them], or scared and intimidated.”

The job of enforcing and verifying how people vote used to be easier prior to 2018, as Lebanon had no pre-printed ballots. *Makanat* would thus distribute their own ballots to voters and use “marking” tactics, such as listing candidates in an order that would distinguish ballots from each other and would enable them to verify if individuals and families voted as they had pledged. While this tactic could no longer be implemented with the pre-printed ballots that were introduced in 2018, *makanat* devised new ways for identifying defectors. For instance, party representatives would keep track of the order of families entering voting centres, which helped them identify defecting families during vote count. As such, *makanat* have a solid reputation of omniscience, which leads many voters to fear the social and material repercussions of getting caught if they do not demonstrate their allegiance through voting.
Traditional parties also rely on a range of tactics to instil fear in voters. They claimed that Li-Baladi (“For my Country” – a Kulluna Watani group which ran in the Beirut 1 district) candidates would not be able to defend “Christians’ interests.” An interviewed candidate recalled how the Orthodox church, in alliance with other Christian actors in the area, labelled him a “leftist,” which has specific implications and historical connotations within the Christian-majority part of the city. A “leftist” denotes a member of the Lebanese National Movement – a front comprised of various pan-Arab leftists who allied with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) against right-wing Christian groups during the civil war. In other words, being branded “leftist” was dissociated from leftist economic or political views to signal an anti-Christian position.

Another example comes from a Li-Baladi candidate who reported that the muftah of a prominent party proudly boasted that “the price of a vote is $500,” while noting that he “personally prevented providing medical treatment for an undecided voter until the patient agreed to vote for them.” Indeed, swaying voters does not only occur through direct payments, but also relies on exploiting people’s vulnerabilities and dependencies on basic services. When I asked one of my interviewees which parties engaged in such practices, the answer was: “Literally everyone. These are tactics that each party’s makana employs.”

Internal Shortcomings: Nascent Groups and Disorganized Structures

Despite the systemic barriers, repressive practices, and fraudulent behaviour, all the political activists who had participated in the Kulluna Watani campaign believed political change was still possible through elections. They recognized that the “dirty tactics” were an imposing hurdle but felt the negative electoral outcomes were also due to internal shortcomings and failures to organize and mobilize strategically. They noted how time was wasted in arguments over alliances and list-formation as opposed to focusing on developing a common agenda or campaigning locally. According to some, independent groups “fell into the trap of wanting to unite civil society,” resulting in a coalition lacking a clear identity and political vision, with candidates having very little in common. Another
interlocutor noted what he termed “two major strategic disasters” in the coalition’s experience: one was the inability to form lists that could challenge the dominance of Hizballah and Amal parties in their strongholds; the other was the self-interested priorities of some candidates, which led to divisions in the coalition and ultimately the loss of what they thought was a quasi-guaranteed seat for independents in the district of Mount Lebanon 4 (Chouf-Aley).15

A main internal shortcoming of most Kulluna Watani groups laid, however, in the ineffective campaigning at the grassroots level. As one Li-Baladi member notes: “The process of selecting and vetting candidates was ridiculous. We spent so much time arguing over all of these matters and forgot to talk to people. We weren’t present on the ground!”

Nevertheless, many of my interlocutors singled out Li-Haqqi (“For my Rights” – a Kulluna Watani group which ran in the Mount Lebanon 4 district), as operating differently:

We tried to unite civil society and it was messy because candidates ended up having nothing in common. We even imposed unpopular candidates on the constituencies of certain districts… The reason why Li-Haqqi had such a relatively great performance is that they were a grassroots-driven campaign run by genuine members of the community who took matters into their own hands and imposed their will on traditional parties.

I was able to verify this quality through my interviews. Recognizing that it lacked the funds to obtain exposure through mainstream media, Li-Haqqi members committed instead to an organic outreach and recruitment strategy that operated via a door-to-door and word-of-mouth approach. One of their candidates noted they had personally visited more than 100 villages in the sub-districts of Chouf and Aley during the electoral campaign. The group also strongly relied on social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, which enabled it to build a following progressively, ultimately reaching 1,000 volunteers at its peak. Moreover, Li-Haqqi’s internal organization privileged participatory methods and a horizontal decision-making structure. Their members selected parliamentary candidates.
through an internal voting process. Similarly, all decision-making followed this democratic process. As such, Li-Haqqi’s defining features are its grassroots and participatory structure. One member noted that their mission was to “redefine the political discourse and the arena where electoral battles are waged.”

Li-Haqqi’s programme is comprised of 10 points, each focusing on a rights-based issue. For them, basic rights and services should not be a luxury or a clientelistic favour that citizens (re)pay for through allegiance to a sectarian patron. They want to forge a different type of bond with citizens, as one of their members told me: “What brings votes is being directly in touch with the people. Being on the ground is a lot more impactful than any politician speaking on television. It’s a matter of trust and human connection.”

**Li-Haqqi’s Campaign: Building Community Against Harsh Realities**

Despite amassing the largest number of votes amongst Kulluna Watani’s eleven groups, Li-Haqqi did not obtain a seat in parliament as it fell approximately 3,000 votes short in its districts of Aley and Chouf. The failure raises important questions. Could Li-Haqqi have overcome the “dirty campaign” that they had to face?

I was told the story of a Li-Haqqi member’s father who was expelled from his job after his employer’s business received threats from strongmen affiliated to the Druze party in power in the region, the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). Li-Haqqi members tried to intercede with the employer, to no avail, as the latter was too scared that his business would be at risk should he rehire the father. Another story concerns the mother of yet another Li-Haqqi supporter whose peers kept on pressuring her verbally not to support her son’s political platform and to vote instead for the PSP she had been loyal to for decades. I was told the harassment was occurring daily and was so stressful that she implored her son not to vote for the group he rallies because her social status and “survival within her community” were directly associated with her loyalty to her peers and party.

Another major strategy favoured by political elites and their supporters pertains to voting fraud. On election day, Li-Haqqi had 350 delegates in Chouf-Aley voting
centres – more than any other independent group – reflecting well its ability to engage with citizens at the grassroots level. Despite this presence, numerous violations seemed to have been committed during vote-counting. According to an interlocutor who operated in a voting centre in Aley, ballots were being counted in the absence of the judge, and when ballot boxes were received after hours, at 4am, from unknown sources, the judge requested the delegates to start the counting over. By 6am, Li-Haqqi delegates had counted approximately 11,500 votes in their favour and had many more ballots still to count. At that point, the judge, who is believed to be affiliated to a sectarian political party, asked the delegates to take a break and reconvene at 9am. When they returned, official results had already been released, and Li-Haqqi votes numbered only 9,987. The number of votes needed to obtain a seat in parliament was 13,126. When objections were made to the judge, Li-Haqqi was told to file a complaint with the Constitutional Council, the body that oversees electoral disputes. In total, 53 objections were filed at the Aley centre, yet none of them was addressed. Rumours go that a deal was struck between the PSP and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) between 6am and 9am, whereby each one would get a (stolen) seat: one from Li-Haqqi and the other from Wi’am Wahhab’s list that obtained 12,796 votes. Verifying whether these claims are true or not is practically impossible. In the end, the lists headed by the PSP and the FPM ended up splitting the 13 parliamentary seats (9 and 4, respectively).

Lessons Learned: Reorganizing for New Battles

While elections results are certainly disappointing for Kulluna Watani and those who hope to change Lebanon’s politics, and the strategies deployed by sectarian political players can induce helplessness, the elections themselves seem to have provided valuable lessons and consolidated political maturity within anti-sectarian opposition groups. In my interviews, I asked activists to reflect on the strategies they consider to be the most promising to oppose sectarian elites going forward. Some people on the radical left consider that real change will never occur from within the system, given the inherently flawed governance structure, and that participating in elections is a useless enterprise. Most interlocutors who belonged to the Kulluna Watani coalition disagreed and thought this binary is
dangerous, noting that citizens are a part of the system, whether they like it or not. For a Li-Haqqi member, regardless of the arena where battles against the system are waged (elections or the streets), the ultimate objective identified as social justice is the same: “When people go down to the streets, they don’t expect to topple the system. They know it takes time and that they have to go vote in a few months.” Indeed, claiming to want to induce change from “the outside” implies that one can afford being outside of the system. Many activists perceived this position as a self-righteous stance usually coming from a position of privilege or obliviousness and highlighted that political change may take years or decades to come and defined their role as working towards incremental change.

My interlocutors agree that a main impediment to developing successful oppositional politics is reducing people’s material dependencies on elites to access basic services and jobs. With 1.5 million Lebanese citizens living below the poverty line, in addition to inefficient public services, reliance on patronage is paramount. Some argue that people who could afford to vote for Kulluna Watani were the ones financially independent, those who did not face risks of being ostracized or threatened by their communities, and who were not co-opted by the business networks of elites. How to address and challenge this clientelistic structure is a key disagreement within members of opposition groups. Some think that they cannot and should not attempt to and prefer instead to focus their initial efforts on rallying the middle classes who are relatively independent financially from sectarian leaders.

Other activists think that the “middle-class approach” would merely allow opposition groups to gain a handful of seats in parliament, as most of the voting age population is either poor or employed in the public sector. As one interlocutor pointed: “If none of these people are voting for you, then what kind of opposition movement are you?”

One way to counter or reduce the impact of the rampant clientelistic networks is for opposition groups to focus on creating solidarity networks at the grassroots level that can operate as alternatives to the traditional services distributed by sectarian parties. Communities must materially and emotionally support each other to fill the vacuum left by the state. By progressively establishing trust and solidarity, a stronger movement can emerge, organically. A Li-Haqqi supporter
shared that she would have never voted for them had she not experienced a sense of political agency as a result of being included in their participatory structure and engaged in the decision-making process. Indeed, the sense of belonging and empowerment establishes trust in political alternatives and lays strong foundations for a durable anti-sectarian movement to consolidate.

Another area worth exploring is the possibility to develop counterstrategies to the sectarian fearmongering narratives of sectarian elites. Many activists noted that it is essential to voice alternative political narratives and imaginaries, responsive to concrete issues of socio-economic, environmental and civil rights. The issue is how to achieve this. In 2018, many groups such as Li-Haqqi tried, and it would be worth exploring whether these discourses managed to overcome the fearmongering. Effective political mobilizing could be achieved by forging common interests and causes like re-distributional justice, fighting corruption, radical environmentalism, accountability, and inclusive economic development. Considering that 2018 represented the first concrete efforts to organize under these new forms of mobilization, a framework based on horizontalism may be worth investing in further.

Nonetheless, a main barrier to organizing remains scarce resources – financial and human. Challenging the hegemony of sectarian political groups requires matching the long-established networks of their makanat, which demands concerted resources that no independent group currently has. Many activists and most candidates have full-time jobs and cannot afford to be full-time political actors who can invest the time and efforts needed to develop grassroots solidarity networks. While sectarian parties have “parasited” state resources and/or extracted capital through various local and transnational sources, anti-sectarian groups struggle to make their ends meet. Many candidates of Kulluna Watani are in debt because they could not afford financing their electoral campaigns.

The open question is whether local groups can overcome this organizational challenge by investing in community building and informal networks. Li-Haqqi’s experience is encouraging in this regard. The strong sense of community it built enabled it to continue its organizing work even after members returned to their jobs. Members still find time to contribute to mobilizing efforts and support each other to make this happen. The participatory and decentralized structure of the
group seems to play a key role in sustaining its operations even without funds. The challenge is whether this decentralized approach with its emphasis on community can be scaled up to broader regions or even nationally. Those hoping for change in Lebanon have three more years to try to explore and test new approaches before the next election. At least, 2018 has given them a clearer sense of what they are up against.
Endnotes

1. This essay is based on my thesis defended at Amherst College in April 2019, which can be accessed at the following link: academia.edu


13. Due to the majoritarian nature of the municipal electoral system, Beirut Madinati’s 30,000 votes (approximately a third of total votes) did not secure the group any seats in the capital’s council. For a detailed breakdown of results, see: monthlymagazine.com.


15. The leading candidate of the independent Madaniya list refused to ally with Kulluna Watani.

16. The right to: i) a civil and impartial state, ii) a healthy environment, iii) comprehensive health care, iv) high quality education, v) a productive and just economy, vi) a decent job, vii) adequate and affordable housing, viii) equality, civil rights and personal freedoms, ix) effective, transparent and non-sectarian public institutions, and x) basic public services. A detailed Arabic-version of the program can be found at: lihaqqi.org.
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