

The 2018 campaign of the civil society
Breaking through the sectarian system?



#YouStink Protest-August 29, 2015 - Photo by Joelle Hatem

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Introduction

On the 6th of May 2018 the Lebanese are voting for their parliament for the first time in 9 years. Elections, supposed to be held in 2013 but postponed repeatedly for security concerns, are held under a new electoral law. There is a huge discontentment with the political system and a high level of political apathy. The garbage crisis of 2015 and the municipal elections of 2016 showed that a huge segment of society does not feel adequately represented by the established political parties. This representation issue has a lot to do with the inherent corruption of the ruling political class and their failure to provide basic public services.

The 2018 election saw an increase in candidates who do not come from the traditional sectarian parties. These civil society groups, who have their roots in previous protests, try to create a new political discourse around secularism, citizenship and pro-human rights.

Civil society is a broad term. In general, it is used for non-state actors that are active outside the mainstream political centre. Lebanon witnessed an active civil society in the garbage crises and the municipal elections. They rally on a secular, environmental, anti-corruption cause. As such, civil society groups are the political opposite of the establishment. Mainstream Lebanese parties mobilize on a confessional base and use their position to maintain a patron-client relation with their constituency. By contrast, civil society groups do not claim any sectarian base and are outside the current clientelist system.

This paper examines the emergence of the civil society groups out of the events in 2015 and 2016. Several groups were established to contest in the parliamentary elections. During this process, groups had to surpass their differences for creating a coalition. Not all groups had this approach, some preferred to stay local and abstain from going into a coalition.

Beside list formation, civil society faced challenges in reaching out to a sufficient number of people. Traditional parties put enormous amounts of money in their campaign, which are means that the civil society do not have. A more structural challenge is the nature of the Lebanese sectarian system, which does not allow a non-confessional party to gain an easy access in the decision-making process. This paper followed closely the campaign of the civil society and will be published just after the elections. As such, the election result is included and the events in the days after, but an in-depth electoral analysis was not the aim of this research.

Events before the elections

Garbage protest and Beirut Madinati

In the past years, Beirut witnessed a growing active civil society that has been busy with exposing the established political parties. The Ta'if Agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war had a provision for abolishing political confessionalism, but it was never implemented.¹ Secular activists had been trying to mobilize people for protesting the sectarian Lebanese system but faced difficulties in breaching out of their own social circles. Beside this, the majoritarian system also withheld anti-establishment parties from getting in the parliament. The extension of the parliamentary mandate did rally just a few hundred people in 2013² while the system fell into a political deadlock between the two main blocks.³

In the summer of 2015, protestors took the street after the government failed to prolong the contract of the trash collection. The failure of the government to provide a basic state service like garbage collection led to the so-called garbage crisis. More than 100,000 people took the street, the biggest protest since the Cedar Revolution in 2005 when the Syrians were forced to leave. Trash piling up in the streets became quickly the symbol of a much larger political disease. The massive mobilization stemmed from a broader discontentment with the system: *"because the protest is not just about garbage, it's about everything."*⁴

The initial demands had a strong link with the trash issue. They wanted a sustainable solution and the resignation of both the minister of environment and interior. Gradually, this shifted towards drastic reform demands to change the electoral law and run the parliamentary elections.⁵

Two movements dominated the garbage protests, YouStink and We Want Accountability. Both wanted to fight the corruption and the system that is entrenched

in it but differed on the goals and continuation of the protests. While YouStink tried more to stick to the point for avoiding mistakes from the past⁶, the solution for We Want Accountability was inevitably a political one,⁷ linking it to economy and the struggles of the working class.⁸ Though they had their differences, the two groups were able to cooperate.

The movement was able to mobilize people on a non-sectarian and non-partisan base and transcended the sectarian boundaries. This was a challenge for the traditional confessional parties. A movement that rejected the sectarian representation undermined the legitimating of confessional leaders that has been in place since the Lebanese independence. A founding member of YouStink explained the traditional tactic to undermine groups that challenge the status quo:

*"First they ignore you, when that doesn't work, they try to assimilate you and if that failed, they start fighting you."*⁹

Although the garbage protests did not result in any concrete results, something had changed. Street protests were not successful, so a part of the protesters aimed to implement changes from within the system, through the municipal elections. Out of the social networks established during the garbage protests, Beirut Madinati was founded. This local, non-sectarian party restrained from a confrontational tone and focused on its ten-point program to improve Beirut. Their campaign gave them a professional and even corporate, technocratic image instead of a protest party. As so, they were able to channel the anger and protests into a party in which people from Beirut could lay hope.¹⁰ Although the traditional parties assembled together to confront this challenging party, Beirut Madinati was a fierce contender and was able to get 40% of the votes. The majoritarian system withheld BM from any seats, but this result was a political victory.

The sudden appeal and mobilization factor of the garbage crisis and Beirut Madinati showed a wider discontentment with the political system. Civil society in Beirut seemed ready for change and prepared to challenge the sectarian parties that took their constituency for granted since the civil war.

Electoral law

In June 2017, the Lebanese Parliament came to accept the new electoral law. The most significant change is the shift from the majoritarian system to a proportional one and the preferential vote. On a first sight, the proportional system seems a benefit towards smaller, independent parties. Indeed, the majoritarian system kept Beirut Madinati out of the municipal council, but the threshold to gain a seat in parliament remains high. The electoral law is no real game changer. The Lebanese consensus system requires cooperation between all major parties. If one of them would have perceived the new law as a threat, it would not have passed the parliament.

Aly Sleem, researcher at the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) describes the law as hidden majoritarian. The demand was for big electoral districts to have an effective proportional system in some districts, but the small size of some constituencies makes it a hidden majoritarian system. *Because the smaller you go for electoral system, the more the proportional system will be likely close the majoritarian system rather than the proportional system*¹¹. A report from the Lebanese Centre of Policy Studies (LCPS) describes the law as hidden majoritarian for small constituencies where there are several sectarian seats.¹²The candidates compete directly against each other for a single confessional seat which makes the proportional system de facto ineffective.

The other major change, the preferential vote, also gets critical remarks from candidates and researchers. Voters are only allowed to cast one preferential vote which causes intra-list

competition for this sole vote. Candidates compete for this single vote and spread their resources. Besides complicating list formation, it plays the candidates against each other. While the proportional system gives smaller parties a chance, the preferential vote safeguards the dominant position of the establishment. Civil society movements do not have spearhead candidates who attract a huge number of votes just by their names. This makes the Lebanese political system highly personalized, making voters more interested in the person than in the political party.

The law also changed the electoral districts. This gerrymandering process has a long tradition in Lebanon. Parties redraw districts to change the sectarian composition so that they have a more favourable vote. The districts in Bekaa were for example changed in a way that two major politicians would get their seat without having to compete against each other.

The law also heightened the ceiling for expenditures on campaigning and doesn't differentiate between services and bribing. Associations that are linked to a politician or party that had been running for a constant period of three years can continue their provisions. The law states clearly that this can be tuition fee or providing money, which is close to bribery according to international standards and LADE.

The money aspect is a major obstacle for civil society movements. Candidates have to pay a 5000\$ fee for running in the election, which Libaladi candidate Laury Haytayan sees as a restriction of a democratic right: *"After all, this is your right as citizen to run, and you shouldn't be paying for your right."*¹³ Beside the fee, campaigning is an expensive business in Lebanon, where TV-channels ask amounts up to 100,000\$ for candidates if they want to join a talk show.

List formation in Beirut

Inside Beirut Madinati there were splits on whether to engage further in Lebanese politics. A part wanted to continue developing the movement and abstain from becoming too much politicized, while others wanted to tilt Beirut Madinati to partake in the municipal elections. The general assembly decided not to run nor negotiate or make an alliance with other parties. In an interview, Ibrahim Mneimneh, head of the Beirut Madinati list in 2016 stated the following on this issue: *“As a municipal campaign, we didn’t not have a political position on different critical issues. As a group we were very diverse, and we needed time to come together towards a single political vision.”*¹⁴ According to Walid Hussein, journalist, these critical issues that Beirut Madinati split on was on the Hezbollah weapon issue and cooperation with groups that have affinity with Hezbollah.¹⁵ The general assembly decided not to participate and gave candidates permission to run on an individual base.

Kollouna Watani

After the new electoral law was adopted, the Tahaluf Watani coalition was founded. This formation consists of several movements and had the aim to form a nationwide civil society coalition. One was Sabaa, a party that has nationwide ambitions but was not yet ready to fulfil this ambition.¹⁶ To make such a coalition possible, movements had to be incorporated under the same umbrella with different views on the same critical issues that split Beirut Madinati. This became a strong debate once YouStink, We Want Accountability and Sah¹⁷ were incorporated. To overcome the differences, the coalition postponed from taking a position and added an ambiguous paragraph that refrained from taking a strong stance on this issue. While allowing for different political views, the coalition had strict ethical guidelines for groups that aimed to join the coalition. These conditions ranged from not being a member

of a traditional party or having affiliation with a regional country to endorsing woman and human rights. Groups that fitted the criteria were allowed in the framework.

Out of the 917 candidates that registered, 320 withdrew because they were not able to join a list.¹⁸ The new electoral law does not allow candidates to run as independent, they should form a list. A lot of these victims were civil society candidates.¹⁹ Out of 597 candidates running, 86 are women, a significant rise compared to 2008.²⁰ For this list formation, Tahaluf Watani set up an electoral coalition together with the Citizens within a State movement. They took the name Kollouna Watani, which is Arabic for ‘We are all patriots.’ Kollouna Watani was able to submit lists in 9 out of 15 electoral districts in Lebanon with 66 candidates. Though there are differences between the groups’ visions, they were able to unite for electoral purposes, because they share their opposition towards the current system in the state and the traditional sectarian parties.²¹

Beirut II

Kollouna Watani was able to form lists in Beirut I district, Baabda and Matn. They had no list in Beirut II, but there are two lists that can be put under the term civil society, Kelna Beirut and Sawt el-nas.

Kelna Beirut had the reversed electoral strategy from Kollouna Watani. This movement was founded between different activists to form a civil society list in Beirut II district. Some of the candidates²² were also running for Beirut Madinati and a lot of the volunteers were there too in 2016, but Kelna Beirut never had the aim to represent Beirut Madinati. They refused to join the civil society coalition and decided to stay local. On the one hand because they had a different electoral strategy and on the other due to some groups in Kollouna Watani that have ties with Hezbollah, a red line for them. The campaign manager, Karim Mufti, sees the Kelna Beirut electoral strategy as a bottom-up one while Kollouna Watani has a top-down approach.²³

Therefore, they were able to take a clear stance on critical issues that divide the country politically. In an interview, Ibrahim Mneimneh, Kelna Beirut member, shared his view on the electoral strategy of Kollouna Watani:

“In order for them to make this alliance work, they had to tone down their positions and go for some grey areas regarding political positions. When you bring too many together they elude the differences.”²⁴

These grey areas are of course the issue of Hezbollah and its weapons. Kelna Beirut was open for independents to join but then they had to end their relationship with their former party. Fatmeh Hamasni is an example of this. As a former Sabaa candidate, she joined Kelna Beirut as an independent.

The Sawt el-nas list consists of candidates from We Want Accountability and other groups. Though We Want accountability is part of the Kollouna Watani coalition, Sawt el-nas did not run under the umbrella. This did not fit the criteria because the list includes party candidates, although from small leftist ones²⁵ that oppose the Lebanese political regime and insist that they have never been part of it.

Kelna Beirut and Sawt el-nas ran independently in Beirut II district. Both have a lot in common, but their views regarding critical issues are too opposite, which made cooperation no option. This split already occurred in the garbage crisis, then between We Want Accountability and YouStink and continued in the municipal elections with Beirut Madinati. Hani Fayad, a member of We Want Accountability, said that they were aiming for a list consisting of candidates from different movements, but that Beirut Madinati did not want to make any compromise. Kelna Beirut stuck to this strategy: *They made the same process that Beirut Madinati made, announced and went for it.*²⁶

Kelna Beirut indeed had no talks with Sawt el-nas, because its candidates are closer to Hezbollah. Kelna Beirut did not want to make

any compromise on this point, which kept them out of Kollouna Watani. Fatmeh Hamasni stated: *“I respect what they say, but we are not the same. If we are in parliament they are the closest to us. For 70, 80% we have the same points, goals and plans.”²⁷*

Libaladi

The Kollouna Watani list for Beirut I district consists mainly of Libaladi candidates. Most of the Libaladi founders are from Beirut Madinati and the broader social network. Three²⁸ out of seven initial candidates were candidates in 2016 while two²⁹ others were behind the political programme of Beirut Madinati. They respected the democratic decision of the general assembly to not join the parliamentary elections but decided to establish another movement. Through an interview with Yorgui Teyrouz, who ran in the municipal elections, it is clear which side of the choice of Beirut Madinati Libaladi represents:

“But inside the GA there were a lot of people who thought there is a must to continue to fight. It is not only about the 115 who voted, this brand belongs to the 30000 who voted. They gave us our trust and hope they expected us to run. So we just can't lay down and say this is not my fight.”³⁰

Libaladi is close to #YouStink and tries to continue on the momentum from the garbage protests. After initial reluctance they joined Tahaluf Watani because they felt it was time to do something on a nationwide level. They were close to not joining the coalition and running by themselves but chose in the end for the electoral strategy of a nationwide coalition. Haytayan explains the process that led to this decision:

“We decided that we should run all together as one because there are lot of common points between us. There are differences between us as groups, this is normal, in Kollouna Watani it is impossible to agree on everything but at least we were able to come up with a common ground.”³¹

The Kollouna Watani list for Beirut I was a critical one, because it was the district where civil society had highest chances for getting into parliament, due a lower threshold and a clear distinction between them and the other four list that have close links to the establishment. Beirut II was a different story because there were 9 lists competing for 10 seats. The mere fact that the broad array of civil society groups was able to get a unified list for Beirut I was a victory on itself. The traditional parties were hoping that they would split on internal disputes for the deadline of the list completion, but the coalition succeeded.³²

Campaign

Rallying

All movements tried to obtain an open, young image. With weekly open office events from Libaladi and Kelna Beirut, movements try to make the distance between candidates and their constituency as small as possible. Libaladi put a lot of emphasis on events on public space. They held weekly talks entitled Ahadees Beirut on actual topics in Lebanon. One was on the never-finished Hekme-bridge, a symbol of corruption. Through this event, civil society reclaims unused public space and raises awareness at the same time about corruption.³³

Kollouna Watani chose as well to present the different symbolic places. For the launch of the Beirut I list, Beit Beirut³⁴ was chosen, a civil war symbol in the capital. The environmental aspect is a main pillar of the civil society groups, what could be witnessed at the Matn list presentation on 4/04. Standing with their back towards a former landfill, the candidates showed clearly their position towards the ruling parties that have been ignoring the garbage issue for years. The campaign manager stated that *“they are putting a layer of sand on the trash from the past”*,³⁵ because there is currently a real estate project on the former dump.

The civil society relied strong on social media because it was hard for them to get covered by television. TV channels ask enormous prices up too 100,000 \$ for air-time and are mostly owned by politicians. For example, only the state media Télé Liban covered the national launch of the Kollouna Watani.³⁶ The lists do not have enough funds or refuse for ethical reasons³⁷ to pay for coverage. Therefore, social media is the main platform for the movements. Through campaign videos highlighting corruption or consequences of bad governance, they try to spread their message through platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Libaladi is certain that it secured the whole online community, but they know that they need a stronger presence on the ground to have a sufficient number of voters.³⁸

In addition to social media, the lists rely on street and door-to-door campaigning. All candidates note that the reactions on street campaigning are positive, but it takes them a lot of time, as stated by Hamasni: *“You can’t use supporters. People want to see you, talk and discuss with you and have your phone number.”*³⁹ As new faces in the political scene, they face more scepticism while they don’t have the same resources to have such a dominant presence on the street. The political banners and billboards that are everywhere in the public space gives a message to the voters about who is in charge. Mainstream parties don’t have to defend themselves that much, it is about them being in power. Yorgui Teyrouz explains the difference: *“They don’t ask the parties so much, with us they are detailed and picky.”*⁴⁰

Next to the difficulties of not being well-known there are limits to where you can campaign. Although only noted by Hani Fayad and not by any of the Kelna Beirut candidates in Beirut II: *“There are areas that you can’t access. Like where we are (Barbeer), this is a Future Movement stronghold. You can’t put up a single picture, you can’t talk to a single person.”*⁴¹

Programme

The programmes of the different movements are all quite the same, a fact that the candidates admit. Political programmes are a new given in the Lebanese political system that is traditionally more focused on personalities. The programme of the civil society reflects the new political discourse that has been present since the Garbage crisis and Beirut Madinati. For civil society, the main goal is to have a secular state that treats the Lebanese equally and provide basic needs regardless of religion. They aim to overcome the current clientelist culture and to establish the notion of citizenship. A main civil society demand is the simple request for following and implementing the constitution. The conflict of interest between the judiciary and executive branch holds back any parliamentary control and the different candidates are also a spearhead for a change in the political culture.

The campaign of the mainstream parties was more focused on socio-economic issues and sustainable development instead of the political divisions that has been present for years in the country.⁴² The corruption issue was also co-opted in the programme of the traditional parties after they were put on the table by the movements led by civil society. That is why civil society emphasizes the political past of the traditional parties, who have been in charge for 30 years, and now talk about combating corruption.⁴³ Besides, pointing to the hypocrisy of this position, civil society also sees corruption as inherently linked to the political system. Rania Masri, candidate for Citizens Within a State in Baabda, states that *"The root of the problem is sectarian representation that divides us"*⁴⁴ while Mneimneh sees corruption as *"a result of sectarianism, clientelism and nepotism and entrenched in the culture of public services."*⁴⁵

Another issue is the judiciary and parliamentary control. The current Lebanese system lacks any independent judiciary control because the judges are directly appointed by

ministers. This creates a strong link and dependant relationship between the different branches of government. When members of parliament are appointed as ministers they keep their seat in parliament. Next to weakening parliamentary control, ministers appoint judges as well. Ending this conflict of interest between the different branches of government is a recurring theme in the programme of civil society. This demand is not radical at all, they just ask to implement the constitution and *"follow the book"* as Hamasni said.⁴⁶

In addition to the judiciary control, the candidates identify themselves as vanguard for a new political culture. LCPS studies show the unproductivity⁴⁷ and ignorance⁴⁸ of the current MP's once they have gained their seats in parliament. Instead of using the parliamentary control tools to hold the government accountable, they provide services to their constituency, what should be the task of institutions. However, the independent candidates, like Haytayan, aim *"to bring back the notion of being a parliamentarian and build a capable state instead of the current sectarian one."*⁴⁹ In general, Lebanese don't have a favourable view on politics and abstain from participating in the political process. Aside from presenting themselves as responsible parliamentarians⁵⁰, civil society has the aim to redefine politics to show that it can be something good.⁵¹

While the stances on a secular state controlled by laws are common, there are more differences on the policy that this state should implement. Sabaa⁵² and Kelna Beirut are more pragmatic centrists while Citizens Within a State have a clearer leftist stance,⁵³ but these differences are minor in the current state of the movement. Their fundamental opposition towards the current policy of the ruling parties overcomes these differences and due to the clear anti-establishment stance, these differences can be described as minor in the current state of the movement. All the movements propose a shift from indirect to direct taxation. Lebanon has currently one of the lowest VAT-taxes in the world and as such

a regressive taxation system. The movements have a taxation plan to let the service sector and banking bear the burden instead of the current weight imposed on citizens but have differences on whether to go on with Public-Private partnerships for example.

With the garbage crisis as a trigger for the non-sectarian protest movement, the environmental aspect is never far away. Regarding environmental issues, most of the movements have a holistic approach and encompass it in their programme and in their campaign. The environmental problems in Lebanon are linked to the crisis of the whole system. Due to the incapacity and absence of funds for the courts, the environmental laws are not being implemented.⁵⁴

A more divisive factor is Hezbollah and its arms. Some movements and individuals in Kollouna Watani are close to Hezbollah, which was, beside a different electoral strategy, a reason for Kelna Beirut from abstaining. Although Libaladi for example has a clear stance on the weapon issue that is close to Kelna Beirut, cooperation with groups that have a less clear stance was not an issue. Sabaa also has a clear stance but a more pragmatic electoral approach, stated by Matn candidate George Rahbani: *“you don't have to be against Israel to solve the garbage problem.”*⁵⁵ Hani Fayed from We Want Accountability expresses a different view. While having a major problem with Hezbollah as a party, he doesn't oppose the fact that they possess weapons. This is because the Lebanese regime is not allowed to have these weapons due to NATO conditions.⁵⁶

The Hezbollah weapon issue is closely linked to the Lebanese army. All candidates support a reinforcement of the current army to make a dialogue possible to incorporate Hezbollah and its militias but differ on the possibilities to implement this. Libaladi aims to achieve this through combating corruption, which would give the army more funds,⁵⁷ while Citizens Within a State proposes to re-establish national conscription.⁵⁸

There are thus a lot of common points, but the issues that split Lebanon politically since 2005 can also be witnessed in the movement. Walid Hussein sees this division as a disadvantage and contributing to the bad reputation civil society had in this campaign.⁵⁹

Although none of the volunteers or attendants at political rallies at the beginning of my observations spoke about these differences to keep up the united image, I wouldn't see this split as a fundamental challenge for the movement. Kollouna Watani is an electoral coalition in the end, not a political one. While the splits are easily framed as main ideological differences, there is the aspect of strategy and personal differences. The strategy is to unite movements that oppose the system, states Rania Masri: *“If there are differences on socio-economic views and the way they define a civil state, let it be like that.”*⁶⁰

There are for sure differences between movements, but the candidates don't see this as a major problem. They abstain from labelling the movement as divided and see it more as an attempt by mainstream parties and media that tries to make a systemic split in the movement. The fight for them is not against each other, but against the system, as expressed by Haytayan: *“I don't see focusing on differences will make any difference, we need to keep on focusing on common things.”*⁶¹

In the end, differences emerge when you evolve as from protest on the street about a specific issue to a political movement with a position on all aspects of the country, whether it will be on programmes or on the electoral strategy. Apart from minimizing the impact of the differences, it is also an indication of maturity and a developing process to have debates on programmes

Ibrahim Mneimneh sees it like this:

“If civil society wants to become a political society, they will have differences. I wouldn't see it as a division. It is very natural. Civil society are groups working outside an establishment on specific topics, this doesn't

*cover all aspect of politics. Of course it is not homogenous. I don't understand why it is always portrayed as divided.*⁶²

Challenges

Excluding all the money that is put in the electoral campaign due to the high ceiling for electoral expenses, civil society faced more challenges. With limited resources they tried to spread their message, but it is hard to go beyond the support that they already secured. Through observing the different events of movements, I tried to get an image of the voter public. The events of Libaladi are monopolized by youth, a fact that Libaladi candidates don't hide, they state clearly that their public is *"a young, non-sectarian, non-religious audience that is fed up and willing to change."*⁶³

Rania Masri shares this position: *Among the Youth, there is a huge chance that we can get their vote. They have an openness to look at things in a different way that have not yet been mulled to a particular mindset.*⁶⁴

The secular youth is of course not sufficient. Civil society movements don't aim for the affiliated party voters, they aim for those who abstain from voting and stay home. While they secured the vote of the secular youth, reaching out to *"those who gave up hope"*⁶⁵ should be the next step.

There is also an important difference between Beirut Madinati and the 2018 campaign. In 2016, the vote was only between two lists while there was also less at stake. According to Yorgui Teyrouz, the political parties felt less threatened by Beirut Madinati. Not having representation in the municipal council is no main a threat, while Beirut Madinati received votes from discontent FPM and Lebanese Forces supporters.⁶⁶ Walid Hussein also notes a fundamental difference between the local and parliamentary elections, because communal leaders have their interests in the political system to maintain the clientelist relations.⁶⁷

The candidates and their programmes receive positive feedback while campaigning but being a new face in Lebanese politics without huge financial resources is a disadvantage and there is always the services and money aspect of Lebanese politics. Although officially against the law, vote-buying is a social accepted practice in Lebanon. This problem cannot be seen separately from the clientelist system and is another aspect of the patronage network and services.

The common practice of vote-buying is an example of how the notion of citizenship is currently absent in Lebanon. The clientelist nature of the system turned a vote from an instrument to hold politicians accountable into a commodity that can be sold, and none of the traditional parties makes attempts to put a hold on this. On the contrary, as Fatmeh Hamasni states: *They push people to be poor, to be dependent on them and at the last moment they need the money.*⁶⁸

According to Haytayan, the problem became worse the past years, with voters actively looking for a politician to sell their vote to with the purpose of making a quick win. By passing this ethical boundary and keeping this practice actively alive, politicians *"are destroying everything that is left from the civil responsibility and citizenship."*⁶⁹

Due to the clientelist nature of Lebanese politics, civil society lists have problems reaching out to people from lower socio-economic strata, although candidates would not admit this. People might favour the idea of civil society groups and have sympathy towards them, but they stick to traditional parties because they are in need of the services that they provide.⁷⁰

Election results

The elections didn't result in the chance that was hoped for. With a lower voter turnout than in 2009, the apathy among Lebanese on politics remains high. Civil society failed to

reach out to those who stay at home, although their vote is the one they are aiming for. They wanted to channel the discontent voter but did not succeed in convincing them.

LADE reported more than 7,000 electoral violations, but the most striking one is the case of Joumana Haddad. Initial results on election day showed two Kollouna Watani seats in Beirut I that have been won, one by Sabaa candidate Paula Yacoubian and the other by Joumana Haddad from Libaladi. Traditional parties reported this as well, but this result was altered to just one seat the day after. The contrast between the excitement on election day and the anger the day after couldn't be bigger. In Lebanon, all lists have their own representatives at the voting counting. Apparently, Kollouna Watani representatives had to leave the counting room in Forum de Beyrouth due to some unspecified technical errors. After the representatives were let in 20 minutes later, the voting projections changed out of their favour.⁷¹ The Christian minority seat in Beirut I went to the Free Patriotic Movement candidate instead of Joumana Haddad. The official statement that there was an IT-problem for covering this fraud resulted in a spontaneous protest on May 7th in front of the Ministry of Interior. The crowd quickly grew to 500 people⁷², who were also denouncing the electoral violations in general.

Joumana Haddad, present at the protest made the following statement: *Yesterday, all the lists announced that the CS had won two seats, while today one seat has disappeared. We want an explanation, mathematically and scientifically.*⁷³

Although civil society did not face direct obstruction from the establishment during the campaign, two candidates from civil society in parliament of whom one openly atheistic was probably seen as a too big of a threat. The mere fact that independent, non-sectarian candidates can gain a seat that has been held for decades by traditional parties is a fundamental threat for the establishment.

While the electoral ambition was more than one seat, the fight of civil society did not end on 6th of May. All candidates have the aim to continue combating the system after the elections: *"It is one fight, but we still have many fights coming"*⁷⁴ or *"this election is a point in this timeline, we are going to continue just like we started, either inside the parliament or outside the parliament."*⁷⁵

For them, the elections of 2022 are just around the corner. Their aim is to develop the current platform into a party that is beyond confessional divisions and any religious identifications.⁷⁶ After evaluating this campaign and their different electoral strategies, Kollouna Watani and Kelna Beirut representatives acknowledge that they can learn from each other's strategy⁷⁷. In the end, their fight is not with each other, but with the system.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The civil society can look back upon a campaign in which they developed themselves on a political level. Though facing difficulties for forming the lists, the debate and electoral strategy mark a new point in the struggle of civil society. Through Kollouna Watani, civil society had a platform for groups that had their differences but agreed to rally on a common ground.

Civil society got quickly branded as divided in this campaign, but these differences are not a fundamental challenge. Although movements have their differences on electoral and political issues, they find each other on the non-sectarian citizenship discourse. While not all groups joined the Kollouna Watani platform, they all had their own discussion on the electoral strategy and the programme. These issues are not being raised in non-election times, what makes this first electoral campaign also a learning process for civil society. With a well-developed programme, civil society showed its transition from a one-

issue movement to a mature political movement.

The main problem during the campaign was the inability to reach out to people outside the network of young and secular activists. This is due to the high electoral costs of campaigning in Lebanon, but there is also a large segment of the Lebanese population that will stick to the sectarian party system and the services. Civil society acknowledges this and aims for the silent majority that abstains from voting, but they failed to mobilize them. While they can look back on a unified national campaign, they unfortunately did not reach enough voters. By evaluating where they excelled and what mistakes have been made, civil society can prepare itself for the upcoming battles that they might face.

Breaking through the confessional system is a tough challenge. The sectarian parties cling to their seat to maintain their dominant position. Civil society fights an uphill battle against a system that reverts to fraudulent means to keep them out. This unequal position will not change drastically the coming years, but the one seat in parliament can make a difference. The question now is how will the different civil society groups develop in the coming years and how will they try to reach more voters. For the candidates, the 2022 elections are just around the corner and this campaign was a first step in the development of a nationwide non-sectarian platform.

Methodology

For this research I interviewed 7 candidates, 3 women and 4 men and had talks with candidates who withdrew their candidacy, researchers, journalists and campaign managers. A full list of the interviewees can be found in the annex. I attended several list presentations, rallies, public gatherings and open office nights, this is mainly to gain an impression on the different movements, their

way of working and the voter public attending their events.

The interviews had a semi-structured approach and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. The questions started with the political past and previous activities of the candidates, then moved to address the programme and end with the challenges and the post-elections expectations of the candidates.

For logistic reasons I confined this research to Beirut and its two surrounding districts, Baabda and Matn. Politicians are eager to label themselves as independent or part of civil society when they are not given a place on a list of the traditional parties. I did not include lists that had parties present in parliament. As such we have the Kataeb – ecology movement list in Baabda, or former Beirut Madinati candidates on lists in Beirut II with traditional parties. Therefore, the Sawt el-nas list in Beirut II is part of this research, while the Baabda list of Kataeb-Ecology movement is not.

Interviews

Karim Mufti, campaign manager Kelna Beirut, 29/03
Rania Masri, Citizens within a State candidate Baabda, 5/04
Walid Hussein, journalist, 12/04
Ibrahim Mneimneh, Kelna Beirut candidate Beirut II, 18/04
Yorgui Teyrouz, Libaladi, candidate Beirut I 18/04
Aly Sleem, LADE researcher, 19/04
Fatmeh Hamasni, Kelna Beirut/ Sabaa, candidate Beirut II 20/04
Laury Haytayan 23/04, Libaladi, candidate Beirut I
Hani Fayad, 24/04, SSNP al intifada/ We want accountability/Sawt el-nas, candidate Beirut II
YouStink founder, 24/04
George Rahbani, 26/04, Sabaa candidate Matn

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Footnotes

¹ Ta'if Agreement, retrieved from <http://www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/LebaneseSystem/Documents/TaefAgreementEn.pdf>

² Yorgui Teyrouz, interview on 18/04/2018

³ After the assassination of ex prime-minister Rafik Hariri, the Lebanese politics split in the two rivaling anti-Syrian 14 March and the pro-Syrian 8 March blocs.

⁴ Kerbage, 2017

⁵ Bergmeijer, 2015.

⁶ YouStink founder, interview on 24/04/2018

⁷ Hani Fayad, interview on 24/04/2018

⁸ Rania Masri, interview on 5/04/2018

⁹ YouStink founder, interview on 24/04/2018

¹⁰ Sharp, 2016

¹¹ Ayi Sleem, 19/04/2018

¹² Atallah & El-Helou, 2017. <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=117>

¹³ Laury Haytayan, 23/04/2018

¹⁴ Ibrahim Mneimneh 18/04/2018

¹⁵ Walid Hussein 12/04/2018

¹⁶ George Rahbani, 26/04/2018

¹⁷ Sah is the group around Ziad Abs, the person who was behind the memorandum of understanding between FPM and Hezbollah in 2005. Unhappy with the current FPM leadership, Abs and others founded the Sah group (Walid Hussein).

¹⁸ The deadline for list formation was 26th March.

¹⁹ Nayla Geagea, co-founder of Beirut Madinati and Libaladi being one of the most prominent ones.

²⁰ Female candidates from 15% of the list, while in 2009 only 2%

²¹ Rania Masri 5/04

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- ²² Ibrahim Mneimneh and Marwan Tibi
²³ Karim Mufti, 29/03
²⁴ Ibrahim Mneimneh 18/04
²⁵ The people movement, the Nasserist movement and the SSNP branch that split in 1958
²⁶ Hani Fayad, 24/04
²⁷ Fatmeh Hamasni, 20/04
²⁸ Yorgui Teyrouz, Levon Telvezian and Tarek Ammar. Tarek Ammar withdrew his candidacy to have a Kollouna Watani list for Beirut I, in favour of Ziad Abs.
²⁹ Gilbert Doumit and Nayla Geagea. Nayla Geagea withdrew, she had talks with KelnaBeirut for joining their list but they were not able to find a compromise.
³⁰ Yorgui Teyrouz 18/04
³¹ Laury Haytayan 23/04
³² Libaladi volunteer 25/03
³³ Libaladi volunteer 22/03
³⁴ Beit Beirut, formerly known as the Harakat building is located on the Green Line, which separated East and West Beirut during the Civil War.
³⁵ Campaign manager Citizens within a State
³⁶ 9/04 at Forum de Beyrouth
³⁷ Rania Masri, 5/04
³⁸ Yorgui Teyrouz, 18/04
³⁹ Fatmeh Hamasni 20/04
⁴⁰ Yorgui Teyrouz, 18/04
⁴¹ Hani Fayad, 24/04
⁴² Walid Hussein 12/04/2018
⁴³ Hani Fayad, 24/04
⁴⁴ Rania Masri 5/04/2018
⁴⁵ Ibrahim Mneimneh, 18/04
⁴⁶ Fatmeh Hamasni 20/04/2018
⁴⁷ <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=147>
⁴⁸ <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=145>
⁴⁹ Laury Haytayan 23/04/2018
⁵⁰ Fatmeh Hamasni 20/04/2018
⁵¹ Yorgui Teyrouz 18/04/2018
⁵² George Rahbani 26/04/2018
⁵³ Citizen within a state opposes Public-Private Partnerships for example clearly, while KelnaBeirut supports them on their site (kelnabeirut.com, last visited on 7/05/2018)
⁵⁴ Rania Masri 5/04/2018
⁵⁵ George Rahbani 26/04/2018
⁵⁶ Hani Fayad 24/04
⁵⁷ Yorgui Teyrouz 18/04/2018
⁵⁸ Rania Masri 5/04/2018
⁵⁹ Walid Hussein 12/04
⁶⁰ Rania Masri 5/04/2018

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- ⁶¹ Laury Haytayan 23/04
⁶² Ibrahim Mneimneh 18/04
⁶³ Laury Haytayan 23/04
⁶⁴ Rania Masri 5/04
⁶⁵ Rania Masri 5/04
⁶⁶ Yorgui Teyrouz 18/04
⁶⁷ Walid Hussein 12/04
⁶⁸ Fatmeh Hamasni 20/04
⁶⁹ Laury Haytayan 23/04
⁷⁰ Harb, Doumit & Hilton, 2018.
⁷¹ Azhari, T. (2018)
⁷² Own observations at 7/05/2018 in Saniyeh
⁷³ Joumana Haddad, 7/05/2018. Audio retrieved from <https://soundcloud.com/alx-afh/liban-reportage-au-sit-in-de-joumana-haddad-alexis-afeiche>, last visited on 10/05/2018
⁷⁴ George Rahbani 26/04/2018
⁷⁵ Hani Fayad 24/04
⁷⁶ Haytayan 23/04
⁷⁷ Karim Mufti 29/03, Youstink founder 24/04
⁷⁸ YouStink founder 24/04