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# Lebanon's Student Movement: A New Political Player?

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Students of Secular Club of the American University of Beirut (AUB) hold banner reading in Arabic 'education right for all' during a protest in front AUB building in Beirut, Lebanon, 29 December 2020. © EPA-EFE/NABIL MOUNZER



## I. Introduction

Lebanon's independent student groups – composed of groups opposed to traditional political parties – made headlines in late 2020, after successful electoral campaigns for student councils across a handful of private universities. One year after the October 2019 uprising swept the cash-strapped country against its traditional sectarian parties, these unaffiliated student political groups campaigned on the basis of reclaiming student councils from the traditional political parties that have dominated campus elections for decades.<sup>1</sup> These electoral victories were part of a reinvigorated student movement unaffiliated to Lebanon's sectarian political parties, and paved the way for establishing like-minded student groups on other campuses as well as tight-knit coordinating and movement-building initiatives between students across the country.

This paper examines the significance of these student elections and the renewed mobilization of the student body. It contextualizes this mobilization within a longer history of student activism in the country and how the country's sectarian political parties were able to successfully dominate campus politics through extending their patronage networks to students in exchange for political loyalty.

While some alternative political student groups had been active for some time, this paper finds that the October 2019 uprising galvanized this movement and accelerated the process of expanding the capacity and support base of these groups, as well as their networking across different universities. The uprising and the deteriorating situation in the country also influenced these groups to further incorporate national issues into their organizations' priorities. In a short amount of time, they have also built bridges with new anti-establishment political parties and have gained visibility notably through new grassroots media outlets.

While these independent student groups have strengthened their cooperation on and off campus – and in some cases, are even working within the same network – they retain many differences that pertain to their ideology, their perspective of political independence, and their priority areas. So far, this has not prevented them from working together.



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Despite their recent growth, these independent student groups in Lebanon still face many of the same obstacles that hampered their development in the past. Different student groups face threats and harassment by partisans of traditional parties, while others face extra hurdles to develop their organizations on campus due to censorship and restrictions by university administration when it comes to forming political groups. On top of this, Lebanese traditional and sectarian political parties continue to use their patronage networks to consolidate their presence on campuses.

What Lebanon's independent student groups do next will be crucial. In a relatively brief period, they have moved beyond their respective campuses to address broader issues such as education and unemployment across the country, and have taken active positions on national issues. Their presence in a wider range of universities is encouraging though their ability to mobilize at Lebanon's only public university – where the sectarian parties clientelist networks are powerful -- remains an open question.

Lebanon's municipal and national elections scheduled for 2022, and independent student groups can now play an important role in supporting candidates taking on the country's ruling political parties. Even though they cannot vote until aged 21, their growing membership and experience in campaigning and political organizing increases the otherwise limited capacity of independent political parties, whether as individuals or through their national networks.

## II. Methodology

The findings of this paper are primarily based on seven focus group discussions with 39 students from seven independent student groups that took part in elections at four private universities in Lebanon: the Secular Club and Change Starts Here at the American University of Beirut (AUB), independent students from the Lebanese American University's two campuses in Beirut and Byblos, Taleb and the independents at the Saint Joseph University (USJ), and the Renaissance Initiative at the Rafic Hariri University.

The participants were selected to be inclusive with regards to gender, age, faculty, and where the students came from. The average student participant was 20 years



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old and in their third year of university. 41% of the total participants were females.

The questions asked in the focus group discussions were aimed to have a better understanding of students' individual motivations to become politically active on campus, in addition to their perception of the October 2019 popular uprising, the Beirut Port explosion and the ongoing economic crisis. In addition, the focus group discussions delved into the independent student groups' relationships with traditional political parties on campus and other independent and opposition parties both on and off campus, as well as the obstacles they face in organizing and campaigning. Finally, the students in the focus group discussions reflected on their understanding of political independence, the role of student groups in wider political change in Lebanon, and what the next steps ought to be for student groups across the country.

The authors held eight key informant interviews with former student activists, independent student activists from Lebanon's public university, and representatives from independent political parties that have engaged with university students.

Lastly, to historically contextualize the recent developments with independent student groups, the authors conducted thorough desk research of local media and existing literature of student mobilizations and elections in Lebanon.

### III. Historical Context

Student movements were not always bound by sectarian politics, and in the years prior to the civil war in 1975, were forceful actors in the Lebanese political field. During that period, students represented an integral part of the emerging current of oppositional politics in the country,<sup>2</sup> with demands extending beyond campus and country borders.

In 1950, high school and university students, mostly from the AUB and Saint Joseph University, organized mass protests calling for the establishment of the public Lebanese University. This movement perceived a national university as an institution that legitimized Lebanon's independence, and as a step towards increasing access to education, especially for the poorer social classes that had no

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alternative to expensive private universities.<sup>3</sup> After the government rejected their calls, students called for a massive protest on 2 February 1951, where thousands of students, professors, and others rallied. The security forces responded with violence, beating student protesters and using live ammunition. As a result of the student mobilization in 1951, the creation of the Lebanese University was announced but not formally founded until 1959. Even then, the national university still lacked sufficient institutions and resources to secure free education for all. The student movement reached its climax in 1962, with strikes and protests sweeping the streets and calling for the achievement of the necessary reforms and budget allocations for the Lebanese University. Some of the most important demands included buying official land for the university, and the calls were eventually answered in 1965.<sup>4</sup>

Following the end of the Six-Day War in 1967, students started to mobilize around political issues occurring outside Lebanon. This revolutionary wave of student activism perceived national governments and university administrations as similar authoritarian entities that needed to be challenged. Many students during that time “posited a wholesale rejection of older authorities in favour of new ones proposing revolutionary plans”.<sup>5</sup> A survey of students at Lebanese universities in the early 1970s by sociologist Halim Barakat discovered that this left-wing wave of student mobilization wanted “to change the whole network of structures and value orientations”, and liberate humanity from “domination, exploitation, and deprivation”.<sup>6</sup> The students called for guaranteeing the return of Palestinian refugees to their homeland, on the one hand, while also calling for overthrowing authoritarian governments in the region, on the other.<sup>7</sup> In his history of student politics in Lebanon, Makram Rabah cites the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the ensuing Palestinian revolution as the two external factors that catalyzed student activism on campus.<sup>8</sup> In parallel, students continued to demand the reform of the education system as a way to address the glaring economic discrepancies in society. At the core of their movements were students’ rights and student equality, insisting on better representation in academic institutions.<sup>9</sup>

This significant momentum waned with the start of Lebanon’s 15-year civil war in 1975. By 1977, Education Minister As’ad Rizk issued decrees 115 and 122, effectively abolishing student councils and student participation in the Lebanese

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University's decision-making processes. Back in its prime, the student movement in Lebanon earned the students an institutional voice. With sectarian tensions mounting, the student movement disintegrated.

After the end of the civil war in 1990, only a small percentage of youth retained independent left-wing political leanings outside traditional parties, while the majority veered towards the country's sectarian leaders of the civil war. For example, campus politics became an important space for mobilization for youth supporters of two rival Christian parties, Lebanese Forces (LF) and Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), as the parties' leadership were imprisoned and exiled respectively. However, this period witnessed also inter-sectarian youth alliances over common causes. The FPM and LF, alongside independent leftist groups and supporters of Druze-led Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), were key organizers and mobilizers for the 2005 protests against the Syrian occupation, some of the largest protests in the country's history.

Though Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon, the post-2005 era revealed a deepening of factional and sectarian divisions between youth who opted to support one of the two major parties or coalitions – the pro-West March 14 coalition or the pro-Syria March 8 coalition. This period “politicized a generation of young people, many of whom had never been involved in politics before”<sup>10</sup>, but were primarily part of the different parties of the ruling elite.

This polarization manifested itself at the level of student elections in universities which developed into a “testing ground” for the popularity of traditional political parties among the youth as they prepared for national elections.<sup>11</sup> Dr Bassel Salloukh, associate professor of political science at the Lebanese American University, told the Arab Reform Initiative that the traditional political parties exploit student elections to strengthen their constituencies, and to maintain political mobilization along sectarian lines. “From the perspective of political parties, I think student elections were used to project power and relevance,” Dr Salloukh said. “But the other thing is to fish out for new recruits and to mobilize or incentivize an identity which is the sectarian identity.”

Traditional political parties tried to strengthen their legitimacy and presence on campus by creating youth wings and distributing patronage to university



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students.<sup>12</sup>) For example, while external financing of student groups is strictly prohibited at AUB, political parties at times invested thousands of dollars to fund their student campaigns.<sup>13</sup> They would gift loyalists free textbooks, copies of past exams, parking passes, stationary, mobile phones, among other things.<sup>14</sup> These gifts and services were used to incentivize supporting traditional political parties on campus and voting for them in student elections. As a result, this reproduced the status quo of Lebanese politics, and limited the students' opportunity and ability to immerse themselves in critical and tolerant political discourse both on and off-campus.

In parallel, some groups began to organize as an alternative to the sectarian parties notably the Secular Club at the American University of Beirut, which was founded in 2008 to “mobilize around a rejuvenated form of secular political opposition in Lebanon.”<sup>15</sup>) Their anti-sectarian slogans and positions built on a growing resentment of the sectarian political representation and the clientelist campaigning tactics and sought to challenge the existing political rhetoric that dominated campus. Over time, like-minded student groups on other campuses would campaign against the sectarian status quo as well, though they often were hesitant of being overtly political in their work.

By the summer of 2015, when a waste management crisis sparked a wave of anti-government protests, students in large numbers were present in the squares. The following summer, the newly formed political parties Beirut Madinati and Citizens in a State (*Muwatinun wa Muwatinat fi Dawla*) ran in separate lists against the traditional parties in an unsuccessful attempt to win the Beirut municipal elections.

During that period, more student groups against the status quo began to form alternative political groups that were not only invested in their campus but also in national issues and that routinely communicated with similar-minded groups on other campuses. At AUB, students formed the communist Red Oak Club, which – unlike the Secular Club – would boycott the student elections. There was also the Alternative Student Movement at the Lebanese American University and *Safha Bayda* (*A Blank Page*) at Saint Joseph University. At the public Lebanese University, students successfully mobilized to overturn a decision to introduce new student fees in 2014, though no anti-establishment organizations were set up. However,



feminist students formed Radical at the public university, and organized occasional talks and discussions. But most of their work appeared to be off campus, supporting women's and migrants' rights groups and other student organizations on other campuses.

It was not until 2017 that students and campus groups unaffiliated with Lebanon's traditional political parties established a formal network. That September, students from the American University of Beirut and Saint Joseph University's Secular Clubs launched the Mada network, with the support of alumni and individual students from other campuses. This student-led political network aims at integrating youth into the political, social, and economic scene in Lebanon. One of its key goals in 2017 was to form a "student contract" to prevent ad hoc and unregulated tuition fee hikes.

## IV. Analysis and Findings

### 1. The significance of the October 17 uprising in galvanizing students

The October 17 uprising was a pivotal event that politically mobilized university students in Lebanon. It came at a critical moment in recent Lebanese history. The value of the Lebanese lira, pegged to the US dollar since 1997, began to collapse.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the panic at the banks that soon ensued, there had already been sporadic protests over soaring unemployment and high costs of living for the past year.<sup>17</sup>

The uprising sparked a unique breakthrough from previous years of organizing and mobilizing among university students. Not only did the uprising mobilize and galvanize wider segments of Lebanese youth, including some who had not been politically involved before, but it also drove a significant number of students to abandon traditional political parties and, in some cases, join independent groups that challenge the Lebanese status quo. The uprising also provided new spaces for movement-building with student groups organizing protests and marches in coordination with other campus groups and broader civil society, holding public



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discussions about economic and political issues in places like Azarieh in downtown Beirut or Nour Square in Tripoli, ultimately bridging campus and national issues on a far larger scale than before.

80% of the students that took part in the focus group discussions organized by the Arab Reform Initiative said that they were involved in the uprising, either as individuals or as organizers and volunteers with existing student groups like the AUB Secular Club. The uprising itself seems to have encouraged students to join independent groups. Almost 54% of the students in this discussion joined their respective student group during or following 17 October 2019. This was especially the case at Lebanese American University Byblos, where most of the students at the discussion did not join their groups until the uprising. Even the few students that did not take part in protests said that the uprising played a role in inspiring them to join student groups and becoming politically active. This was particularly the case during the focus group discussions at Rafic Hariri University.

20% of the students in the focus group discussions were previously partisan or sympathetic to a traditional political party in Lebanon but had since ended their affiliation. Most of them are members of AUB's Change Starts Here and USJ's Independents. Both these groups present more politically moderate leanings compared to their collectively more progressive counterparts at the AUB Secular Club and Saint Joseph University Taleb. 49% of students of all the interviewed students believe that more of their peers have been disassociating from traditional political parties since the uprising and supporting political alternatives, and 51% believe that students have become more politically engaged.

Not only has membership in independent student groups skyrocketed, but also one of the independent student groups that took part in the discussion was formally established following the uprising. For example, Rafic Hariri University's independent student group was set up in January 2021, over one year after the uprising, while the students from AUB's Change Starts Here say their group "was born from the womb of the revolution."

These developments appear to come organically within the student groups themselves. Just over 20% of all the interviewed students are part of an independent political party or campaign, including Beirut Madinati, Citizens in a



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State, and Li Haqqi. This shows that the growth of political student groups unaffiliated with the country's traditional parties was organic, and not a product of the country's newly created independent political parties. Independent political parties have relied on student groups to inform them about issues related to students and young adults, most notably access to education and employment. This relationship is further explored in the next section.

The students' active involvement in the uprising has also influenced them to further incorporate national issues into their organizations. This is a stark difference from previous years, where AUB's Secular Club was the primary student group to consistently do this. 69% of all students in the focus group discussions believe to varying degrees that their key demands must include issues that go beyond their respective college campuses. While they include topics that apply to students such as affordable education, funding the public Lebanese University, and unemployment, some students have also mentioned human rights issues related to migrant workers, refugees, LGBTQ+ and women. Others have called for even wider structural reforms, such as establishing a civil state rather than one built on confessional allocations, and electoral reform for fairer national elections.

Most students in the focus groups believe that the issues they immediately face as students are linked to Lebanon's wider issues. One said that it would be "elitist" to assume otherwise. The key difference between interviewees was not about the importance of the national issues but rather if such issues should be an immediate priority for student groups. All the students interviewed from AUB Secular Club believe in prioritizing national issues in their activism. "We won't be students forever," one said. Some other groups believe in incorporating both student and national issues in their work. For example, students from Rafic Hariri University campaign against tuition hikes and for greater political freedoms on campus, while also communicating with unions and other off campus groups to work on national issues, such as the economic crisis, corruption, and lack of transparency with public resources. One common goal among the different groups is to create more spaces for political activism and engagement on campus, which they believe is something their administrations severely restrict them from doing and hinders their ability to grow in membership.

In addition, grassroots and activist media channels, many operating solely through



social media channels, grew both in popularity and capacity during the uprising, discussing current events through an anti-sectarian and anti-establishment lens. This is a far cry from the country's mainstream media, which is partisan to traditional parties. Channels like Megaphone have covered student elections, and shed light on the politically independent groups, exposing them to tens of thousands of viewers both in Lebanon and abroad.

Kareem Safieddine, a member of the AUB Secular Club when he was a student and now with Mada, says these new channels played an essential role in increasing support for these politically independent student groups, especially as traditional media has often ignored or sometimes vilified these new groups. "It is crucial because of the general hype, credibility, [and] legitimacy it creates [for the groups]," Safieddine explained.

## 2. **Emerging Parties' Relations to New Student Groups**

The new political parties that emerged or built support through the uprising have not extended their influence into campuses the way traditional parties have. In interviews with the Arab Reform Initiative, Li Haqqi and Citizens in a State indicated that while they have some members who are also university students, they see student groups as independent entities that they communicate with and not extensions of their own parties.

Some independent parties have endorsed or promoted independent student lists, but did not play a role in shaping them. For example, Li Haqqi has a committee dedicated to students, which aims to integrate students' grievances and issues into their overall policy. The National Bloc, a traditional political party that restructured itself and aligned itself with the popular uprising, have supported independent student candidates during the last student elections; and on March 25, 2021, they announced the formation of their own committee for youth and students in a publicized conference.<sup>18</sup>



This makes it further evident that the student groups' successful campus elections campaigns were not simply extensions or by-products of the pro-uprising political parties and groups; they are their partners.

### 3. **Perceptions of Political Change and Political Independence**

In addition to their increase in membership following October 2019, the members of student groups have changed their perceptions of political change and what it means to be politically independent

Students almost unanimously recognized a shift in how they perceived political independence, which they say was previously seen as being apolitical and inactive. When asked about how they define being politically independent today, 26% of students in the focus group discussions said it meant being politically independent from Lebanon's ruling parties, another 26% said it meant being politically engaged and "aware" with self-determined positions and views, and 10% said it meant backing an alternative party or platform.

Some of the remaining students were unsure how they would best define being politically independent, while others associated it with anti-sectarianism, accountability and transparency, anti-corruption, supporting human and minority rights, and adopting politically progressive views.

However, despite the many common principles these students share within their groups, there are also ideological differences in some of these spaces. Most students in the discussion groups agreed that their respective groups are not built on a unified ideology; they either see their group as a heterogenous alliance that is bound by the same goals and principles. For example, one student from USJ's Independents admitted that he does not oppose a government system based on sectarian quotas, but believes in reforming it to be more inclusive and functional, while another believes that all independent student groups ought to be politically progressive and secular. In fact, a student at LAU's Beirut campus believes that



several of the students in his group would in fact compete against one-another, should they run for national elections in the future. Despite being able to coexist and cooperate together despite their differences, some student groups say that their members must strictly adhere to their core values, which for example prohibit racism and misogyny.

This trend in changing perceptions among politically independent students appears to be internal and organic, without significant external influence. Only 20% of students interviewed at one point or another were active with an independent political party or campaign, most of them being with Mada, a grassroots student and youth network. Other students primarily were involved as volunteers for charity campaigns and the Lebanese Red Cross, while others spent time in associations related to their hobbies and aspired career professions.

The students' upbringing played a relatively small role in influencing their political views. Just over 38% of students said that their parents influenced their views, whether ideologically or through their resentment of the country's ruling class and political parties. However, almost two-thirds of these students said they were not influenced by their families and upbringing, or were actively encouraged to be apolitical and disengaged from political activities. This ultimately shows that the increased number of unaffiliated students choosing to become politically active rather than remain apolitical is of their own volition.

#### **4. Not All Campuses Are Created Equal: Censorship, Threats and Partisan Loyalties**

Despite the recent surge in the growth of independent student group membership and recent electoral successes, independent student groups in Lebanon face significant obstacles and difficulties in organizing and campaigning. Each private university campus comes with its own unique experiences in terms of the administration-student body relationship; however, the seven different student groups that took part in the focus group discussions have faced relatively similar



obstacles.

The two most frequently noted obstacles mentioned by the students were their respective campus administrations and being on the receiving end of slander, threats, and harassment. When it comes to conflict with campus administrations, the AUB Secular Club says their administration intervenes in the student council by censoring them. At one point, student clubs needed approval from the university's Office of Student Affairs before publishing a post on social media. As a response, the Secular Club issued a statement with 13 signatories, both student groups in AUB and on other campuses, requesting a clarification about the direct social media monitoring and censoring "in the pursuit of preserving what's left of our democracy".<sup>19</sup> Other groups have said that their administrations are partisans to Lebanon's ruling parties. For example, students from Rafic Hariri University – which is named after the assassinated former prime minister Rafic Hariri, the founder of the Future Movement party - say their administration and faculty are politicized in favour of several traditional parties, not allowing them to formally register as a student organization. They say this has repelled other student groups on campus they want to collaborate with, who fear reprisal. In addition, the Secular Club at the American University of Beirut were able to use their intended name, whereas students from the Rafic Hariri University had to refer to themselves as independents, because "politics isn't allowed on [our] campus." Similarly, students from the Lebanese American University's Byblos campus said their administration forced them to take down social media videos where they described themselves as "independents", under the pretext that "all candidates running for university elections are in fact independent."

Independent groups being censored, slandered and shamed on social media by supporters of traditional parties is a common practice, according to the students, while some of their candidates were directly targeted and bullied online. Students from Saint Joseph University's Independents said student partisans of traditional parties slandered and threatened them online, and sometimes this has been aggregated by affiliated media. For example, local television station MTV, which is partisan to the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb parties, even ran a news segment claiming that Saint Joseph University's Secular Club, a left-leaning group, was working to benefit Iran-backed Hezbollah.<sup>20</sup>



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Some campuses are also more overtly politically charged than others which can lead to an intimidating environment. Partisans at USJ, for example, often refer to it as “Bachir’s fortress”, in reference to assassinated president-elect and leader of the Kataeb Party militia in the civil war, Bachir Gemayel. In fact, students from opposing political parties sometimes clash. At USJ, students from Hezbollah and the Amal Movement clash with those from the Lebanese Forces party, both often accusing each other of inciting sectarian strife. Prior to the 2020 student elections, supporters from both sides attacked each other and threw flares, before the police intervened to separate the partisan students. Several were reportedly wounded.

Four of the seven interrogated independent groups identified students opting to remain apolitical as an obstacle. The reasons differed, with students citing a wide variety of reasons from alleged ignorance, lack of awareness, and privilege, to deliberately choosing to remain apolitical and uninvolved in elections and political work. One student group also mentioned that difference in ideology with allied groups also proved to be a hurdle. Most of the students in the focus group discussions identified as progressive or left wing, while AUB’s Change Starts Here identifies as a more moderate and liberal entity, and the USJ Independents say they don’t subscribe to a particular ideology as a collective.

Only two of the seven student groups said that clientelism was a major hurdle to their organizing. However, all the groups said that political clientelism was widespread on their campuses. Student branches of political parties offered financial support for tuition fees and textbooks, as well as scholarships and job opportunities in exchange for loyalty. The students in the discussion groups added that recruiters often approach anxious first-year students to help them settle on campus in exchange for votes in the upcoming student elections. In short, the traditional political parties’ patronage networks continue to play a significant role at Lebanese universities, decades following the end of the civil war. Limited financial resources and the Covid-19 pandemic were not seen as major hurdles in their organizing and campaigning work, only being mentioned just once respectively.

The obstacles for independent groups and students within the five private universities are similar to those in the public Lebanese University. Except that at the country’s only public university, political partisanship and clientelism exist at a



far greater magnitude. Like other public institutions in Lebanon, staff hirings are based on sectarian quotas and affiliations or loyalties to political parties. At the Lebanese University, two students in a recently-formed independent political group told ARI they believe this hinders their ability to function freely, whether its administrative obstacles or possible academic penalties. On the other hand, they believe student groups affiliated to traditional parties function with no disturbances.

It is worth noting that elections at the Lebanese University have been routinely postponed. The university's administration and Education Ministry say that this is to prevent political tension and possible violence. For example, in December 2017, Education Minister Marwan Hamade cancelled elections at the Lebanese University, fearing that students would “fall into the extremism seen in our society”, referring to political partisanship and tensions between traditional parties.<sup>21</sup>

Two second-year students from a newly formed independent student group at the Lebanese University said that they have faced serious obstacles and reprisal. “Politically independent students were threatened several times”, one student said, adding that they believe the traditional political parties perceive them as “threats” at the Lebanese University. Another student feels that politically affiliated professors could bully them in class, or even unfairly grade their academic work.

In addition, the two students say that many students benefit from the traditional political parties' clientelism or feel that their efforts to end the traditional political parties' hegemony at the Lebanese University campus would be futile.

## **V. Looking Forward: Building Campus Networks and Linking Alumni with Students**

The 2020 student elections was a major breakthrough for Lebanese student groups unaffiliated to the country's ruling class. The deteriorating economic crisis, the countrywide anti-government uprising in October 2019, and the Beirut Port



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explosion on August 4 played a huge role in galvanizing these student groups. But unlike before, this wave of student activism and mobilization was not merely a reaction to certain developments. It appears that activists from independent groups took this opportunity to further institutionalize an otherwise fragmented and niche set of student political groups. The biggest case of this was Mada. Though it was formed before the uprising, it developed into an entity to coordinate between university groups as well as a platform to organize protests, discussion groups, and targeted digital campaigns.

During the 2020 student elections, Mada played a significant role in endorsing and promoting independent student candidates across Lebanese campuses.<sup>22</sup> It then helped set up new “Secular Clubs” and independent student groups on private university campuses across Lebanon, including Balamand in the northern Koura district, the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, Antonine University, and the Beirut Arab University. It also supported the Lebanese University’s Secular Club. In short, independent student groups no longer operate on their own as they have a network of their peers across the country backing them in various capacities, even with issues specifically related to their campus.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, they supported protests in Tripoli over living conditions, and mobilized turnout for anti-government protests.<sup>24</sup>

Today, Mada mobilizes swiftly in response to countrywide issues, and currently functions as a de facto national student union. On December 12, 2020, Mada launched “إعلان طلاب لبنان” (Declaration of Students of Lebanon) at a public event attended by students, political activists, journalists, and others. Students from different independent groups spoke to an audience of their peers, journalists, and activists about the need to establish a national student movement, inclusive of campuses across the country, in what they say is in the spirit of the October 2019 uprising. The conference which included Mada’s different student groups listed four demands: (i) reversing decisions to dollarize student tuition and to implement a student financial contract to fix fees, (ii) ensuring real, shared governance and elected student councils in each university, (iii) supporting and funding the Lebanese University, and (iv) supporting professors and workers in universities. Students from different universities elaborated on these issues, and their experiences on their campuses trying to take on traditional parties’ foothold



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in student councils and trying to have a greater stake in campus governance. In short, their demands addressed both their universities' administrations and the country's rulers. One week later, they organized a "day of rage" for students on December 19, 2020, to protest against their university administrations and reiterate their demands.

This consolidated presence has elevated student power in Lebanon and better positioned them to voice their demands as groups that function autonomously but that can coordinate with new non-sectarian political parties.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, these major developments have forced campus groups representing traditional parties across the spectrum to take notice. Often dismissing independent groups in the past, some admit that they did not engage in student elections in 2020 in part due to the anti-government sentiments from the uprising and spiralling economic crisis. It is clear that, to varying degrees, they view these independent groups as competition with growing popularity.

A student from the Amal Movement said that the emergence of groups like Change Starts Here at the American University of Beirut, which included some former political partisans, and increased criticism of the party's student partisans partially subdued them. While the party has been heavily criticized for its corruption and sending partisans to attack protesters, he says that they are open to dialogue, if independent student groups are open to dialogue as well, claiming that they are refusing to engage. At the same time, he claims that they support what their secular counterparts have done and want to "help" them.

On the other hand, a student from the Lebanese Forces' group at AUB said student elections that year were organized on a very short notice, and did not give them enough time to find the optimal candidates. This militia-turned-political party has tried to present itself as different from the rest of the country's traditional parties over the past year by arguing that it supported the October 2019 uprising, albeit unsuccessfully. He praised the October 2019 uprising, but refuses to see it as a "political movement, as it lacks a clear vision of what we want as Lebanese." And while groups involved in Mada, such as USJ's Taleb, say the Lebanese Forces have slandered and threatened them during their campaigns, this student representative says they support the student network.



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Going forward, what Lebanon's banded independent student groups do next is crucial. In a relatively brief period, they have moved beyond their respective campuses to address broader issues such as education and unemployment across the country, and have taken active positions on national issues, and organized major protests. With Lebanon's municipal and national elections scheduled for 2022, independent student groups, whether on their own or through the Mada network, could take part in organizing campaigns through their alumni in an alliance with other independent political parties, or play a crucial role as the voice of a growing segment of university students in Lebanon.

The Mada network could also turn into a political party of its own, as it has actively taken strong positions and proposed solutions to a handful of issues, and works alongside independent political parties as an equal player, rather than a branch unique to students and young professionals.

But what is most certain is that a slow budding of student political groups unaffiliated with Lebanon's ruling parties turned into rapid development over the past two years, with the economic crisis and uprising acting as key catalysts. The recent momentum that came from the sweeping victories at campus elections, the continued institutional development whether as individual groups or through Mada and alternative political parties, and successful elections of independent candidates and groups at professional association such as the Beirut Bar Association and Engineers Syndicates indicates that this student movement is no longer a reactive one and has potential for longevity.

## ANNEX

### **Key Informant Interviews:**

Alexi El-Haddad - Citizens In A State

Nadim El-Qaq - Li Haqqi

Ali Nouredine - Secular Club co-founder, Mada

Karim Safieddine - Secular Club alumnus, Mada



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Dr. Bassel Salloukh - Associate Professor of Political Science, Lebanese American University

Student from Lebanese Forces Party

Student from Amal Movement

Two anonymous students from Lebanese University Secular Club

### **Focus Group Discussions:**

American University of Beirut Secular Club

American University of Beirut Change Starts Here

Lebanese American University Secular Club - Beirut Campus

Lebanese American University Secular Club - Byblos Campus

University of Saint Joseph Taleb

University of Saint Joseph Independents

Rafic Hariri University Independents, The Renaissance Movement



## Endnotes

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# Arab Reform Initiative

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The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

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- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

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