Political Perspectives in Lebanon After the Thawra

A Study of Secular Clubs

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Contents

"The abolition of political confessionalism shall be a basic national goal and shall be achieved according to a staged plan" (Paragraph H, Preamble, introduced by the Constitutional Law of September 21, 1990).

"The Chamber of Deputies that is elected on the basis of equality between Muslims and Christians shall take the appropriate measures to bring about the abolition of political confessionalism according to a transitional plan. A National Committee shall be formed and shall be headed by the President of the Republic […] The task of this Committee shall be study and propose the means to ensure the abolition of confessionalism […] The principle of confessional representation in public service jobs, in the judiciary, in the military and security institutions, and in public and mixed agencies shall be cancelled in accordance with the requirements of national reconciliation; they shall be replaced by the principle of expertise and competence" (Article 95, as amended by the Constitutional Law of November 9, 1943 and the Constitutional Law of September 21, 1990).

In the Lebanese Constitution, political confessionalism is mentioned three times: once in its Preamble, and twice in Article 95. These three mentions touch upon the abolition of a system that has been governing Lebanon since its independence in 1943. Confessionalism in Lebanon relates to the distribution of political and administrative positions according to confessional criteria. Not only does confessionalism require Parliament to be equally divided between Muslims and Christians, but it also extends, as stated in Article 95, to public service jobs, the judiciary, the military, security institutions and public/mixed agencies. As will be discussed later, confessionalism and sectarianism[1] also encompass the primacy of religious laws upon civil laws in Lebanon (« personal status »), therefore creating a *de facto* legal inequality between Lebanese citizens, as well as a strong sectarian divide between citizens on social, territorial and economic grounds.

Even though the abolition of confessionalism is defined as a "basic national goal" by the Constitution's preamble, as amended by the 1990 Constitutional Law that followed the Ta'if Agreement, nothing has been done so far in this direction. No National Committee has ever been created and sectarianism, as well as its pernicious inflections (notably, clientelism and corruption), remains at the core of the Lebanese political system. Ironically, sectarian leaders themselves have voiced their concerns about the sectarian regime's inability to fix Lebanon and the multiple crises the country is currently facing. Hussein Hajj Hassan, a prominent Hezbollah politician, responded with a stern "certainly" when asked by journalist Anthony Samrani if he and his party would support the end of political sectarianism.[2] Even Michel Aoun, President of the Lebanese Republic from 2016 to 2022, blamed the government's dysfunctions on "the challenges presented by Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system".[3]

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[1] Whereas confessionalism refers to a particular system of government, sectarianism is an umbrella term that describes the organization of social and political life around sectarian divides. This paper uses both terms, as confessionalism and sectarianism are deeply interwoven in Lebanese institutions and society.
[2] 'Hussein Hajj Hassan : Le Hezbollah n'a pas un projet de changement du régime politique', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, May 2, 2022. Available at: www.youtube.com (Accessed: Nov. 21, 2022)
[3] Homsi, N. (2022) 'What's next for Lebanon with no government and soon no president?', *The National News*, September 21. Available at: www.thenationalnews.com (Accessed: Nov. 21, 2022)

The turning point of the thawra

The staunchest criticism of the sectarian political model came from the civil society. Lebanese citizens have called for the abolition of this regime for more than a decade. The topic became a rallying cry for all Lebanese during the 2015 "You Stink" movement and more recently during the 2019 revolution (*thawra*). In 2015, what started as a rebellion against the government's mismanagement of waste soon became a global mobilization against its inability to tackle virtually any public issue. Sectarianism was blamed for its inefficiency. As Meier and Di Pieri wrote, the movement

> "mobilized around the common denominator of anti-sectarian narratives. These narratives go beyond merely criticizing and fighting sectarianism. Rather, they include a critique of the confessional system, sectarian affiliations, and religious extremism, in addition to the repudiation of corruption, ineffective governance, and social injustice, and demands for public spaces, accountability, transparency, gender equity".[4]

In other words, anti-sectarianism became a global and comprehensive movement, encompassing all kinds of demands and grievances emanating from Lebanese citizens directed against their government. This movement, initiated during the 2015 protests and the 2016 municipal elections during which the independent, anti-establishment "Beirut Madinati" list gathered 40% of the votes against the traditional sectarian parties, was later amplified during the 2019 *thawra*. The "Revolution" - even though this term is controversial among scholars - started on October 17, 2019 after the government announced yet another tax on its people, this time targeting the popular WhatsApp communication system. The *thawra* lasted for months until the first Covid lockdown in March 2020, and was briefly reignited after the Beirut Blast in August 2020. This movement was exceptional for many reasons, the most significant one being its national nature: the mobilization was national, from Tyre to Tripoli, from Beirut to the Beqaa; its demands, through their trans-sectarian spirit, fostered national unity.[5] On the first days, what was to become the *thawra* gathered up to one million people in Beirut.[6] Even though the mobilization started against the launch of the new 'WhatsApp tax', it soon became a global movement criticizing the elites in power and the corrupt regime. Protesters took on the motto previously introduced during the 2015 movement, "Kelloun Yaane Kelloun" (كلن يعني كلن), or "All Means All". Lebanese from all sects criticized a political system, i.e. the sectarian system, that is unable to provide its citizens with economic opportunities and public services. Moreover, many demands that were until then disregarded by previous social movements in the country were included in the *thawra*'s agenda, such as women's rights or LGBTQ+ rights.[7]

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[4] Di Pieri, R. and Meier, D. (2017) *Lebanon Facing the Arabic Uprisings: Constraints and Adaptation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 79.

[5] This idea was notably developed by Nawaf Salam during the conference 'La thawra d'octobre 2019, trois ans après : de l'espoir à la désillusion ?' held on October 28, 2022 at the Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut.

[6] Sullivan, H. (2019) 'The Making of Lebanon's October Revolution', *The New Yorker*, October 29. Available at: www.newyorker.com (Accessed: Nov. 21, 2022)

[7] Younes, R. (2020) 'If Not Now, When? Queer and Trans People Reclaim Their Power in Lebanon's Revolution', *Human Rights Watch*, May 7. Available at: www.hrw.org (Accessed: Nov. 22, 2022)

Three years later, the *thawra*'s outcomes are heavily controversial. Lebanon has spiraled down into the worst economic and financial crisis of its history and the momentum created by the October 17 Revolution failed to kick the sectarian elites out of power. However, the *thawra* allowed a new movement to arise: the 'October 17' movement, or 'Change' movement. Mostly composed of political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs) that emerged during the Revolution or groups that decided to join them, the 'October 17' movement transcends the traditional divide of Lebanon's political scene, i.e. the 'March 8th' and 'March 14th' movements. This division appeared after the 2005 Cedar Revolution that kicked Syria out of Lebanon, but was led by sectarian parties - whereas the 'October 17' movement seeks to build an independent, anti-sectarian narrative away from traditional politics. As Fadi Nicholas Nassar wrote, "Lebanon's October 17 revolution fundamentally altered the country's political fabric in a simple but somewhat irreversible way: elections are now open to new actors not aligned with established political parties".[8] Indeed, 13 'Change' MPs, i.e independent and supposedly not affiliated with any traditional parties, were elected during the 2022 parliamentary elections. The *thawra* did not lead to the system's downfall as it wished for; but it nevertheless led to the emergence of a new political narrative and of new grassroots organizations.

The development of secular clubs since the thawra

Secular clubs were definitely influenced by the *thawra* and benefitted from its momentum to grow and develop across the country. Secular clubs are generally, but not exclusively, university clubs whose goal is to promote secularism, social justice and democracy within their university but also on the national political scene. Secular clubs' activists were particularly involved in the *thawra*, organizing sit-ins, protests and 'talk-ins' to defend students' and youth rights. The number of secular clubs significantly increased after the revolution : in 2019, there were 3 clubs in Lebanon (AUB, USJ, NDU); there is now, as of 2022, 12 university clubs and 9 regional clubs. All of them work as grassroots organizations dedicated to amplify secular ideas to the youth. Building on the *thawra*'s momentum, secular clubs also advocate for the right to education, the implementation of a welfare state, or the safeguarding of minorities' rights in Lebanon. They work in partnership with Mada, an umbrella organization founded in 2017 that seeks to be a network between all secular clubs across Lebanon. In 2022, for the first time, Mada and regional clubs supported several candidates in the parliamentary elections. One of them, Ibrahim Mneimneh, was elected in the Beirut-II district. From grassroots organizations, secular clubs are becoming political actors at the national scale.

Secular clubs are indeed important political organizations for the youth and for students, especially those with secular and progressives ideas. They are platforms that allow them to voice their demands and concerns, as they have no other place to do so. Indeed, the Lebanese electoral law states that only those aged above 21 can take part in national elections. According to Asef Bayat, "when people are deprived of the electoral power to change things, they are likely to resort to their own institutional clout (as students or workers going on strike) to bring collective pressure to bear on authorities to

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[8] Nassar, F. N. (2022) 'The Critical State of Youth in Lebanon: Past Breaking Point and Organizing for Change', *The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies*, September 01. Available at: www.lcps-lebanon.org (Accessed: Sept. 20, 2022), p. 19

undertake change".[9] Moreover, not only are students deprived of their political power because of their age, they are also hushed because of political oppression and censorship from traditional parties. Therefore, universities and university clubs became one of the only safe space where students can voice their demands. It also explains why universities are increasingly political in Lebanon. Asef Bayat argues that this phenomenon can be observed throughout the Arab world, as "the surveillance from the side of the Arab state pushed civic activism into institutional realms such as college campuses, schools, mosques, NGOs"[10]. In Lebanon, however, surveillance mostly comes from sectarian parties, leaders and followers, as described by Sami Farsoun :

> "Political opposition in Lebanon has been forced to take to the streets or to engage in extra-institutional means as the varies segments of the domestic dependent bourgeoisie and semi-feudal lords have monopolized control of the political institutions of the country"[11]

As an example, one interviewee also stated that "in the early 2000s, during the Syrian occupation, politics were neutralized. Only those who were with the Syrian regime were involved in politics, and it was only in student circles that one could practice politics. That's how it started" (ITW Jana). Students are excluded from political participation because of their age, but also because of the stranglehold of traditional parties on political institutions. Student activism has therefore become their preferred way to voice their demands, and secular clubs are now grassroots political organizations where secular students can express their grievances and, to quote Asef Bayat's words, "bring collective pressure to bear on authorities to undertake change".

For all these reasons, secular clubs' activism is far from being a 'niche' topic. Their demands are highly political, from university-level grievances to a national-level programme. Universities in Lebanon are not closed spaces, impermeable to the power dynamics in the country. Traditional parties also maintain a strong presence in public and private universities across Lebanon. A statement made by the Lebanese American University (LAU) secular club explains the importance of university elections for wider national developments :

> "Universities are not isolated spaces. They are spaces of political-social contestation. In our context, they are a contestation between secular, progressive candidates and sectarian, clientelistic forces.
> Students, particularly in the secular club, were an instrumental part of the October 17 revolution, and an important force in the demonstrations following the August 4 explosion. University elections are a platform in order to empower such growing voices.
> We need to use every moment, every tool, every opportunity to fight back at a system which impoverished and harmed us for 30 years, and which is making deals at our expense today".[12]

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[9] Bayat, A. (2010) *Life as Politics. How Ordinary People Change the Middle East.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 11.
[10] Quoted in: Seeberg, P. (2015) 'Bringing People Back in Politics: The Role of Civil Society, Political Parties, and Regional Organizations in a Changing Middle East', *Democracy and Security*, 11(2), pp. 98-110, p. 100
[11] Farsoun, S. (1973) 'Student Protests and the Coming Crisis in Lebanon', *Middle East Research and Information Project Reports*, 19, pp. 3-14, p. 11
[12] LAU Secular Instagram post, 20/09/2021. Available at: www.instagram.com

Asef Bayat wrote that "youth may become agents of democratic change only when they act and think politically; otherwise, their preoccupation with their own narrow youthful claims may bear little impetus for engaging broader societal concerns".[13] Secular clubs' claims are far from being restricted to "narrow youthful claims"; as shown by the above-mentioned statement, secular clubs are linking their student demands to national, political grievances. Moreover, they have benefitted from the *thawra*'s momentum to grow and expand. As will later be shown, secular clubs are now trying to access the traditional political scene through Mada, therefore bearing a rather significant impetus for change.

Literature review and methodology

By showing how secular clubs have become actors of democratic and secular change in Lebanon since the *thawra*, this paper aims to bring new elements to existing literature on social movements and student activism in the Middle East. The *thawra* remains to this day an understudied example of social movement in the region, with the notable exception of the book *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution* edited by Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed, released in October 2022. This paper is not a record of the *thawra*, but seeks to study its political outcomes through the example of secular clubs, which are part of the 'Change' or 'October 17' movement that was born, or revived, during the revolution. Therefore, this paper adds on existing academic literature on social movements in the Middle East by studying one specific example of how social movements can produce political renewal within a certain social category, e.g. students and youth. There is abundant academic literature on student activism in Lebanon, especially before the war. This paper notably builds on Agnès Favier's PhD thesis entitled "Logiques de l'engagement et modes de contestation au Liban. Genèse et éclatement d'une génération de militants intellectuels (1958-1975)". However, few scholars have focused on the rejuvenation of student activism after the *thawra*. In addition to this, the study of secular clubs, as actors advocating for secularism, is significant since Lebanon is mostly studied by scholars through the prism of sectarian mobilization.[14] Therefore, this paper's goal is to study, in a modest way, the connection between student activism and secular advocacy post-*thawra* in Lebanon. It argues that students, through secular clubs, are active actors of democratic change in the country through the study of two of their main demands: the right to education and the fight for secularism. Therefore, it links their activism within their universities to their fight on the political stage.

A qualitative approach was chosen to conduct this research project. Ten activists from seven different secular clubs were interviewed between September and November 2022. All of them are former or current members of secular clubs and/or Mada. Because of this qualitative approach, the scope of this

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[13] Bayat, A. (2010) *op. cit.,* p. 19

[14] See, for example, *Social Movements, Mobilization and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* edited by Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel (2011); *Leaders et partisans au Liban* edited by Franck Mermier and Sabrina Mervin (2012); *The Politics of Sectarianism in Post-War Lebanon* by Bassel Salloukh (2015); *Hezbollah: Mobilization and Power* by Aurélie Daher (2019) or *Winning Lebanon. Youth Politics, Populism and the Production of Sectarian Violence* by Dylan Baun (2021).

research is limited, as there are currently twenty-one secular clubs in the country. The research on secular clubs would benefit from a more quantitative approach.

Interviews conducted:[15]

Name	Secular club	Date of interview
Elias	Université Saint-Joseph (USJ)	27/09/2022
Jana	Université Saint-Joseph (USJ)	01/10/2022
Antoine	Université Saint-Joseph (USJ)	01/11/2022
Said	American University of Beirut (AUB)	05/11/2022
Sarah	American University of Beirut (AUB)	10/11/2022
Ibrahim	American University of Beirut (AUB) + Mada	01/10/2022
Ayman	Lebanese University (LU) + Mada	24/10/2022
Salim	Lebanese American University (LAU)	29/10/2022
Ahmad	Nabatiyeh Secular Club	18/11/2022
Rifat	Université La Sagesse (ULS)	28/11/2022

Section I - What is a secular club ?

A typology of secular clubs

The first secular club was founded at AUB in 2008. The second club was then founded at USJ in 2011 and the third at NDU in 2018. Historically, secular clubs were student clubs, hence their important position in secular student activism nowadays. It is worth mentioning that secular clubs flourished in private universities, in which 59% of Lebanese students are enrolled.[16] After the *thawra*, secular clubs continued their expansion in private universities. There are now clubs in 11 of them: Lebanese American University (LAU), University of Balamand (UOB), Lebanese International University (LIU), Université Antonine (UA), Université du Saint-Esprit Kaslik (USEK), Beirut Arab University (BAU), American University of Science and Technology (AUST), Université La Sagesse (ULS) and, of course, AUB, USJ and NDU.

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[15] All names were modified to preserve the interviewees' anonymity.
[16] Badre, L. and Yaacoub, N. (2012). 'Education in Lebanon', Statistics in Focus, Central Administrations of Statistics, No. 3, p. 3

Fig. 1: Secular clubs in private universities.

University	Date of creation
American University of Beirut (AUB)	2008
Université Saint-Joseph (USJ)	2011
Notre Dame University (NDU)	2018
Lebanese American University (LAU)	October 2020
University of Balamand (UOB)	December 2020
Lebanese International University (LIU)	January 2021
Université Antonine (UA)	February 2021
Université du Saint-Esprit Kaslik (USEK)	February 2021
Beirut Arab University (BAU)	March 2021
American University of Science and Technology (AUST)	May 2021
Université La Sagesse (ULS)	August 2021

The differentiated development of secular clubs in private universities can be explained, to some extent, by their different political histories and identities. Historically, AUB and USJ have been stronghold for nationalist, secular and progressive activists (especially in the 1950s and 1960s). After the *thawra*, the impetus given by AUB, USJ and NDU secular clubs extended to other private universities. Most private universities clubs share the same values and experience the same challenges, e.g. the dollarization of tuition fees and the political fight against sectarian parties' representatives in their university. They participate in student elections, which are highly political. As will be shown in section III, results vary greatly depending of the club's age, the electoral law within university and the popularity of secular ideas on campus.

The Lebanese University (LU) secular club is a separate case. Further developments on the LU will be made on section II. The only public university in Lebanon, the LU was established in 1951. More than 79.000 students were enrolled at the LU across its 76 branches in 2019.[17] Because it is publicly funded, it is highly dependent on the government's decisions and on the overall functioning of the Lebanese state. Therefore, the challenges and demands of the LU secular club, founded in February 2021, are distinct from those of private university clubs, even though they all share the values of secularism, democracy and social justice.

A third category of secular clubs is regional secular clubs. The first one was established in Tyre in March 2021, and there are currently 9 regional secular clubs in total (as of December 2022).

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[17] 'LU in numbers', available at: www.ul.edu.lb (Accessed: Nov. 24, 2022)

Fig. 2: Regional secular clubs.

Name	Date of creation
Tyre Secular Club	March 2021
Aley Secular Club	May 2021
Saida Secular Club	June 2021
Ras Beirut Secular Club	October 2021
Nabatieh Secular Club	November 2021
Tripoli Secular Club	November 2021
Achrafieh Secular Club	January 2022
Baabda Secular Club	March 2022
Shouf Secular Club	March 2022

Regional clubs share the same core values as university clubs (i.e. secularism, social justice and democracy), but they also take into consideration the particular challenges of their regions. Therefore, their fights may vary because of these specific stakes. Even though they are not affiliated with universities, they mostly rally high schools students and university students. One interviewee from Nabatieh secular club defined its club's goals as such : "To redefine politics in the region with secular and democratic concepts away from the militia and sectarian tribal concepts adopted by sectarian parties". Therefore, "the purpose is to engage in the region and produce a counter-hegemony from below by creating an alternative common sense" (ITW Ahmad). In other words, university secular clubs aim to produce political change within their universities, as bottom-up organizations, whereas regional clubs are mainly focused on their regions.

Even though the clubs' challenges may vary depending on their university's status (private or public) and local challenges, their structural organization is similar. Every club is composed of 'core' members holding specific positions (president, vice-president, secretary, communication officer…). These 'core' members are most of the time elected to these positions by other members. The latter can participate in organizing events, they can have a position on the club's list during student elections or participate in one of the club's committees (political committee, recruitment committee, cultural committee…). The numbers and functions of these committees vary depending on the size of the club. Even though this research's scope is limited because of its qualitative approach, it is possible to say that secular clubs fit into the category designed by Mona Harb of "progressive activists".[18] Harb describes these organizations as "non-structural" and working in a flexible set-up, with horizontal forms of shared leadership. These organizations also rely heavily on social media as means of communication, which is the case for secular clubs, as will be shown later. Indeed, even though there

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[18] Harb, M. (2021) 'Youth in Lebanon: Policy Narratives, Attitudes, and Forms of Mobilization', *Arab Center Washington D.C.,* June 17. Available at: www.arabcenterdc.org (Accessed: Oct. 20, 2022)

are fixed positions within the club, membership is flexible and easy to access, and the decision-making process can be described as horizontal to a certain extent. Mada, the national network of secular clubs in Lebanon, also falls into this category. One interviewee who works with Mada described the organization as having "a more horizontal, flexible idea of membership that is based on mobilization" (ITW Ibrahim). Moreover, university clubs seek to have a good representation of every campus within their organization. Many universities have multiple campuses across the country. LAU, for example, has one campus in Beirut and one in Jbeil. To ensure good representation, LAU secular club makes sure its cabinet is equally divided between Beirut students and Jbeil students; one interviewee from LAU stated that the club's presidency and vice-presidency rotate every year between Beirut and Jbeil. The same thing goes for the LU, which is spread across 76 branches across Lebanon. Even though the main campus is located in Hadath (Baabda district), the club seeks to have members in as many branch as possible.

The secular clubs' demands

As mentioned previously, secular clubs may face different challenges depending on their university or region. However, they all share the three same core values : secularism, social justice and democracy. Even though there is no clear hierarchy between these three values, secularism seems to be the cardinal value. For secular clubs' activists, "secularism is the optimal political governing system that can help different communities co-exist" (ITW Salim), whereas sectarianism has failed to do so. Secularism means for them "the separation of State institutions and religion" (ITW Elias). However, as mentioned previously, political confessionalism and sectarianism are deeply embedded in every layer of Lebanese political and judiciary institutions. Because of this, in the Lebanese context, secularism refers to "the elimination of any confessional consideration from all aspects of the administrative and juridical levels of the Lebanese political body" and encompasses "both the de-confessionalization of personal status laws and the political system at large".[19] In other words, there can be two concrete ways to fight sectarianism in the Lebanese context: to adopt an optional civil code regulating personal status matters and to eliminate sectarian quotas for political and administrative positions. These two positions were mentioned by the interviewees. Indeed, secular clubs advocate for the end of the religious personal status law that gives religious courts the authority to regulate personal status (i.e. marriage, divorce, custody of children) within their sects ("We are in favor of a law that governs all Lebanese in their personal status", ITW Elias). This creates a fundamental legal inequality between citizens, as there are fifteen different personal status laws in Lebanon. Secular clubs also oppose sectarian quotas, a system that promotes nomination upon sectarian belonging instead of expertise. At their level, secular clubs refuse to use sectarian criteria when building their student elections' list. One interviewee recalled that a student group in their university, supported by a traditional party, was actually reproducing the official sectarian distribution within their own student list. However, it is worth mentioning that sectarianism can act as an umbrella term encompassing a wide variety of topics. For instance, USEK secular club stated that secularism entails:

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[19] Farha, M. (2019) *Lebanon, The Rise and Fall of a Secular State Under Siege.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 28

> "Separation of religion from political life
> Equal opportunities for people of all religions
> Religious freedom
> Fair decision making
> Equal treatment for all
> Freedom of speech: no religious group can apply pressure of dominance
> Democracy
> People are equal under the law, not their confession"[20]

Recent surveys show that the youth recognizes the negative role of the sectarian system and support secularism in general. The Adyan Foundation surveyed 1.800 young people aged between 18 and 35. The results are explicit: 89,3% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "the sectarian political system has proven its failure in protecting citizens and has hindered their development",[21] and 77% agreed or strongly agreed that religion should be totally separated from the Lebanese state.[22] Moreover, 63,7% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the idea of adopting an optional civil personal status in Lebanon.[23] This shows that the secular clubs' definition of secularism is rooted in global youth demands and grievances against the sectarian system.

The second demand shared by secular clubs is social justice. It encompasses other values, such as social equity or protection of minority rights (women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, refugees' rights…). One interviewee summarized it as follows:

> "We demand social equity and inclusive campus that is accepting of all communities, whether it's the queer community, women… […] We demand equity and equal opportunities for students to be able to enroll in this university and to continue their education regardless of their social status. We want to ensure that every student, regardless of their gender, their ideology, their political affiliation, everyone has equal chances in attending the university" (ITW Salim).

For secular clubs activists, social justice should prevail both in the global Lebanese society, but also within their university campuses. Social justice is linked with the implementation of a welfare state in Lebanon that would guarantee equal access to public services to all its inhabitants, whether Lebanese or not. As secular clubs mainly developed within higher education institutions, they specifically focus on the right to education in the country. As showcased in Salim's interview, access to higher education is being jeopardized by two factors: social inequalities and the lack of inclusivity. Indeed, increasing tuition fees in private universities prevents students from lower social classes to enroll in these universities. The economic collapse also has pernicious impacts on students' attendance (i.e. because of the rising costs of transportation). Moreover, the lack of inclusivity and absence of administrative procedures to fight sexism, homophobia or racism can discourage students to pursue their education. The fight for the right to education, which means inclusive campuses and access to universities for every student, is therefore an important part of the secular clubs' demands.

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[20] Kaslik secular Instagram post, 10/02/2021, available at: www.instagram.com
[21] Al-Hindy, E. (2020) *Youth Public Opinion for Non-Sectarian Politics in Lebanon.* Available at: www.adyanfoundation.org (Accessed: Sept. 20, 2022), p. 36
[22] *ibid.*, p. 32
[23] *ibid.*

The third core value defended by secular clubs is democracy. They support a more participatory approach to politics and believe that Lebanese citizens should play a more important role in national politics. One interviewee stated for example that they were in favor of direct democratic methods, such as referendums. Within their universities, secular clubs advocate for more autonomous student councils. Student elections are held every year, around October/November, in most universities (but not all of them). Students vote for their representatives who will then sit in the student council for a year or so. As will later be shown, these elections are highly political, with traditional parties supporting certain lists to maintain their stranglehold on Lebanese universities. Secular clubs also build lists to strengthen their presence within student councils. However, a majority of interviewees stated that these councils barely have any autonomy or power. Therefore, their fight for a more autonomous student council is linked to their global fight for democracy, as this instance is an important bridge between the university's administration and the student body. Secular clubs also advocate for more transparency in decision-making processes in their universities.

The three core values - secularism, social justice and democracy - are indeed translated into student demands within their universities. However, secular clubs have a broader political agenda. This agenda is directed against the sectarian system. As stated by Erik Neveu, "a social movement is defined by the identification of an opponent […] Demands can only be deployed against a designated opponent".[24] In the case of secular clubs, and of virtually almost every movement/organizations that erupted after the *thawra*, this designated opponent is the sectarian system, i.e. the sectarian elites in power and the political establishment. The fights led by secular clubs against traditional sectarian parties within their universities is seen as a fight against the ruling class, as it extends its influence in higher education institutions. The struggle against the system is also visible for regional secular clubs; as stated by one interviewee from Nabatieh secular club, "it is important to ensure that authoritarian structures in the South don't have a monopoly on political life here" (ITW Ahmad). That is why secular clubs' demands go beyond what Asef Bayat calls "narrow youthful claims", proving that secular clubs can be actors of democratic change. For example, AUB secular club released a list of their own national grievances in April 2022 for the parliamentary election. These demands included universal healthcare,[25] protecting freedom of assembly,[26] a unified civil code for personal status laws,[27] holding banks accountable for the economic crisis and the redistribution of losses[28] and full sovereignty on Lebanese lands.[29]

[24] Neveu, E. (2019) *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux*. Paris: La Découverte, p. 10
[25] AUB secular club Instagram post, 16/04/2022, available at: www.instagram.com
[26] AUB secular club Instagram post, 18/04/2022, available at: www.instagram.com
[27] AUB secular club Instagram post, 18/04/2022, available at: www.instagram.com
[28] AUB secular club Instagram post, 20/04/2022, available at: www.instagram.com
[29] AUB secular club Instagram post, 20/04/2022, available at: www.instagram.com

Secular clubs' means of action

In order to spread their ideas and put their demands into practice, secular clubs resort to three main means of action: online activism, direct political action and advocacy work. Online activism is a distinctive feature of what Mona Hard describes as "progressive activists". Indeed, secular clubs use social media platforms to spread their ideas and share their news. Social media presence has many benefits: it is accessible to everyone and allows activists to express themselves freely. This is particularly significant since most traditional medias (such as TV stations, radios, or newspapers) are actually owned by or linked to sectarian leaders.[30] Social media is therefore seen as a 'democratic' space where secular clubs can own their narrative to mobilize fellow students during elections and spread their ideas. As Fadi Nicholas Nassar wrote about 'Change' groups, "there appeared to be a consensus that social media [is] a tool to dispel disinformation, highlight their distinctive identity and platform, and a means to increase voter turnout. Social media allowed these groups to have control over how they represented themselves". [31] Online activism through social media platforms is not new in Lebanon, nor in the Middle East in general; it was particularly visible during the 2015 movement that gathered protesters around the hashtags #YouStink or #WeWantAccountability. For secular clubs, social media are tools that allow them to voice their concerns, make statements and, as written by Fadi Nicholas Nassar, "highlight their distinctive identity" - every secular club having for example their own graphic charter.

However, secular clubs' activism is not restricted to online spheres. They frequently use direct action to convey their ideas. The idea that direct political action can lead to change is deeply entrenched in grassroots organizations, especially since the *thawra*. These direct actions take many different shapes, the first one being on-campus activism. During student elections, secular clubs organize different activities (when authorized by the administration) to share their program and ideas. Secular clubs also take part in protests happening in the city. Secular clubs' actions were particularly remarkable during the *thawra*. AUB secular club and USJ secular club were extensively invested in protests at that time, organizing sit-ins, talk-ins and marching in the streets of Beirut, advocating for student rights and youth rights. Interviewees recalled a particular march that happened in December 2019 that gathered students from the LU, AUB, USJ and LAU. A few months before the *thawra*, in August 2019, Mada also took part in a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Education to protest against the dollarization and rise of tuition fees in private universities. This continued after the *thawra*: in July 2020, AUB secular club protested against the administration's decision to fire 800 of its employees; in August 8th, 2020, secular clubs also participated in the mass protest that denounced the government's negligence that caused the Beirut Blast.

Finally, secular clubs also use advocacy works to disseminate their values and ideas. They mostly take the shape of events or conferences organized under their names, within their universities or outside if the administration doesn't allow it. LU secular club, for instance, is not allowed to do so. Conferences are a way to reach out to fellow students and convey their ideas. Secular clubs host

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[30] On this topic, see Cochrane, P. (2007) 'Lebanon's Media Sectarianism', *Arab Media & Society*, August 16. Available at: www.arabmediasociety.com (Accessed: Nov. 25, 2022)

[31] Nassar, F. N. (2022) *op. cit.*, p. 13

political activists that share the same values to have discussions with students. For example, in September 2022, AUB secular club organized a roundtable entitled "From campus to parliament: the student movement and its role in crucial milestones" with opposition MPs Ibrahim Mneimneh, Halime El Kaakour and Michel Douaihy;[32] in March 2022, NDU secular club and UOB secular club organized an online discussion on feminism in the Middle East with Katrina Leclerc, director for MENA at GNWP;[33] in October 2021, UOB secular club hosted an online discussion on mental health with clinical psychologist Mia Atoui.[34] These are only a few examples of the wide variety of topics tackled by secular clubs in their advocacy work.

To fully understand the scope of secular clubs' fights and the intricate connection between the clubs' university and national demands, section II will focus on the fight for the right to education and section III will concentrate of the fight for the implementation of secularism in Lebanon. This will show how secular clubs act as student unions and as political grassroots organizations at the same time.

Section II - Fighting for education in Lebanon

The commodification of education in Lebanon

Secular clubs' fight for education, or specifically the right to education, is rooted in their fight for social justice and democracy. It is linked with the development of a welfare state that could provide citizens with public goods and public services. Access to higher education is being jeopardized by increasing tuition fees in private universities and by the neglect of the LU, the only public university in the country. The primary cause is the continued commodification of education, against which secular clubs are actively fighting.

Even though liberalism and the laissez-faire doctrine have always been embedded in Lebanese politics since the State of Greater Lebanon (1920), the 1990s neoliberal reconstruction played a tremendous part in the current education crisis. It allowed privatization and sectarianism to flourish in the education sector. Hannes Baumann dedicated an entire book, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction*, to this topic. He notably shows how Rafiq Hariri, who was Prime Minister from 1992 to 1998 and from 2000 to 2004, "embedded the neoliberal system into all sectors, empowering private organizations at the expense of public institutions". [35] Education was no exception to this, and it particularly suffered from neoliberal reforms led by Hariri's governments. There was no significant investment in public services during his time in office, including in the

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[32] AUB secular club Instagram post, 17/09/2022, available at: www.instagram.com
[33] NDU secular club Instagram post, 25/03/2022, available at: www.instagram.com
[34] UOB secular club Instagram post, 07/10/2021, available at: www.instagram.com
[35] Haidar, F. (2021) 'Higher Education and the Commodification of the Future', April 30. Available at: www.beirut-today.com (Accessed: Oct. 6, 2022)

education sector. But, most of all, education became a means of patronage and clientelism for sectarian leaders because of the continued impoverishment of the population under the neoliberal reconstruction. Hariri's policies, which were based on alleged "trickling-down" effects, increased poverty and inequalities. Poorer households were particularly vulnerable to clientelism, because they are less likely to afford private, fee-paying schools for their children. As Baumann states, "there is therefore a scope for patronage by proving free education (by building schools or giving scholarships for private schools)".[36] Poorer households mostly rely on free education, i.e. public schools that are less likely to provide students with an "acceptable level of academic competence". A study conducted by the Ministry of Education in 1998, used by Baumann in his research, showed that only 50,4% of students enrolled in public schools achieved an acceptable level of "academic competence" against 77,1% for students in private schools.[37]

Education was not the only sector affected at that time. "Service ministries" (i.e. Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health…) were used by warlords-turned-politicians as a means of patronage, notably through overstaffing (giving public jobs to their constituents to secure voting and allegiance). This led to major inefficiencies in public sectors that were affected by it. Baumann's conclusion is that not only does neoliberalism boost the private sector at the expense of the public sector, but it also reproduces "the political economy of sectarianism". Neglecting public education allows sectarian leaders to use it as a means of patronage. It deprived citizens from their right to access education (because of the rise of private, fee-paying schools that are not accessible to everyone) and left public schools, including the LU, at the mercy of sectarian leaders. The state disengaged from the education sector, also leaving private universities free to increase their tuition fees without any limitation.

The case of the Lebanese University

The LU is particularly affected by the continued commodification of education in Lebanon. Because private organizations were always favored, the LU was belatedly founded in 1951. Students from private universities led mass protests demanding the creation of a free university to guarantee the right to education for all. Farjallah Honein, who studied law at Huvelin, died during a protest advocating for free education in Lebanon. This impetus continued until the 1970s. At this time, students were calling for "a genuine national university with a full-fledged technical program, state grants and scholarships for students from lower class backgrounds" to ensure that every students could have access to higher education.[38] Lebanese students have a long history of fighting for the right to education, and secular clubs are the heirs of this battle. Because of this, the LU has a symbolical importance for secular clubs.

Today, the LU is suffering from the government's mismanagement of the education sector and the continued implementation of neoliberal policies in Lebanon. Because it is publicly funded, the LU's budget is decreasing. This is a long-term trend: between 2005 and 2014, 210 billions Lebanese pounds that were previously allocated to the LU's budget were re-allocated to "more crucial areas within the

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[36] Baumann, H. (2017) *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[37] *Ibid*.
[38] Farsoun, S. (1973) *op. cit.*

government".[39] However, the economic collapse has made things even worse: between 2018 and 2021, the government cut the LU's budget by 55 billions LBP.[40] It is worth mentioning that while the LU's budget is being reduced, private universities benefit from governmental policies. For example, they benefited from subsidized loans from the Banque du Liban: allegedly, they reached 75 millions $ for AUB and AUB medical center, 25 millions $ for LAU and 11 millions $ for USJ.[41] Education is not deemed a priority sector for the government, and the consequences for students are enormous. The reduction of operating costs means, for example, that buildings are not sufficiently maintained and that the LU is not adapting to the increasing number of students entering the university each year, therefore jeopardizing the quality of the education provided to them. Moreover, professors are heavily suffering from the reduction of budgets, as their salaries are still being paid in LBP at the 1,501 rate, which means that they cannot cover the galloping inflation. Professors have been on strike for months to demand a rise of their salaries.

In other words, not only is the LU symbolically important because it was created thanks to student activism, but it is also a good indicator of the overall functioning of the Lebanese state. The failure of the LU is representative of the failure of the state as a whole. Rotberg wrote that "nation-state fail because they can no longer deliver positive goods to their inhabitants", and that "when a state has failed or is failing, education and health systems become increasingly decrepit and neglected".[42] Indeed, the decline of public education in Lebanon, particularly of the LU, adds on to the multiple symptoms that can be observed in the country nowadays, such as shortages of electricity, fuel, or the decline of the health system. The creation of LU secular club in February 2021 was therefore deemed "historical" because, as stated by activist Verena El Amil, "the LU is the most essential battle as it is the cover image of what the education sector looks like in Lebanon".[43] As will be discussed in section III, LU secular club is actively fighting against academic sectarianism within the university: but it is also a vanguard movement against the decline of the LU and for the right to education in Lebanon. The fight for the LU is highly political. As one interviewee studying at the LU said, it is important "to read the issue of the LU as being related to the Lebanese system, in order not to depoliticize this issue" (ITW Ayman). It is thus important "not divide the students' and teachers' struggle for their salaries, and to create an intersectional movement between the two" (ITW Ayman). The rise of the LU's budget is one core demand of the LU secular club. The club thus stands at the forefront of the fight against the decline of the Lebanese state and the consequences of neoliberalism on the higher education sector in the country.

[39] Beat, A. (2021) 'The Intentional Dismantling of the Lebanese University', *Watchdogs Gazette*, May 29. Available at: www.watchdogsgazette.com (Accessed: Oct. 10, 2022)

[40] *ibid.*

[41] Haidar, F. (2021), *op. cit.*

[42] Rotberg, R. (2003). 'Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators', in Rotberg, R. (Ed.), *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 1-25.

[43] Zrein, R. (2021) 'Lebanese University Now Has A Secular Club', *The 961*, February 16. Available at: www.the961.com (Accessed: Nov. 28, 2022)

The commodification of education in private universities: fighting against dollarization

Even though the case of the LU is particularly representative of the commodification of education in Lebanon, private universities are also suffering from mercantile logics applied to the education sector. Nowadays, the fight for education led by secular clubs takes the shape of fighting against the dollarization of tuition fees. This is not new: in 1971-1972, students were already protesting against a 10% raise in tuition fees.[44] This is a crucial stake, because tuition fees "constitute a fundamental issue in the educational choices of young Lebanese and contribute to perpetuate a fundamental inequality of opportunity in access to university".[45] Fighting against the dollarization is indeed embedded in secular clubs' activism for social justice and the right to education for everyone, regardless of their social status. In 2022, multiple universities (including AUB, LAU, BAU and UOB) announced the partial or full dollarization of the tuition fees, meaning that the university would only accept payment in fresh dollars. Previously, most universities would accept payments in LBP at a higher rate than the official one. However, dollarization is very problematic given the current economic crisis. Access to foreign currencies, especially dollars, has become very restricted in Lebanon. The official withdrawal limit authorized by the Central Bank is of 500$ per month, but in reality many banks have lowered this limit to 200$ per month, making it nearly impossible for students to pay their tuition fees.[46] Most importantly, many students don't have access to fresh dollars at all.

Secular clubs are leading the fight against the dollarization process, as it is perceived as heavily unfair for students. As stated by a member of AUB secular club :

> "The reasoning they [the university's administration] provide is that there is an economic crisis. Their expenses are all in dollars so they have to dollarize the tuition fees to cover these expenses. But we believe this is really unfair, and we know that the people responsible for the crisis are mostly political rulers in the country. They caused the crisis and they are still actively causing the downfall. So, why are the students paying the price for it?" (ITW Said).

The dollarization is another step towards making education a class privilege. To fight dollarization, secular clubs participated in protests but some met with resistance from their university's administration. In April 2022, five students from LAU were suspended after they participated in demonstrations against the tuition's full dollarization.[47] Administrations are uneasy with students' resistance to dollarization and some use intimidation techniques to silence them. Because online activism is a big part of secular clubs' activities, some interviewees mentioned that their administration tried to monitor what they were posting on their social media, imposing a *de facto* form of censorship. But secular clubs are elaborating innovative solutions to fight dollarization within

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[44] Farsoun, S. (1973), *op. cit.*

[45] Abdul-Reda Abourjeili, S. (2009) 'Le Liban', in Labaki, B. (Ed.) *Enseignement supérieur et marché du travail dans le monde arabe.* Beyrouth: Presses de l'Ifpo, pp. 217-245

[46] 'Several banks set to lower 161 withdrawal limits', *L'Orient Today*, September 4, 2022. Available at: www.today.lorientlejour.com (Accessed: Nov. 15, 2022)

[47] Bzeih, B. (2022) 'Dollarisation and Student Struggle', *Watchdogs Gazette*, April 25. Available at: www.watchdogsgazette.com (Accessed: Oct. 6, 2022)

their universities. In 2021, following the administration's decision to raise tuition fees to the 3,900 rate, AUB secular club raised a legal complaint to the judiciary to protest the decision. The statement issued by the club mentioned that:

> "This step is being taken so that countless students can continue their education instead of dropping out from university, or paying an unimaginably high price in order to remain. We are committed to our fight for affordable and accessible education"[48]

Another long-term fight led by secular clubs is the fight for the implementation of student contracts in private universities. This would be a contract between the student and the administration signed at the beginning of their education, and would set the tuition fees for the entire degree the student is pursuing. The goal is to protect students from the volatility of the Lebanese lira by setting a fixed rate. For example, a first-year student would negotiate the payment of their tuition fees at the 3,900 rate; the student contract would ensure that they would pay their tuition fees at this rate for the entire time of their education. This would prevent dropouts and would be a fairer solutions for students who already suffer greatly from the economic collapse.

By fighting against the commodification of education in Lebanon, in both private universities and the LU, secular clubs aim to defend students' right to education. In the Lebanese context, this battle encompasses the denunciation of the LU's decline and the fight against the dollarization of tuition fees. It exemplifies their overall goal to achieve social justice in the country, and makes secular clubs key actors for students rights in Lebanon.

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Section III - A bigger plan:
fighting for a secularism in Lebanon

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Theoretical framework

As stated in the introduction, secularism is neither new nor limited to student movements in Lebanon. It is at least as old as its counterpart, sectarianism. One of the first case of political sectarianism in Lebanese modern history can be traced back to 1922, when a Representative Council composed of 16 Christians and 13 Muslims was established - even though other examples can be found during the Ottoman era. In 1943, the National Pact (an unwritten agreement between then President Bchara al Khoury and Prime Minister Riad al Solh) officially established political sectarianism in the country, with the 1932 confessional census as baseline. The 1989 Ta'if Agreement endorsed the sectarian project and enshrined it in the post-war reconstruction. Even though this paper focuses on how student activism has reclaimed secularism, it is worth mentioning that sectarianism

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[48] AUB secular club Instagram post, 12/02/2021. Available at: www.instagram.com

was controversial from the very beginning. For example, in his book *Qalb Lubnan* (published posthumous in 1947), Lebanese-American writer Ameen Rihani wrote:

> "I am a Syrian-Lebanese who believes in the separation of religion from politics, because I realize that the main obstacle to national unity is the religious partisanship. The Lebanese idea, i.e. the national sectarian idea, is an old and impotent one. If we go by it, it will be a devastating blow to us. It was the cause of our defeat and misery in the past, and will be, if it prevails, the reason for our misery in the future"[49]

As mentioned before, secularism appears to be an 'all-encompassing' demand, ranging from the separation between politics and religion by adopting civil laws and terminating sectarian quotas in public administrations, to diminishing the influence of sectarian parties within Lebanese society. One interviewee stated that:

> "Secularism is removing the influence of religion from the State, which is present in larger extent in Lebanon… But I don't think this is what we mean in this context. It's not only about having laws that are not sectarian, it is also about creating social change, more secular, to minimize the strength of these religious institutions and to eliminate these sectarian parties" (ITW Rifat).

Secular clubs aim to fight sectarianism within their universities, meaning that their goal is to fight sectarian parties' stranglehold and influence within higher education institutions. In other words, they try to counter their position within the institution (whether it is the university itself or student councils), but also the narratives that they seek to implement on campus. As mentioned earlier, Lebanese universities are highly political, and political fights on campus often replicate those of the national scene. The dynamics are similar, even though the scale is different.

Once again, the *thawra* played an important role in this fight. Many interviewees stated that the revolution was a strong incentive for students to get political and to organize themselves to fight the regime in their institutional clout, i.e. the university:

> "The revolution happened, and the discourse we had at Huvelin was now in the streets. Everyone was chanting our ideals. Secularism, democracy, social justice. We were shocked […] There was a revival in the secular club and in Taleb [a list in the student elections]. So many people were now interested and listening to what we were saying" (ITW Jana)

> "After the revolution and the explosion, a majority of students became politicized. Even those who were not really political became political with the revolution […] There was a clear break between the system and the students, which had consequences in the [student] elections" (ITW Elias)

The *thawra* created a major momentum for secular clubs, especially during the following student elections. The *thawra* shed light on the wrongdoings of sectarianism and its connection with corruption, clientelism and state weakness.[50] Universities are evidently affected by these phenomena.

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[49] Farha, M. (2019), *op. cit.,* p. 136
[50] On this topic, see: Maïla, J. (2020) 'Head-to-Head with Corruption: The Lebanese Challenge', *Democracy Reporting International.* Available at: www.democracy-report.org

Therefore, secular clubs' fight against sectarianism on campus is perceived as a fight against the regime as a whole.

Academic clientelism and sectarianism

The fight led by secular club is directed against what can be described as 'academic clientelism' or 'academic sectarianism'. It characterizes the way sectarianism interferes in higher education institutions (HEI). Indeed, students are preferred targets for traditional sectarian parties. As Mona Harb writes, youth are "main targets of sectarian political parties, which present them with viable employment and social services opportunities".[51] Section II mentioned how access to education became a tool for traditional leaders to secure voting, notably through scholarships or the construction of schools. Hannes Baumann stated that neoliberal policies, because it always favored private institutions at the expense of public institutions (including schools and universities), were one of the main explanations for this phenomenon. However, in HEI, sectarianism also seeks to reproduce itself. It is important for traditional sectarian parties to exert influence on students to recruit and retain them once they enter adulthood. In order to do so, these parties can rely on student clubs affiliated with them and their student representatives on campus. As will be shown later, they also use intimidation techniques and violence (symbolical and physical) to maintain their stranglehold over HEI. Therefore, traditional sectarian parties seek to maximize their gain (in terms of partisanship). For example, the Lebanese Forces have a student section that includes a "Department of Francophone Universities" (دائرة الجامعات الفرنكوفونية) and a "Department of American Universities" (دائرة الجامعات الأميركية). Their goal is to strengthen the party's presence in private universities, notably during student elections.[52] Hezbollah also has a Committee on Higher Education (هيئة التعليم العالي) that "brings together university professors who sympathize with the Resistance. They number about 400 in total, distributed among different universities, with the most members at the Lebanese University (70%)".[53]

Academic sectarianism is blatant within the LU. As stated by the LU secular club, "The LU represents a miniature model which accurately reflects the Lebanese government with all its characteristics".[54] Not only is the LU subjected to traditional parties' narratives, it is also a product of sectarianism on an institutional level. After the 1989 Ta'if Agreement that ended the civil war, sectarianism expanded to first-category public servants, including the Rector of the LU, who has to be Shia. According to Adnan el Amine, this led to a "politicized" governance of the LU, meaning that the rector is chosen by the government (mostly on political grounds and affiliation) and deans are chosen according to the official sectarian distribution.[55] Here, confessional criteria or political affiliation prevail at the expense of experience or merit. This is a clear case of clientelism permitted by sectarian politics. It is highly problematic for the good functioning of the LU: according to Yvette Gharib and Nisrine Hamdan Saade, "political and sectarian interference in the affairs of the LU hinders the development

[51] Harb, M. (2021) *op. cit.*
[52] 'دائرة الجامعات الأميركية' & 'دائرة الجامعات الفرنكوفونية', available at: www.students.lebanese-forces.com, available at: www.students.lebanese-forces.com (Accessed: Dec. 5, 2022)
[53] Daher, A. (2019) *Hezbollah. Mobilisation and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 110-111
[54] LU secular club Instagram post, 14/02/2021, available at: www.instagram.com
[55] El-Amine, A. (2016) 'Les modèles de gouvernance des universités arabes', *Revue Défense Nationale Libanaise*, 96, pp. 35-65

of the institution and violates its integrity, for personal and electoral interests".[56] It also allows for traditional sectarian parties to impose their narratives on campus. As one interviewee studying at the LU stated:

> "They have turned the university into a militia, militias without whom nothing can be done. Nothing can be done without talking to these parties because they control everything in the administration" (ITW Ayman)

For these reasons, the establishment of LU secular club was important in order to build a counter-narrative against traditional parties' hegemony. According to the interviewee:

> "The institution of the secular club was essential to create a place where students could find opposition to what is happening at the LU […] The founding idea of the secular club was to create a real political identity that could stand as a clear and serious alternative against what is happening at the LU without being afraid to denounce things as they are and without leaving aside the issue of Hezbollah" (ITW Ayman)

Even though private universities are not concerned by sectarianism on an institutional level, they still suffer from pressure exerted by traditional parties. As will be shown later, it is particularly visible during student elections. Jihane Sfeir summarizes it as follows:

> "Factionalism now reigns on the campuses of private and public universities; warlords, leaders of militia parties, impose their candidates for academic positions even if the latter do not have the required qualifications; fraud in examinations and during student elections is becoming commonplace".[57]

Student elections: universities as political battlegrounds

The fight against academic forms of sectarianism led by secular clubs mostly takes place during student elections, when students elect their representatives on student councils. These councils work as an intermediary between the student body and the administration. Stephanie Daher labeled these elections "extended arenas of *hirak"*, even though she argues that they "could not be considered indicative of a power shift in the country".[58] This paper also argues that student elections are political battlegrounds for secular activists where they lead a fight that resembles that of the national scene. They are also good indicators of the overall political climate in Lebanon. Political claims often emerge from university demands, as shown previously with the case of the dollarization process. Moreover, sectarian parties and their representatives on campus usually resort to intimidation techniques and clientelistic methods to silence their opponents and maintain their stranglehold on HEI - ways that also resemble those used by traditional parties during national elections. In a nutshell, since universities are not 'closed systems', they are deeply influenced by the overall political tensions

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[56] Gharib, Y. and Hamdan Saadé, N. (2017) 'L'enseignement supérieur au Liban : un paysage complexe', *Revue internationale d'éducation*, 76, pp. 18-23

[57] Sfeir, Jihane. (2021) 'L'enseignement supérieur au coeur de la tourmente libanaise', *Transtext(e)s Transculture Journal of Global Cultural Studies*, 16, pp. 40-53.

[58] Daher, S. (2022) 'Extended Arenas of Hirak: Anti-Sectarian Electoral Contestation in Students and Syndicates' Elections', *Civil Society Knowledge Center.* Available at: www.civilsociety-centre.org

and atmosphere. Since secular clubs work as grassroots organizations aiming to educate around their three core values (secularism, democracy, social justice), student elections are also an important moment in their militant temporality. Their demands are highlighted on campus (when authorized by the administration), but also by independent media that are deemed close to the October 17 movement.

During elections, secular clubs often build affiliated lists (Taleb at USJ, Campus Choice at AUB) and programs with a wide variety of demands, from day-to-day claims to more political ones (i.e. the issue of dollarization or claims related to inclusivity on campus). Programs are usually available on the club's or the list's social media, where an online campaign is also conducted (i.e. videos, presentation of candidates, etc). Candidates and supporters organize events on campus to promote their ideas and gather students' opinions (when authorized by the administration). In many universities, students have to meet some criteria in order to be candidates (i.e. having validated a certain number of credits), although student electoral laws vary greatly between universities. After a few weeks of campaigning, voting is either held online or in-person, usually by faculties. Secular lists compete against others, mostly against lists affiliated with traditional sectarian parties. Their presence vary depending on the political tradition and localisation of the campus. For example, Christian parties affiliated with the March 14 movement (Lebanese Forces, Kata'ib) are strong in USJ, NDU and ULS, all located in mostly Christian areas. Parties affiliated with the March 8 movement (including Hezbollah, Harakat Amal or the Free Patriotic Movement) are mostly represented at LAU (Beirut campus) and AUB, both located in Hamra and Ras Beirut (mostly Muslim neighborhoods). Their political presence is strongly related to their overall presence in the districts where the universities are located, linking local politics with university politics. It is worth mentioning that electoral alliances between parties at national level replicate themselves within universities. Traditional sectarian parties' representatives also organize in lists and present candidates. The support they get from the party vary depending on the university, with some candidates even claiming to be independent to attract more voters.

It is to be noted that academic clientelism often interferes with political campaigns and debates. This particular form of clientelism can take many different shapes. Interviewees recalled that traditional sectarian parties would provide transportation to students or grant them exam-related privileges in order to secure their votes. According to LADE, parties would also buy students' votes through bribes (through gifts or providing services) and would also resort to intimidation techniques, such as campaigning on election day in front of the polling station.[59] Harassment of students on election day happened in front of LAU Jbeil campus during the 2022 student elections. Traditional sectarian parties also take part in online intimidation campaigns and threaten secular activists. One interviewee admitted that sometimes students stop their activism because they are scared for their future and for their education; another stated that they might have stopped their activism earlier, had they known that they would face such harassment. Physical threats and fear of physical violence is a top concern for students. One interviewee said that the possibility of being "violently attacked by them [the

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[59] 'Voting irregularities during student elections at universities', LADE & Heinrich Böll Stiftung-Middle East, 18/11/2016, available at: www.lb.boell.org (Accessed: Dec. 6, 2022)

traditional parties]" is plausible. Physical violence in Lebanese universities is not new: in 2007, four students were killed and twenty-five injured at BAU during clashes between supporters of the Future Movement and Hezbollah/Harakat Amal.[60] Because of this, student elections undergo an important securitization process - showing, once again, their highly sensitive and political nature. To preserve the voting process' integrity, some elections are monitored by LADE. LADE's main goal is to reinforce fair and democratic electoral practices in the country. Aside from its advocacy and awareness campaigns, LADE monitors parliamentary and municipal elections in Lebanon. The organization is also involved in student elections: between October and November 2022, LADE monitored elections in ULS, NDU and Rafik Hariri University (RHU).[61] Moreover, to ensure safety on campus, some universities decided to hold elections on week-ends, while others chose to involve the Army or private security officers.

Some universities use the risk of violence and clashes as a pretext to restrict political activism. At LAU, for example, political activism is not allowed on campus. As stated by one member of LAU secular club:

> "The university doesn't allow political activism to take place inside the university, claiming that the history of political activism on campus is not good because a lot of fights and clashes between students, especially during student elections, took place " (ITW Salim)

This prevents student candidates to voice political demands and restrict their claims to university-related issues. The administration would allegedly terminate one's candidacy if supported by a political force, whether secular/independent or sectarian. Things are even more radical at the LU, because student elections are not held at all. For the LU secular club, it is a clear infringement of the democratic process on campus :

> "It is eminent that the absence of university elections, which is the right of each student, led to the control of the decision-making process by unelected student councils. This reality, in all of its forms and interpretations, is nothing but a crystal-clear and disgraceful transgression against democratic and progressive principles; the latter must never be transgressed in any situation, and that is to preserve the most basic representative rights of students"[62]

These examples show how elections' restrictions on the basis of political violence can impact student representation and democratic processes on campus. It also negatively impacts the political scope of secular clubs and works as a form of censorship :

> "One of [our] first goals is to impose university elections, because there hasn't been any at the LU for ten years. The administration justifies this by the violence and clashes that can occur during elections. But according to the club, the absence of elections makes it possible to prohibit the emergence of a

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[60] 'Four killed in Beirut university clash', *The Guardian*, January 25, 2007. Available at: www.theguardian.com (Accessed: Dec. 6, 2022)

[61] 'بيانات ومواقف' LADE, available at: www.lade.org.lb (Accessed: Dec. 6, 2022)

[62] LU secular club Instagram post, 14/02/2021, available at: www.instagram.com

real student movement that could harm the interests of the administration and therefore of the political parties that dominate the political sphere of the university" (ITW Ayman)

Despite these challenges, secular clubs managed to deliver good electoral results since the *thawra*. Before the revolution, secular students' presence in student councils was marginal, if not inexistant. However, in 2020, secular clubs swept a historical victory in many universities.[63] At USJ, the secular club won 85 seats out of 101; at AUB, 9 out of 19; and at LAU, 16 out of 30 (Beirut and Jbeil campuses). This dynamic was confirmed in 2021 and 2022 at USJ and AUB, even though Campus Choice, AUB secular club's affiliated list, was surpassed by Change Starts Here, another independent list. This conveys the diversification of political independent offers in the global Lebanese scene. Even though some universities remain deeply linked to traditional sectarian parties (such as NDU or ULS), secular clubs' fights and wins were highly publicized on several media outlets, whether regional (i.e. Arab News, Middle East Eye) or local (i.e. Megaphone News, Beirut Today, The961, Now Lebanon), giving them a strong media platform to voice their political claims.

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Section IV - What's next?

Secular clubs, Mada and the electoral game

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The thawra's lost momentum

As shown previously, the 2019 revolution created a strong momentum for secular club. It highlighted the ideas that they had been voicing for many years and created a sturdy incentive for students to organize themselves. The number of members doubled in existing clubs after the revolution, and clubs were created in many universities and regions. The 2020 student elections resulted in a landslide victory for secular activists in many universities. However, three years after the *thawra*, Lebanon is facing a global backlash that also reverberate on progressive grassroots organizations, like secular clubs. The Covid-19 lockdown halted the *thawra*'s impetus and dynamics by forcing citizens to stay at home for an extended period of time. Online activism was severely hindered by electricity shortages and lack of Internet access. The country was then hit by the Beirut blast, the largest non-nuclear explosion in history, that destroyed huge parts of the capital city and stroke a decisive blow to an already decaying economy. The economic crisis is indeed one of the hardest challenges in Lebanon nowadays. The inflation rate reached 210% in July 2022 and dollars are now exchanged at a record rate of around 40.000LBP = 1$ (in December 2022).[64] These challenges definitely altered the *thawra*'s momentum, and it was proven during the 2022 parliamentary elections. Even though 13 'Change' MPs were elected into office, traditional sectarian

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[63] Chehayeb, K. (2020) 'Lebanon: Sectarian Parties Trounced in Unprecedented Student Elections', *Middle East Eye*, December 4. Available at: www.middleeasteye.net (Accessed: Sept. 21, 2022)

[64] Abboud, M. and Ricour-Brasseur, J. (2022) 'Sans le FMI, le taux de change à plus de 110 000 LL à la fin 2026', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, August 1. Available at: www.lorientlejour.com (Accessed: Dec. 7, 2022)

parties maintained a strong presence in Parliament, with Harakat Amal gaining 3 seats and the Lebanese Forces 2 seats compared to the previous election in 2018. This global backlash also impacted student elections, as it gave a new momentum for traditional parties' representatives in universities. As explained by one of the interviewee:

> "Now that the momentum is back somehow to traditional ways, they [the traditional parties' representatives] didn't need that much campaign. They just depended on their success in the parliamentary elections, they had a success, they built their momentum on 'ok, we re-gained ground now'" (ITW Salim)

Traditional parties also re-gained grounds in student councils. In 2021, traditional parties won 26 seats out of 30 at LAU (Beirut and Jbeil campuses), and 25 seats in 2022. At NDU, the secular club failed to win any seat in 2022. The thawra created a strong incentive for secular clubs, but the backlash that followed is a challenge for them:

> "In those years after the revolution, just after the Beirut blast, we had a momentum created by outside factors. After that momentum had died, we had to exert much internal efforts […] We had to do a lot of internal and logistical organization, not to maintain the same results, but not to fall and disappear, because a lot of movements that built themselves solely on the 2019 revolution and on the Beirut blast just disappeared when those momentums vanished" (ITW Salim).

According to the interviewee, secular clubs - especially those established recently - had to double their effort in order to "not fall and disappear" with the momentum. This is especially challenging given the overall fatigue and demobilization that followed 2020. Sarah Anne Rennick conducted a study on demobilization in Arab countries after the social movements that happened in 2011 (Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Tunisia) and 2015 (Lebanon). One of her finding was that state repression and violence were the main cause for demobilization in authoritarian regimes; however, in more liberal states (like Tunisia or Lebanon), she quotes "growing disillusioned with political activism" and "frustration with the lack of sufficient gains".[65] Indeed, the fact that the 2019 revolution led to virtually no concrete changes or reforms of the Lebanese political system reinforced these feelings of frustration and disillusion. One could even argue that things got worse after the revolution, the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis. It particularly affects the youth: a study conducted by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies showed that 55,4% of young people had reduced their food consumption and that 64,2% had reduced their use of lighting, water and heat because of the crisis. Moreover, 40% of the youth is unemployed.[66]

The tremendous impact of the economic crisis on the youth had three main political consequences on student mobilization, especially independent and secular activism. First, the continuous impoverishment of the youth reinforces the leverage traditional sectarian parties have upon them. Because of their clientelistic networks and their ability to provide services (in other words, to supersede the State), parties can attract new voters. Poverty leaves room for clientelism and

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[65] Rennick, S. A. (2019) 'Beyond Mass Protests: Rethinking What Constitutes Arab Youth Political Activism', *Youth Politics in the Middle East and North Africa*, 36, pp. 87-90
[66] Nassar, F. N. (2022) *op. cit.* p. 7

corruption. Talking about the impact of the crisis on his region, the interviewee from Nabatieh Secular Club stated that for instance "the economic crisis reinforced Hezbollah's control over people's material needs" (ITW Ahmad). In this context, it is harder for independent and secular activists to voice their concerns. Secondly, the overall collapse of the Lebanese state has pushed people to emigrate outside of the country, especially the youth. With unemployment on the rise and a lack of social safety nets in the country, young people often have to move abroad in order to work and provide for their families. The LCPS showed that 74,8% of the interviewees, who are all aged between 21 and 29, said they were considering leaving Lebanon for economic and/or political reasons.[67] This lack of perspectives is reinforced by the fact that 55% of the interviewees said they did not trust the government's ability to solve the crisis.[68] Secular student activists are also concerned by this issue. Thirdly, the economic crisis has shifted priorities for everyone, especially for the youth. They consider the crisis as the most important challenge that Lebanon has to face; comparatively, sectarianism is only ranked 4th/5th on the list of priorities.[69] Priorities have changed because many youth and students now struggle to make their ends meet, therefore leading to a general lack of interest for other topics. Many interviewees stated that one of their main challenges was the lack of awareness and global depoliticization on campus. One of them admitted:

"It was very hard to ring the alarm 'there is something wrong going on at the moment'. It's not that simple for us to establish this political awareness. It's like the current system injected a lot of people with morphine. They cannot recognize how severe the situation is" (ITW Salim).

Another interviewee summarized it as such:

"The anti-system, progressive revolution of the youth is there. It is a fact of today's political life. The majority of young people are there. But how can we say, with everything that is happening, that it is still important to have student elections? That's the important question. Because you have lost all your fights, you are losing in the country, you have lost in the economy, to the banks, to the religious parties […] The priorities of the students have changed. They think about leaving the country, finding a future, finishing their studies…" (ITW Elias)

Mada: a grassroots organization within the 'Change' movement

One question remains: how to establish a long-lasting strategy after the lost momentum of the thawra? How to engage with other students and develop the secular clubs' political activism? One answer could be formulated through Mada. Secular student activism, of which Mada is a important component, can be defined as a social movement in the sense that "it is an intentional act of togetherness marked by the explicit project to mobilise in concert. It develops within a logic of claim, of defense of a material interest or a cause".[70] Mada, an organization that functions as a network of secular clubs around the country, has indeed the "explicit project to mobilise in concert" to defend a

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[67] *ibid.*, p. 11
[68] *ibid.,* p. 10
[69] Nassar, F. N. (2022) *op. cit.,* p. 8
[70] Neveu, E. (2019) *op. cit.* p. 15

particular cause: the cause of secularism, social justice and democracy. Erik Neveu writes the following :

> "Social movements produce a specific arena: the arena of social conflicts, through strikes, demonstrations, boycotts, opinions campaigns. One of the singular features of this arena is that it functions as a 'space of appeal' […] By appealing - in the sense of demand - to mobilisation, to public opinion, the social movement also appeals - in the judicial sense - to what it perceives as a refusal to listen to it or to give it satisfaction within the classic institutional arenas"[71]

In other words, secular clubs and Mada produce their own activist arena - the secular student arena - through their many social fights (student elections, protests…). This arena allows them to voice their demand on a broader stakes through what Neveu calls the process of appealing. Mada appears to be a significant organization in the sense that it unites secular clubs around Lebanon and the organization also works with politicians and other 'Change' groups. Mada can appeal to mobilisation - because it is a grassroots organization and it relies on an extensive network of clubs across Lebanon - but also appeal in the judicial sense thanks to its relations with outside organizations.

Even though it is quite young, Mada's activities have quickly developed and can be summarized as such:

> "Starting with the rise of the AUB secular club and USJ secular club in 2008 and 2011 respectively, the Mada network now contains students, youth, and activists from more than 20 universities, regions and syndicates. Today - by challenging the status quo, participating in student elections, building a local grassroots movement, and forming a progressive front - we continue the battle for a country based on secularism, democracy, and social justice!"[72]

Concretely, Mada is composed of members from secular clubs, allowing them to connect and work together. According to our of the interviewee who is a member of Mada:

> "Mada is a network constituted by secular clubs. Mada has two avenues of work: there's the open working group which is open to all members of secular clubs and there's a council of representatives that includes two representatives per secular club. So it's an umbrella movement" (ITW Ibrahim)

Mada can therefore unify the secular clubs' demands and strategies, thus having a role as an organizer of secular student activism in the country - something that is deeply needed, as the atomization of activist movement is a challenge in the region. Asef Bayat recognized that "as in many parts of the Middle East, the youth in general remained dispersed, atomized, and divided, with their organized activism limited to a number of youth NGOs and publications".[73] It is particularly true for students: Fadia Kiwan's works show how student activism within the LU suffered greatly from the atomization of the university's campuses after the civil war.[74] It scattered student activists and limited the

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[71] *ibid*
[72] Mada network Instagram post, 17/09/2022, available at: www.instagram.com
[73] Bayat, A. (2010) *op. cit.* p. 18
[74] Kiwan, F. (2013) 'La société civile au Liban : un levier pour le changement ?', *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, 112(4), pp. 49-60

opportunity to organize, therefore restricting their overall political leverage. Moreover, Mada works as a support organization for secular clubs by providing them with "technical support, financial support, guidance and political direction" (ITW Ahmad). Interviewees boasted Mada's positive impact on their club, especially in terms of organizational support and Mada's network with other activists and groups. By doing so, and as a bottom-up movement, Mada seeks to build an 'activist vanguard' in universities whose goal is to counter establishment parties and the sectarian regime in general.

The 'appealing power' of Mada also lies in its position within the 'Change' movement. This umbrella term can be used to describe the groups (CSOs, political organizations and parties) that either emerged during and after the *thawra* or used the momentum it created to reinforce their position as opposition groups. The 'Change' adjective comes from the fact that they are not linked to any sectarian parties. Even though their profiles and programmes are highly diverse, they come together in their will to fight the current regime. These groups rank secularism in a different order but most of them challenge sectarianism to some extent. Therefore, despite their discrepancies, these groups can be labeled under the term 'October 17 movement', as they seek to impersonate the ideas amplified during the revolution (even if most of these ideas did not originate from the revolution itself). As Sam Heller writes:

> "The implicit premise of the October 17 movement was the idea that the country's most important political cleavage was not the divide between March 14 and March 8, or between the sectarian communities atop which party elites situated themselves. Rather, it was the rift between the Lebanese public and the country's party cartel"[75]

A comprehensive mapping of 'Change' actors was published in October 2022 by Democracy Reporting International.[76] It notably provides informations about their political orientations, policy priorities, plans and challenges. It also states that Mada's "core activity", or area of specialty within the 'Change' movement, is "electoral battle on universities" and that the group "places high priority on social justice".[77] I also argue that because of its 'appealing power', following Erik Neveu's definition, Mada is able to mobilize other 'Change' actors around issues that are essential to secular clubs. Education is one of these keys issues. For example, the LU secular club issued a call to demonstrate for the support of the LU on September 16, 2022. The call, supported by Mada, was signed by many 'Change' organizations, such as Shamalouna, LiHaqqi, Lana, Beirut Madinati, Minteshreen, Al Marsad Al Shaabi, Tahalof Watani and the National Bloc, among others.[78]

Fighting the system from within: is it possible to 'win' Lebanon?

In his book entitled *Winning Lebanon. Youth Politics, Populism, and the Production of Sectarian Violence*, Dylan Baun studies the political role of youth organizations in Lebanon between

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[75] Heller, S. (2021) 'Lebanon Is in Free Fall. Opposition Groups Have Radically Different Ideas on How to Save it', *The Century Foundation*, September 14. Available at: www.tcf.org (Accessed: Oct. 5, 2022)

[76] 'The Political Metamorphosis of Lebanon's Civil Society: Mapping the Change Movement', *Democracy Reporting International,* October 22, 2022. Available at: www.democracy-reporting.org

[77] *ibid.*, p. 54

[78] LU secular club Instagram post, 16/09/2022, available at: www.instagram.com

the 1920s and the 1950s. Most importantly, he shows how these organizations tried to 'win' Lebanon on a symbolical and political level by gaining access to official and unofficial power structures in the country; or, in other words, how these organizations went from the 'margins' to the 'center'. A similar dynamic is at work with secular student organizations nowadays. As shown previously, secular clubs' demands have always been very political and go far beyond the confines of universities. The main evidence that secular clubs' work go beyond "narrow youthful claims", to quote Asef Bayat's words, may lie in the fact that they are now actively participating in traditional politics, fighting to 'win' Lebanon on its own institutional grounds. During the 2022 parliamentary elections, Mada officially supported five candidates: Ibrahim Mneimneh, Nihad Yazbek Doumit, Samah Halwani, Verena el Amil and Ali Khalifeh. The first three candidates were running on the 'Beirut Tuqawem' campaign in the Beirut-II district. Mada partnered with the campaign that eventually led to the election of Ibrahim Mneimneh for a Sunni seat in Beirut-II. The case of Verena el Amil, who ran for a seat in Metn (Mount-Lebanon III district), is particularly striking. She was the President of USJ secular club and founded Taleb, the club's list for student elections, in 2017. She said in an interview with L'Orient-Le Jour:

> "We had a choice between March 14 or March 8. For me, that was unacceptable. The university then became a real opportunity to do political work and to apply everything I thought of. Like during the period of May 1968 in France, I was convinced that the student movement could change things"[79]

Verena el Amil, aged 25 during the campaign, was also the youngest candidate to run for elections. Her political journey, from USJ secular club to national elections, links politics in the university to the parliament - that was the title of a conference she gave at ULS in April 2022.[80] Ali Khalifeh's campaign, called "Al Janub Yuwayeh", was launched by Southern secular club (including Nabatieh, Saida and Tyre). According to an interviewee from Nabatiyeh secular club who was also part of this campaign, "our demands revolved around the development of the South and facing militaristic repression and monopoly" (ITW Ahmad). The clubs organized conferences and seminars in the South to promote the campaign's political program. Although the interviewee reported that members of the club and the candidate were subjected to harassment and violence from local traditional parties, and even though Ali Khalifeh was not elected, the campaign's impact is rather positive :

> "We have presented a new model for political action in the South, through a grassroots campaign that communicated with the people directly and focuses on the role of youth, and presents the project and the electoral program before putting forward the names of candidates […] Despite the sensitivity of the battle in the South in the face of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, we never compromised on our political discourse, as we presented a confrontational and clear political discourse in the face of Hezbollah's weapons, banks, and sectarian parties. The frank discourse rejecting the logic of the militia and Hezbollah's weapons has always been absent from the South" (ITW Ahmad)

Out of the five candidates supported by Mada or secular clubs, only Ibrahim Mneimneh was elected. He won 13.281 preferential votes, which makes him the second most popular Sunni candidate

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[79] Sader, M.-J. (2022) 'Verena El Amil: The 25-year-old ready to throw her hat into the ring', *L'Orient-Le Jour*, March 22. Available at: www.today.lorientlejour.com (Accessed: Dec. 12, 2022)
[80] Sagesse secular club Instagram post, 24/04/2022, available at: www.instagram.com

in Lebanon.[81] While being supported by the Beirut Tuqawem campaign, alongside Samah Halwani and Nihad Doumit, Ibrahim Mneimneh was part of the "Beirut the Change" list in Beirut-II district. Two other candidates from this list were also elected: Melhem Khalaf and Waddah Sadek. Ibrahim Mneimneh's campaign was focused on social justice, secularism (the end of sectarian quotas, the establishment of a civil state), progressive social and economical reforms (with a focus on public transportation, public education, social security) and sovereignty.[82] He stated that he "will never be part of the polarization between March 8 and March 14".[83] His victory was a significant win for Mada, who now has a 'candidate' in Parliament. However, the 'Change' MPs have to face numerous challenges in Parliament, the first being the "pressure to unite", according to Mneimneh himself.[84] MPs are currently tasked to elect the new President of the Republic after the end of Michel Aoun's mandate on October 31, 2022. As of December 2022, there has been nine session, all unsuccessful. It is worth mentioning that Ibrahim Mneimneh, alongside other 'Change' MPs, has been supporting Issam Khalifeh's candidacy. Issam Khalifeh is a researcher and former professor at the LU. He used to be part of the LU's student movement in the 1960s and, according to 'Change' MP Halime el Kaakour on an interview with L'Orient-Le Jour :

> "He represents the October 17 uprising, in everything that it entails. He fought for secularism and independence, and has always refused the interference of political parties and the tug-of-war between the March 8 and March 14 camps within the LU"[85]

The 2022 parliamentary elections was therefore an important milestone for Mada and secular clubs in order to 'win' Lebanon. From the margins, they initiated a bottom-up movement that is now moving towards the center. Even though the results might seem modest, the election of Ibrahim Mneimneh is a victory considering Lebanon's electoral law. Proportionality and sectarian quotas, mixed with the 'preferential vote' rule, mostly favor well-established candidates from traditional parties.[86] It was Mada's first political participation and certainly not the last. The next national elections, the municipal elections, will take place in 2023. The stakes are high for many reasons. First, because the Lebanese state is on the verge of collapsing, many argue now that decentralization could help solve mismanagement issues. For example, municipalities have the ability to establish and maintain public infrastructures, including health, transportation or education infrastructures. Secondly, there is no sectarian quotas in municipal electoral lists, which means, according to Ziad Abu-Rish, that "this system encourages cross-sectarian alliances since candidates require the support of constituencies greater than their own to be elected".[87] This could be an opportunity for secular

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[81] Alameddine, L. and Kebbi, J. (2022) 'Ibrahim Mneimneh, Freed from the Straightjacket of Political Sunnism', *L'Orient Today*, May 20. Available at: www.today.lorientlejour.com (Accessed: Nov. 10, 2022)

[82] 'Ibrahim Mneimné, l'urbaniste qui prône Beyrouth ville sans armes', *Ici Beyrouth*, June 2022. Available at: www.youtube.com

[83] *ibid.*

[84] 'Clear & Honest with Ibrahim Mneimneh', *The Beirut Banyan Podcast*, November 2022. Available at: www.youtube.com

[85] Hayek, C. (2022) 'Issam Khalifeh, a fierce advocate for Line 29', *L'Orient Today*, available at: www.today.lorientlejour.com (Accessed: Dec. 12, 2022)

[86] On this topic, see: 'The Lebanese Electoral Law - A complex system that can be understood', *Political Pen*, May 2022, available at: www.youtube.com ; also, Ghaddar, S. (2018) 'Challenging the Status Quo in Lebanon's Upcoming Elections', *The Century Foundation*, April 27. Available at: www.tcf.org (Accessed: Dec. 12, 2022)

[87] Abu Rish, Z. (2016) 'Municipal Politics in Lebanon', *Middle East Research and Information Project*, Vol. 280.

activists, even though the challenges are important: during the 2016 municipal elections in Beirut, the independent list "Beirut Madinati" had to face a list composed of virtually every traditional sectarian parties (Amal movement, Future movement, Free Patriotic Movement, Lebanese Forces, Kata'ib and Progressive Socialist Party) - thus showing that "elite cohesion" can be very resilient when facing adversity.[88] Mada is now actively preparing for the upcoming municipal elections.

Conclusion

Using Asef Bayat's theory as a starting point, this paper shows the rejuvenation of student secular activism after the *thawra* in Lebanon by studying its demands and means of action. One of this paper's goal is to provide a comprehensive mapping of secular clubs and to shed light on their place in the 'Change' movement. By linking student activism and secular activism, this paper argues that secular clubs are examples of how alternative political organizations are gaining ground in today's Lebanese society. Their trajectories show how progressive grassroots organizations can build a bottom-up movement to try and 'win' Lebanon. This paper highlights two specific fights that are lead by secular clubs, fights that are indicative of their overall activism: the fight for education and the fight for secularism.

The fight for the right to education is deeply linked with the clubs' fight to social justice. By fighting against the dismantling of the Lebanese University and the dollarization of tuition fees, secular clubs seek to prevent the overall commodification of education in Lebanon. For secular clubs, the promotion of public education and the right to access higher education - no matter the students' socio-economic status and background - is in line with their overall grievances against the Lebanese state. Their role as student unions on campus is at the very core of their grassroots activism, but it also serves as a platform. The fight they lead on campus against "academic sectarianism" - meaning against the stranglehold on traditional sectarian parties - mainly takes place during student elections. It has been shown that these parties resort to intimidation techniques and harassment to try and silence their opponents. Therefore, the fight against "academic sectarianism" is a continuation of the overall fight for secularism in the country. It shows how political Lebanese HEI are and how they become "extended arenas of *Hirak*", to quote Stephanie Daher's words.

As part of the 'Change' movement, secular clubs indeed became the vector of the *thawra* ideas and demands on the ground. Secular clubs are now undergoing a process of institutionalization, meaning that they are building on the *thawra*'s (lost) momentum to establish themselves within the 'traditional' political game. This is mostly done through Mada, who supported candidates during the last parliamentary elections. From the margins to the center, the clubs' trajectories are indicative of how the youth is redefining the way they want to practice politics. By doing so, they appropriate the century-old fight for secularism in Lebanon, an 'all-encompassing' fight that also include social justice and democracy.

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[88] *ibid.*

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