

Nothing but a demonstration?

*The civil society movement
during the garbage crisis in Beirut
after July 2015*

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When garbage started to pile up in the streets of Beirut in summer 2015, a new wave of civil society protests was initiated in the country. Thousands of Lebanese were protesting in the streets – against the garbage situation, corruption of the government, the failure of electing a president, sectarianism and many more issues connected to the crisis of the state and the waste management. More than half a year later, no final solution for the garbage has been found and the political situation has not changed. It is said that the civil society movement failed to put pressure on the government, but also the regime itself is made responsible for the lack of change. For many people it was hard to follow up with what was happening on the streets during the demonstrations and to understand who the protestors were and which goals they tried to achieve. This paper analyzes the dynamics of the movement and tries to explain why not much has changed so far and if there is any chance for civil society movements in Lebanon in the future.

A Summer with a Distinct Smell

The air of Beirut in summer 2015 will always be remembered by the city's inhabitants. Marked with the smell of garbage, mounting in the streets and boiling under the summer heat, eventually mixed with tear gas and the sound of chants protestors were singing in the central squares. The garbage crisis has long been foreseen to happen in the Lebanese capital and its surrounding municipalities. Regarding the reaction to that crisis, no one expected such a huge number of citizens protesting and demanding their government to find a solution for the situation. Tens of thousands of people had gone to the streets by the end of August.

It all started when the region's major landfill in Naameh closed and the garbage was left in the streets of Beirut and Mount Lebanon municipalities. Shortly after, activist groups started calling for protests in front of government buildings and in squares in downtown Beirut and as the garbage piles grew, more and more citizens joined the demonstrations. They were fed up with the mess in front of their doors. However, the protestors did not solely demand the Lebanese government to find a solution for the garbage issue, they blamed the government for the country's general situation and accused politicians of being corrupt. It is not just the waste management that is in a crisis; the entire state is considered to be in one, with the president's position being vacant since May 2014.

Soon after the protests had started, there was a big variety of demands raised at demonstrations and an increasing number of activist groups and NGOs got involved in the protest movement. At the same time, rumors began to spread about the movement and people lost track of what was really happening, who was involved and what the movement actually wanted. There was much confusion and after major violent clashes between protesters and security forces in the

end of August, many people stopped going to the streets. There have certainly been different reasons for this, though it could be heard everywhere that the civil society movement had lost its momentum.

More than half a year after the garbage crisis had started there is still no sustainable solution for it in sight. Civil society has not given up its actions and protests on the streets, but these are no longer as visible as they used to be. Media has reduced its reports about the garbage and the movement, but the people are still talking about it and many questions are being raised. Why could no solution be reached? Was it the failure of the civil society movement? Did they even have a chance to begin with?

After giving a brief description of the major events that happened in the garbage crisis until the end of 2015, this paper aims to shed light on the dynamics of the protests. It is going to identify who the groups were that organized the protest movement, how they were related to each other and what they demanded from the government. Finally the difficulties that the movement faces and the chances for any further success will be analyzed. The set of circumstances and events has to be seen as a whole to understand the civil society movement around the Lebanese garbage crisis and to see what civil society could achieve in the future.

Method

The research is based on a set of twelve semi-structured interviews that have been conducted face-to-face during November and December 2015. The interviewees are activists who have been involved in the organization of the protest movement, members of NGOs and/or observers of the Lebanese political and civil society environment.¹

The interviews lasted for about 20 to 50 minutes, depending on the interviewee's available time and on the information they had to share. They were asked about their

¹ - See annex for a complete list of interviewees



own activist group, their involvement in the protests and the demands they raised. A focus was also put on their assessment of the cooperation with other groups in the movement. Additionally interviewees were questioned about difficulties they feel the movement has to face and about how they see a possibility for the movement to achieve its goals. The persons were asked to speak on behalf of their group, however their individual opinion is very likely to have an influence on their statements. This has been taken into account during the analysis of the interviews.

Out of the twelve interviewees there is only one woman. All of the interviewees had completed higher education or were enrolled in a university. This certainly means that there is not a very big variety among the interviewees concerning their gender and educational background. But the importance for this research was to get information from people who were involved in the organizational tasks of the movement or as mentioned earlier, who had a background as observers of politics and society in Lebanon. The people fulfilling those criteria who were suggested by other interviewees and contacts and who were willing to give interviews lead to the composition of interviewees. Beirut was the main meeting point and central site of the protests. In other places (e.g. Akkar) smaller protests, especially by environmentalist groups, have taken place. These protests are acknowledged though this paper is focusing on the big civil society movement that was gathering and working in Beirut.

How Garbage Sparked an Outcry

The landfill in Naameh which was set up in an emergency plan in 1997 for the disposal of the garbage from Beirut and Mount Lebanon was supposed to be opened only for a few years until a more sustainable waste management plan could be established. But the waste management has never been a high ranking topic on the Lebanese government's agenda and the closure of the Naameh site has been postponed again and again over the years. Residents have constantly been complaining about the landfill's odors and dangerous gases, also taking into account that the amount of garbage that has been dumped in Naameh exceeds the amount it was originally made for by multiple times. Already in 2014 there were protests in front of the site that led to its short and temporary closure and politicians rushed to promise the final closure of the Naameh landfill in January 2015. Again nothing happened, for which reason this last summer, residents and activists increased their pressure and blocked roads in order to obtain the final closure. After July 17th 2015 there was no more garbage dumped in Naameh.

However, this is not the end but the starting point of a bigger story. Considering that the Naameh landfill was from the beginning only meant to be a temporary solution and not much has been done by the Lebanese government to find a more sustainable way to manage waste, it was expected that at some point there would be a huge problem for the country caused by its own garbage. Environmentalist groups started to come up with ideas how to find solutions which they suggested to the government.² Still, nothing has changed after that. Instead, after the closure of the landfill, the contract of Sukleen

2- Matt Nash, *Lebanon's looming trash crisis*, *Now News*, 11/2014/04/: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/542973-lebanons-looming-trash-crisis>

also expired. Sukleen is the company in charge of the region's garbage and the garbage was left in the streets of Beirut and its surrounding municipalities, well noticeable for everyone living in the area.

This alarmed many civil society activists. A group using the slogan "You Stink", which later also turned into their group's name,³ organized the first protest on July 21st. This group was going to become one of the most prominent ones among the movement, suggesting with their slogan that not only the garbage in the street stinks, but also corrupted politicians in the government and parliament. Back then, newspapers were still talking about "youth"⁴ demonstrating in the streets. Just a few demonstrations later it was visibly not only them, but people from different generations, genders and backgrounds could be seen at the scene, all affected by the same issue, demanding their government to accept the responsibility for the garbage problem. They felt that it was urgent to find a solution and during the weeks more and more people followed the calls of activist groups and joined the rallies in downtown Beirut.

For one month there were mostly peaceful demonstrations in front of ministries and in central squares. Despite urging the authorities in charge to find a solution for the garbage problem, further demands were brought up like investigating corruption cases, electing a new parliament and the resignation of the Minister of Environment Mohammad Machnouk or even of the whole government. Still nothing changed in those weeks and the government could not succeed to present a solution. On August 22nd and 23rd and also on the 29th major violent clashes occurred between protestors and the security forces, leaving dozens on both sides injured. Everyone in the country found someone else to blame, be it the security forces with their harsh reaction, the movement groups themselves or violent infiltrators being sent by politicians.⁵ Regardless who it really was in the end, it is important to stress that this event gave the civil society movement a new orientation.

After the clashes in August, new movement groups began to form as they saw a need for more organization behind the protests and increasing work on the different topics. Also, new demands were being raised. During the demonstrations the police detained some of the protestors even if they could not directly be linked to any violent action against the security forces. The civil society movements demanded their immediate release and groups of lawyers engaged themselves in the issue. The practice of putting detainees from the protests in front of the military court was

opposed strongly by the activists. With this, the variety of demands by the movement grew even bigger and was not only focused anymore on resolving the garbage crisis, but rather on resolving the state crisis. With the slogan "everyone means everyone" protestors pointed out that they see all politicians responsible for the crisis and the corruption practiced in the state and that they would not accept anyone of them claiming to be on the movement's side.

In September, the government finally showed some progress. The tasks of the Minister of Environment Machnouk in dealing with the garbage crisis were transferred to Minister of Agriculture Akram Chehayeb. Under his conduct a garbage emergency plan was issued and approved by the cabinet. However, the plan was largely opposed by the civil society movement who did not see a sustainable solution in it as it contained ideas like temporarily re-opening Naameh and building two more landfills close to the Syrian border. At the end of September, activists presented an alternative plan to Chehayeb which they considered to be more environmentally friendly, taking for example recycling measures into account. In the reverse this plan was not adapted by the minister. During that time numbers of participants at the protests began to decrease. The last big demonstration took place on October 8th. Still, activist groups would launch activities in the streets after that but could not gather crowds as large as those drawn in August.

In between the protests, workers of the contracted garbage removal company Sukleen were sent to collect the garbage again from the streets. After October at least in Beirut no major garbage piles could be seen on the streets. However, this does not mean that there is a solution for the garbage. Due to a lack of proper treatment possibilities, most of it could be found dumped randomly in valleys and along roadsides. Some of it is also being burnt. Concerns about spreading diseases are rising due to leachate reaching ground water. Also the air conditions are being worsened by burning garbage. Any serious health problems would affect the entire Lebanese society and there have been warnings from scientists⁶ and environmentalists. The government's current focus lies on exporting the garbage, but so far no proper foreign company has been found to deal with it.

Until the end of 2015, people in Beirut and Mount Lebanon municipalities still did not know what was going to happen with their garbage and how waste would be managed in the future. Considering this and taking the huge variety of people into account that

3- Corresponding original group names in Arabic can be found in the annex

4- The Daily Star, Lebanon protestors denounce govt response to trash crisis, 21/2015/07/: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Jul-21/20150721-lebanon-protesters-denounce-govt-response-to-trash-crisis.ashx>

5- David Kenner, There's Something Rotten in Lebanon, Foreign Policy, 25/2015/08/: http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/25/08/theres-something-rotten-in-lebanon-trash-you-stink/?wp_login_redirect=0

6- A study headed by AUB proofs the dangerous impact on the air quality by burning trash. The influence on the water quality has not been assessed yet. AUB, Office of Communications, AUB headed research warns of alarming carcinogen levels near open waste dump fires, 01/2015/12/: <http://www.aub.edu.lb/news/2015/pages/carcinogen-waste-fires.aspx>

have gone to the streets to join protests, it is evident that in Lebanon garbage is not the only problematic issue. Many people feel that there is nothing changing for the better in their country and this has been expressed at the protests. The wide range of demands at the rallies showed that the issue is bigger than just a waste management crisis. It is a very complex network of political and structural issues that led to the country's situation which the civil society movement tried to address in different ways. Garbage on the streets was the trigger for the movement groups to form and to call for protests, but it was certainly not the sole reason.

Who are the Groups on the Ground?

The first group that called for protests against the garbage in Beirut calls itself You Stink. It is one of the most prominent ones along with the group We want Accountability. Both of them are mentioned constantly in the media, most likely due to conducting many actions under their name and their names being used as slogans. Because of this, it is widely believed that it is only them organizing the protests and deciding on the agenda. But there have been many more groups that have called people to go to the streets, even more than those eleven⁷ of which activists have been interviewed for this paper. The groups that participated had many different ideas about how to address the crisis and they had varying demands. Those differences shaped the dynamics inside the movement significantly. Instead of listing each single group involved, attention should at this point rather be drawn to differences and similarities in their motives, intentions and structure.

Every group has an internal structure, even those that are not an established NGO. Tasks are distributed among committees such as a committee in charge of social media, one to write statements or one for logistics and organization of the demonstrations. There are regular internal meetings and decisions are often made by a core group inside the bigger group. This means the movement groups are mostly clear about their structure and their positions which distinguish them from other groups. To call for demonstrations and to spread news and information, all groups used social media channels intensively, especially Facebook. In Lebanon Facebook is a highly frequented platform and many activists believe it was indispensable to organize the civil society protest. Some of the groups have more than 10,000 likes, You Stink even more than 180,000. As most of the organizers of the movement groups belong to the young generation (ca. 25-35 years) which is used



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⁷- A full list of those groups can be found in the annex

to working with modern communication methods, this was to be expected.

Three types of groups can be distinguished: firstly, those that have been working for a very long time; secondly those, that used to conduct activities in the past and started reorganizing again during this summer and thirdly, groups that have been founded only recently due to the garbage crisis. The groups that have been working on the ground for a long time are especially the registered NGOs such as the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) which has been founded in 1996. Those groups have a very long experience in their work and were sometimes also asked for advice about environmental issues (Lebanese Eco Movement (LEM) or possibilities for an electoral reform (LADE). A group that revived its activities again in August was Leave us Alone. They were already active in 2011 during smaller demonstrations in Beirut where people asked for political reform. In summer 2015 they felt it would be good to regroup and use the previous experience to help organizing the ongoing protests. The groups that found newly together in July and August felt that they needed to create something for their own, to work with their own ideas and address issues that they felt have not been addressed by others. Many of those groups were founded by young people, had a very high level of activity and were strongly involved in organizing the rallies. This made them very present in the movement, but it also means there was a lot of experimenting with actions and the organization.

The garbage crisis as original trigger event that sparked the protests seems at first sight like an issue that would lead to primarily environmental activists and NGOs taking action. But as described before, this crisis in Lebanon can be linked closely to state structures and the government, so most of the groups would not call themselves environmentalists, but rather political activists. Only the LEM, a coalition between Lebanese environmental NGOs, would have the protection of the environment as a main motive for their actions, though their demands were also directed at the government. In contrast most of the other groups on the ground had further political motives. Finding an environmentally friendly solution for the garbage would just be one of many topics on their list of demands. Another division could be found between the political activists: Some would claim themselves to be leftist like Change is Coming or We want Accountability. Others would rather see themselves as civil society groups that are trying to achieve social and political change

without being fixed on a certain ideology. Groups who would have that intention are the AUB Secular Club, Leave us Alone and You Stink. Yet some groups found it important to distance themselves from the nationalism that was part of other groups slogans and ideas.

Concerning the attitude towards political and legal authorities the groups have shown differences as well. All would agree that the political system in Lebanon needs to undergo reforms to achieve change and progress. However, most of them would acknowledge that this needs to be done step by step and they would also consider cooperating with authorities. Ibrahim Dsouki from Leave us Alone sees a chance for this as soon as a new president is elected. "If this president will adopt what we are saying, we are gonna support [him]. [...] we are not supporting [...] people for a personal name or a personal issue. We are supporting [...] people based on their programs", he explains. Also the LEM was willing to attend meetings with the Minister Chehayeb to discuss the garbage plan with him. On the other hand many groups would demand the abolition of the political system and the withdrawal of the whole government as soon as possible. They widely reject any further negotiations with politicians as they do not expect anything positive from them. The interviewee from We want Accountability went as far as speaking about a "revolution" which would be necessary to achieve change in the country.

Another point in which the differences between the groups are reflected is in their actions and who they intend to address with them. Certainly, all groups joined the protests on the streets to raise their voice in public and ask for positive change. But for some groups demonstrating and mobilizing people would not be their main and only way of taking action. You Stink conducted other activities like sticking pictures of politicians' heads on trash cans and once they organized a Flashmob⁸ to raise awareness for the ongoing issue of the garbage crisis. In September parts of the group occupied the Ministry of Environment. They are also posting information on their Facebook page about what is happening with the garbage in the country. Many groups would gather in separate smaller protests in front of Ministries or hold demonstrations in other places of the city which they linked to corruption, for example at Solidere.⁹ We want Accountability started submitting legal accusations of corruption to courts. The group To the Streets took a completely different approach and stayed as an online group in the back to support the movement. They would also conduct an analysis of the movement. Similar

8- A woman pretended to give birth on the street and received a garbage bag instead of a baby; published on 27/2015/11/ on You Stink's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/tol3etre7etkom/videos/1662525464009568/?theater>

9- Solidere is the company in charge of the reconstruction of Beirut's Central District. It is a form of public-private partnership with a special agreement with the government. Critics claim it is a highly corrupted company, closely linked to the Hariri family.



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in the sense of giving expert input and advice was the work of some NGOs. A main faction between the groups is explained by activist Hashem Adnan: “[We want] to work with people not for people, you know”. He does not feel that performances on the street can lead to real change. Due to this, his group The People Want focuses on working with students and people in municipalities to get them to organize themselves. They aim to create an open public dialogue and include as many different people as possible in those discussions to understand what the people really want. A similar approach is used by the Youth of 22nd August.

Even though there are many differences between the ideas of the movement groups and the strategies they use to achieve their goals, there is one remarkable similarity. All groups see the existing political system as responsible for the current situation that Lebanon is in. Most importantly they reject the sectarianism on which the system is based. None of the groups has any links to sectarian political parties and the participants at the demonstrations came from all sects. Also the groups were mixed inside. This has not been seen in Lebanon before. Anti-sectarian ideas have been existing even before the civil war, but it could never be achieved that so many people found a common ground in this idea.

The Cooperation Issue

The many differences between the civil society groups involved in the movement during the garbage crisis made it very hard to appear as a closed movement during rallies and it was almost impossible to raise a common set of demands to ask from the government. Especially since the number of groups had increased in August, mainly

after the violent clashes on 22nd August, it was difficult to organize. Most groups agreed that more coordination should be a concern of the movement and they were willing to sit together at the same table to discuss, hoping that with this they could be stronger in opposing the government.

The NGO The Legal Agenda decided to host the so-called “Coordination Committee”. The NGO had previously focused more on questioning the independence of the judiciary and sent a group of lawyers to defend people that have been detained by the security forces during the demonstrations. Meetings between different groups of the movement had been happening even before the committee was established. But through the committee, meetings would be given a framework and a fixed meeting location – the aim was to include as many groups as possible in the coordination. The Coordination Committee was hosted by The Legal Agenda for the first time on the 24th August and from that day the movement groups met every day.

Soon it would turn out that the task of coordinating all groups together was harder than they originally believed it would be. “The particularity of this movement [was] that it was not an organized movement, it was a spontaneous one. [...] lots of new groups emerged and they wanted to be part of this process, but they were so different”, says lawyer Nizar Saghieh from The Legal Agenda. So everyone wanted to say what he or she had to say to make sure all points were being added in the end and every single word was discussed through that process. There would also be opposing opinions when it came to the question of who would be the ones to negotiate with the government.

However, the committee achieved to at least give the movement an appearance of

unity for some weeks. It has been a place for some fruitful discussions and for some time there was an agreement that garbage would be the number one issue to be addressed. This did not help to prevent the split of the committee, however. Some groups left the committee, as they did not get what they were expecting out of it. For Nizar the day of October 8th clearly showed that there would be no further coordination in that framework. After many detainees had been taken by the police again during the demonstration that day, the focus of everyone was put on defending those detainees and asking for their release, so other discussions became neglected.

The usually well-working coordination between the activists inside the single groups could not be achieved when it came to coordination between the groups. The differences as described in the previous chapter were one reason for this. Many feared their demands could not be raised adequately if they would not have their own voice in protests and negotiations. Still some groups set up new networks for cooperation on a smaller scale with other groups that had similar ideas. Also, another bigger cooperation table was still regarded as likely by many and seen as a very important step to achieve the movement's goals. Assaad from You Stink points out: "We think that what connects us is much more than what divides us. Because what we have in common is that we are fighting the same regime [...]. What we actually have is differences in tactical ways, in how to approach the obstacle".

What played a role in this as well is that the majority of activists did not have a long experience in dealing with politics and organizing people, so it was also somehow a space for experiments. That is not necessarily a bad process, but it did not lend the movement the appearance of unity it needed and led to confusion surrounding the movement's goals and actors. Something that can also be classified as problematic is that there have been only few women participating in the Coordination Committee. There were many women who went to the streets and also a lot of them participated actively in the movement groups. But when it came to appointing a representative to be part of the committee, women were outnumbered and it became a one-sided table. Their voices were not represented in the committee in the way they were represented on the street.

What does the movement actually want?

Despite all the differences that the movement groups had and the difficulty of coordinating them, it could still be observed that the majority of the demands that were raised during the demonstrations were shared by most groups. Many ideas about what needs to change in the country were similar. There were certainly different interpretations of some demands and discussions about the order in which they should be addressed. The demands listed in this chapter could be observed to be the main ones and important for most of the movements. Not every group that has been involved in the protests spoke out clearly all of the demands described; nevertheless it became clear in which direction the general demands were pointing.

First of all there is the most obvious demand connected to the garbage crisis – the government should find a solution for the problem of the waste management in Lebanon and employ necessary measures immediately. By this the protestors did not mean to simply remove the garbage from the streets of Beirut, but to find a solution that is sustainable, environmental friendly and that can be supported by all the population of Lebanon. The plan that the government proposed at the beginning of September 2015 did not fulfill this criteria in the eyes of the activists and was therefore rejected. The movement proposed another plan to the government at the end of the same month and the LEM had even handed a plan to the government long before the garbage crisis began in July. The group's president Paul Abi Rached emphasized that it is more important that the government would listen to the environmentalist plans than trying to find its own solutions. "The government is changing every day [...], it's not professional when you change your opinion. But we as NGOs we know what we have as potential. [...] We had experience, big experience and they don't want to listen to us", he says. In addition to addressing the government, many groups also addressed the Lebanese society, asking to care more about sustainable waste management and the environment in general. A start would be reducing household garbage by recycling and composting in private homes or work places.

A very important demand of civil society groups in Lebanon has always been the introduction of a new electoral law. This demand was also raised quickly at the rallies in summer. There were many different ideas about how this law should look like exactly, but all agreed that the distribution of seats

should not be linked anymore to the religious sects. Without this sectarian electoral system the distribution of seats would be according to the people's will, many activists argued. Mahmoud Abou Zeid explains which hope is connected to a new system: "We should change the law of election in Lebanon, this is the first and the main thing. And in the end we try to get some civil people into the parliament, at least to have a voice in parliament and to speak directly to all the politicians about our concerns [...]." However, some activists are concerned that even with a new electoral law, the already established sectarian parties would still be very strong and influential and continue making deals only among themselves.

A reform of the electoral system comes along with actually having elections. The civil society movement postulated this from the beginning, asking for elections of a new parliament and a president. "The parliament in Lebanon has renewed the term without elections and this is a violation of the simplest forms and principles of democracy", activist George Azar states. Again there are different opinions about changing the electoral law before new elections or after. The president's position has been vacant since almost two years, one reason named by many why the government is not functioning at the moment and no change can be achieved. This is obvious as a part of the executive branch in the political system is missing. Assaad Thebian, a You Stink activist, says: "We have a political demand which is to revive the democratic institutions [...]. And how would we revive the democratic institutions? That's by having a president, by having a new electoral law, by having a government that can actually meet and do stuff."

Another demand raised aims at the legal system in Lebanon. The people on the street are asking for an independent judiciary, especially when it comes to corruption. There is a high level of corruption in Lebanon where politicians and business men are involved. The movement groups demand the investigation and legal prosecution of such cases. The activists also want to cease the use of martial law in cases of the detainees that were arrested during the protests. This should be a mere civilian affair and treated as such by the courts.

A further demand that was brought up during the protests is that politicians must be held accountable. They should feel responsible for their job and the actions connected to it. This also means that they are responsible for their mistakes and that they need to fulfill the tasks they are paid for. The group We want Accountability put this as their main demand and used the slogan

connected to the demand as their group's name. They feel it is also important that the citizens act and pressure the politicians to show responsibility. "We want to change the idea of how the citizen views himself. He has to question the authority, he has to criticize the authority, he has to hold those who govern him accountable for all the mistakes", George Azar from We want Accountability explains. To make this possible many activists pointed out that civilian rights and democratic values in the Lebanese system need to be enhanced. This would not just mean free expression of speech for them, but rights that are not connected to sect, but simply to the citizen and human itself. Also the social and economic situation for the Lebanese need to be improved. Most groups of the movement acknowledge that it is not only politicians that need to change but also society that needs to take action in order to effect change. People should be aware of their own rights and get involved in public life and care more about their social and political environment.

To sum it up, it could be observed that all demands lead to a common goal which is to enhance the democratic system in the country and practice democratic values. To achieve this, it is agreed that sectarianism needs to be abolished and that civil society needs to get involved in the political processes of the country. Demands are not only directed at the political leaders of the country, but also at the Lebanese society as a whole.

A long list of challenges

Since the protests started in summer 2015, there has been no major change in Lebanon and the political parties and the movement groups could not agree on a proper solution for the garbage problem. It seems like all demands that the movement raised have been completely ignored by politicians and society in the end, despite being discussed at some point before. Many people also hold the movement accountable for this situation, saying it was too weak and did not show enough unity to put pressure on the government. The movement groups themselves can list a number of issues which they feel are a challenge to their work and reasons why so far not much has been achieved. The Lebanese political system plays a big role in this list of challenges, but most activists would also point out mistakes by the movement which show that their work needs to be improved to keep going in the future.

The number of people participating in the protests was very high, especially in August, however the movement groups feel that they could not reach enough people to support their demands and to build an even bigger



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group. It was particularly hard for them to reach people in rural areas and to achieve that the protests and demands were seen as an entire Lebanese issue and not only linked to Beirut and the people in that area. Activists say this is due to mistrust towards everything new. In rural areas people have strong ties to their sectarian parties, even if they are not satisfied with their work. It is hard to reach those people and convince them to question their leaders and authorities. A group that is trying to work to change that is the Youth of 22nd August. “We had this plan to work with people in villages and small places. The main problem was that there’s always a fight back in the villages. [...] People had a problem to connect with us.” “Why would we trust you? We have our government and we’re waiting [...] for them and they are gonna fix it in the end”, member Mahmoud describes the situation. It is also mentioned by the movement groups that they do not have logistic and financial capacities to transport people to rallies and to provide sandwiches and water for them at the site, a practice that is generally used by the established parties. The movement groups are usually self-funded and the work is done on a volunteer basis.

A big challenge for the movement is certainly the failed coordination between the groups. There was mistrust amongst them and everyone wanted to lead the discussions and put their very own demands in it. Some groups suspected other groups for not being independent from the system as they had links to existing (non-sectarian) parties. In some cases coordination was not even wanted. This led to a weak basis of negotiation with the government. The government knew that and could take advantage of the situation, not taking the movement serious. Besides this lack of unity confused people and they were not sure anymore who they should

follow or believe. It was not very clear after some weeks of protest what the movement in general stands for and some actions seemed biased to the people. For example when there were protests against Solidere, people felt the movement only demonstrates against the corruption of March 14th politicians and does not address the other side of March 8th. Sometimes people could also not understand the sense in some actions that the movements were conducting which alienated further people. The fact that some groups started conducting actions on the ground in their own name, sometimes without telling the other groups made the others angry. This happened for example when a group occupied the Ministry of Environment. “I think this was a huge mistake from them. [...] Two days before you win with a huge demonstration [...], you were able to speak in the name of 100,000 persons, but when you went with 30 persons to occupy the ministry, you were acting alone. You have this legitimacy, you will lose it”, activist Ali Mourad says. Another challenge is that the many demands that the movement groups raised led to a loss of focus on the garbage problem. With that it became hard to find a common ground and to put full strength in solving the garbage issue.

But the groups also perceived the influence of politicians and some media as a negative effect on the protests. Rumors were spread about movement groups, aiming to make people suspicious and preventing them from joining the protests. Assaad knows many examples for those rumors: “Our Minister of interior who is part of the Future Movement, he announces that we are funded by Qatar. [...] On the 30th he [Michel Aoun] calls on TV and he says we stole his slogans. We have a journalist Ali Hamadeh who is the brother of a political MP Marwan Hamadeh who is very

close to the Progressive Socialist Party. He goes and says we are Hezbollah fanatics. The brother of Julia Boutros, the wife of Education Minister Elias Bou Saab, he goes and says we are Israeli Zionists. I would give you examples of every politician in the country [...], making their people and their supporters afraid and hate us." Also the violence that occurred at the protests was used by politicians to say that the movement did not mean to use peaceful measures to pursue their goals. At the same time many protestors suspected politicians themselves to have sent infiltrators that caused violence to split the movement and to stop people from going to the rallies.

A problem that many activists see in Lebanon is that people are too occupied with their own issues to get involved in a civil society movement. Many struggle in their daily lives to provide an income for the family that does not just cover costs of living, but also health care and the costs of education for the children. People are used to difficult circumstances and adapt easily to inconvenient situations like electricity shortages and they stop caring too much about their greater environment. When the garbage was removed from the streets the big outcry of the people went silent, even though the problem was not solved. Most likely the government also used this 'out of sight, out of mind' thinking as a strategy to diminish the protests. Some activists also think that people were not patient enough and expected the movement to achieve something quickly which was not possible for them. Another issue with society is that memories of the Civil War remain fresh in people's mind, for which reason many people prefer a stable situation from a change as they are afraid of the unknown and fear things could also change to the worse. "I think the Lebanese people are not ready at that moment for this kind of movement. Because they think that someone bad you know is better than someone you don't know", Ibrahim from Leave us Alone explains. The difficult situation in the region plays a role in this as well and makes sectarian divisions stronger. People and also politicians are very concerned about security issues and do not see a major importance in environmental issues for example.

The biggest challenge for the movement that was named by the interviewed activists is the missing window of opportunity for the movement. The regime in Lebanon is considered very strong, even though the state itself is weak. The regime controls most of the public sphere and has a very strong influence on people, connecting them to the sectarian parties. The parties are afraid of losing their power and influence if they give a single chance or concession to a social movement. Besides, business and politics are

closely linked in Lebanon and a major site of corruption. As long as those corrupt relations are existing it is hard to establish any other businesses or parties.

A number of activists emphasizes that even if the government wanted, they could not act to achieve change in favor of the people. The system has been paralyzed since many years and the parties block each other. "There doesn't seem to be any kind of dynamic going on, the policy has been to paralyze as much as possible to avoid any problem. You cannot resolve the tension between the two sides, you simply paralyze institutions and wait until something happens", university professor Samer Frangie explains. Also foreign countries have a big influence on the parties which leads to a divided government. If politicians are not able to act, it is also almost impossible for civil society to achieve any change. The role of civil society cannot be to replace the political institutions. It is rather an institution to monitor state activities, to express ideas and demands and to bring those ideas and demands into the political process. Just if there is no process, the ideas will not lead to anything.

The energy of small achievements

Looking back to the previous chapters, the situation described does not seem too bright for the civil society movements that have been active during the garbage crisis in Lebanon. However, the interviewees point out that small achievements have been made since summer which give them hope for the future.

First of all, it was civil society that achieved the closure of the Naameh landfill and also prevented a reopening of the site which has taken a lot more garbage than its original capacity would allow to. This is also seen as a triumph by the protestors in Beirut. Besides, the pressure of the movement prevented the government from establishing new companies for the waste management that were linked to sects – for example like Sukleen – according to some activists. The Lebanese government also agreed to give money for waste management to the municipalities, so that they can take care of their garbage. "We stopped the privatization of the waste management in Lebanon, we cannot say that nothing happened", Paul Abi Rached stresses.

An achievement for the movement on a government level is that the Minister of Environment Machnouk is not longer in charge of the waste management. From the beginning protestors have demanded him to step back from his position, claiming he was neither competent nor willing to fulfill his job. Activists are therefore at least



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somehow satisfied that all of Machnouk's tasks regarding waste were handed over to Minister of Agriculture Chehayeb. The courts have now begun to deal with some corruption cases and even Sukleen is being investigated, something that the movement groups have constantly been demanding. Additionally, a general debate about courts and the legal system in Lebanon has been initiated.

Perceived as the most important achievement by the activists is the fact that the movement was able to mobilize such a high number of people without having opportunities like parties to offer free food and transportation to participants. People joined the rallies because they felt a need to raise their voice and speak out for their rights in public. It was not just a small activist group as it had been the case for many other protests in the past – this time there were thousands in the streets. For the first time people came without being guided by sectarianism, even people who had been with parties before joined the protests. Yara Nassar from LADE says: "It was kind of refreshing to see that the demands that we've been asking for for years, you can see now being brought up by people on the streets with no organization at all. No one organized these people, especially in the early movement stage. So these are people talking about [...] what we have been saying for years." Everyone in the country heard about the movement and it received a lot of attention. In the streets a dialogue between people from different classes and sects was initiated, a dialogue that was about being a citizen, not a member of a political party or sect. An opinion poll conducted by LADE shows that the trust in NGOs among the citizens has almost doubled between 2013 and 2015.¹⁰ This can be a sign that people believe that civil society can change something to the better.

Hope for the future?

Seeing that the civil society movement during the garbage crisis could make some small achievements makes many activists feel positive about the future of movements in Lebanon. They would also stress that the movement that had emerged in summer 2015 is not dead and still many important activities are going on, though not always visible in the streets. Also new coalitions and coordination measures are being planned. Others claim that the movement is dormant and will no longer be noticed by society and politicians, although the activities in summer had an impact. They believe that there might be a possibility for new movements, but the challenges are too great for the current movement to achieve any bigger change in the country.

There is no doubt about many things going wrong between the different movement groups and how the movement was organized. But this can be seen as a chance rather than solely as a problem. "It's not a problem if we cannot unite, if anyone has his own ideas, his own agenda, it's not a problem. But it would have been better for the movement if we could have one decision for all", Abbas Saad from the AUB Secular Club thinks. This reflects the idea of making real politics, bringing up differences in debates, but finding the best possible solution which all can agree on. As described before, most activists did not have any prior experience in political organization and it will therefore take time until they are ready for a political process, even though they have been learning every day since the protests started. It is a first step towards a discussion that is not about money and power, but about politics and progress.

10- In 2015 23% said they completely trust NGOs, in 2013 only 12% of the interviewed Lebanese would state that. Data from: Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (2015), Opinion Poll: Performance and Direction of Municipal Councils in Local Governance in Lebanon, p. 38

The civil society movement did not have a strong influence on the political level, but it was able to influence civil society and political culture in Lebanon. Considering the difficult and paralyzed political situation in the country this seems obvious. But a change in society is something very important that a social movement can build on and society constitutes a basis of support. As discussed in this paper, it will also be a long way to get more people to think of themselves first and foremost as citizens rather than as members of a sect for example. At the same time it can be observed that a new generation is growing up in Lebanon – a generation of educated people who have traveled to other countries and are not plagued by war memories.

One should be careful in predicting a fast change for Lebanon, but the protests that emerged in Beirut because of the garbage crisis are far more than just a demonstration. People did not only go to the street to tell politicians their opinion and to demand change, but also to connect to each other. To many people the protests showed that they are not alone with their way of thinking and that there are far more people in Lebanon that want change than they had believed before. Maybe it was something like a protest spirit that emerged and gave many activists the strength to continue their activities. They acknowledge that a lot of work still needs to be done, like addressing the gap between the city and the rural areas and finding ways to work together with groups that have different opinions. But the people can build on the common ground that they have in opposing the sectarian system and on everything they have achieved so far.

The majority of groups from the movement would agree that it is to be expected that change needs time as they have merely asked for reforms and not for a revolution. No one wants chaos or turmoil in Lebanon, there is too much already in the region. All the people want is a better future for their country. Certainly, this is not solely in their own hands as global politics and the regional situation can change things in Lebanon quickly. But there is a number of motivated and optimistic people whose belief in that better future cannot be taken away easily. "Yes, we believe in change and we named our campaign The Change is Coming and there were signs of this because of the participation of the people", Ayman Mrouweh says. Hashem from The People Want adds: "It's not about hope. Nowadays it's about work and it's about what kind of life we want to have. So we can either leave this country and try to have our life elsewhere with less complications or if we want to stay here, we will have to create our own political action towards our reality. It's something that we cannot escape."

Annex - List of interviewees

Paul Abi Rached, president of Lebanese Eco Movement and T.E.R.R.E. Liban, interviewed on 30/11/2015.

Mahmoud Abou Zeid, member of Youth of the 22nd August (شباب 22 آب), interviewed on 02/12/2015.

Hashem Adnan, member of The People Want (الشعب يريد), interviewed on 01/12/2015.

George Azar, member of We want Accountability (بدنا نحاسب), interviewed on 10/12/2015.

Ibrahim Dsouki, member of Leave us Alone (حلوا عنا), interviewed on 08/12/2015.

Samer Frangie, AUB assistant professor in Political Studies, interviewed on 14/12/2015.

Ali Mourad, member of To the Streets (عالشارع), interviewed on 03/12/2015.

Ayman Mrouweh, General Secretary of the Union of Lebanese Democratic Youth that created the Change is Coming (جايي التغيير) campaign, interviewed on 03/12/2015.

Yara Nassar, Executive Director at Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), interviewed on 09/12/2015.

Abbas Saad, president of the AUB Secular Club, interviewed on 20/12/2015.

Nizar Saghiegh, Executive Director at The Legal Agenda, interviewed on 25/11/2015.

Assaad Thebian, member and co-founder of You Stink (طلعت ريحتكم), interviewed on 19/11/2015.