Can Lebanon's secular youth take back the parliament?

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Introduction

The Lebanese State resembles a failed State that doesn't provide its citizens with the most basic public services, can't ensure its monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force and since last year doesn't dispose of a valid parliament. On top of that the Lebanese citizens' political and social identity and even rights are constantly confined to their sectarian belonging. The Lebanese are aware of the difficult conditions they are living in and to many it seems clear that the current sectarian political system and the corruption resulting from it, prevents the Lebanese society from advancing towards a functional State and a common and peaceful future. However political activism against the sectarian system is almost nonexistent, especially among the educated youth that one would expect to have the fiercest reaction, - but in particular the younger generations appear to have resigned. This impression is confirmed by the elaborate analysis of the Lebanese society that scholar Theodor Hanf conducted in 2006. He asserts that the Lebanese have become more pessimistic regarding their future, compared to statistics from during the Civil War. Therefore the Lebanese overall tend to be more cautious about change which they fear could lead to an even worse scenario. It is important to notice that in 2006 70% of the population felt that they couldn't bring about any social change. This expression of resignation and desperation was surprisingly even higher among young and better educated people.[1] Many Lebanese, like the lawyer Nadine Moussa, who was supposed to run as a candidate for the parliamentarian elections in 2013 on behalf of the political movement "Take Back Parliament", were awaiting eagerly the overdue awakening of the Lebanese youth:

"I was always amazed, especially after the Arab Spring, […] at the passivity of the Lebanese youth and I believe strongly that you can't make a change without the youth."[2]
(Nadine Moussa, 2013)

According to Hanf's research, in 1984 75% of the Lebanese citizens were in favor of a completely secular state. In 2006 this number had decreased to 65% which was still a significant majority. That same year, 69% of the Lebanese said, however, that secularization doesn't stand a chance and that community membership is a reality one has to accept. This result reflects a contradiction between the people's desire and expectations.[3] The prevalent apathy among the youth can be explained by different coping mechanisms with the political situation. The civil society activist Mazen Abou Hamdan who works for the Lebanese Association for Civil Rights (LACR) divides the Lebanese youth into three different categories, none of which constitutes a real challenge to the system:

What we are facing among the youth in Lebanon is either frustration and therefore indifference, or sectarianism, […]. And we have a group of youth who are angry at the situation, but they don't know how to solve it or deal with it. They just go down on the streets and say down with sectarianism, but that doesn't really work.
(Mazen Abou Hamdan, 2013)

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[1] *Letters from Byblos,* Theodor Hanf „E pluribus unum? Lebanese attitudes and opinions on coexistence"
[2] All information on the interviews led by the author can be found under Bibliography; Primary Sources
[3] *Letters from Byblos,* Theodor Hanf „E pluribus unum? Lebanese attitudes and opinions on coexistence"

When Take Back Parliament (TBP) a political secular movement, was established in 2012 by a group of young Lebanese who want to abolish the sectarian and corrupted political system, the initiative was received very positively, because it finally offered an organized platform to the secular youth to express itself politically. A large number of Lebanese had already come together before in 2011 under the banner of anti-sectarianism, but the movement wasn't organized well enough and remained too little political and clear in its aspirations, so it could be exploited by the same sectarian parties it was initially up against. TBP set itself apart as the only secular political movement with well defined goals, initiated by young Lebanese who tried to reach out to all like-minded people in the past years. They managed to organize themselves as a group of volunteers with no dependency on internal or external political actors and with the aspiration to transcend sects and religious groups with their agenda. Through social media the movement managed progressively to make a name for itself and present its political programme. However the movement also came across a lot of scepticism by people who didn't believe that a completely independent secular movement is feasible and could be influential in Lebanese politics. More than a year after TBP's experience started it is necessary to study the initiative critically by investigating which challenges secular movements in Lebanon face when it comes to establishing their internal organization and identity. On the other hand through the study of the movement, the research touches on the Lebanese political context which still presents many obstacles for political alternatives trying to find their way into the well established political system confined to the prevalent political parties. The research seeks to explain that the attempt to infiltrate the political system by TBP shouldn't pass unnoticed as it points to the feeling of political misrepresentation and the quest for political alternatives. In order to foreshadow future trends in Lebanese political movements the research tries to enhance the comprehension of these activists' vision of secular activism in Lebanon, because in the future the political alternatives to the already existing parties will be shaped by them and composed of them. Even though the group is no longer active since the summer 2013, it merits to be asked to what extent this new form of political secular movements has contributed to the development of secular movements in Lebanon. By doing so, it is hoped that other movements can build on its achievements and learn from its shortages in the continuing Lebanese struggle for a secular State.

Methodology:

For this research 16 interviews were conducted with members of TBP, of student movements and of civil society organizations. During the interviews the political activists were asked about their personal background, their experience with secular movements and their perception of secular movements in Lebanon in general and TBP in particular. The interviews serve as the primary sources for this qualitative research. Through the interviews an insight is established into the mentalities of currently politically active Lebanese who are the initiators of recent and innovative secular movements. Their opinions about Lebanese secular movements and about TBP illustrate the challenges that these movements face, but also the evolutions secular activists go through as their experience with activism in Lebanon grows. In a first part, Lebanon's political, judicial, economic and regional context is presented in order to show in which difficult conditions secular activists in Lebanon act and to better understand the activist's opposition to the current system. In the second part the paper

starts focussing on TBP by studying the organization, agenda, actions and outreach of the movement. A particular interest was put thereby on the group's difficulties in reuniting all members around one coherent ideology on which the agenda would be based. In addition, the part also questions if choosing to participate in elections as the main means to achieve the movement's goals was beneficial. The third part deals with the failings and benefits of this experience of a secular political movement. Thereby the individual and collective gains of the experience are being ascertained. Furthermore the section examines the acquired insight on the process of shaping political alternatives and elaborating possible fields of actions. As a last part it is interesting to investigate the impact of TBP on the development of secular movements in Lebanon by including a fourth section about the student movements, which rose during the year 2013 at different universities and whose aim to take back the student councils resembled TBP's campaign.

The Lebanese context

Lack of democracy

Lebanon's political system is based on a constitution from 1926 which establishes a parliamentary system with one chamber whose deputies are elected in legislative elections. The deputies elect the president as the head of State and the president is responsible for appointing the Minister, the head of government. While the constitution can be considered as democratic in theory, we will address later that the implementation of these democratic principles is often deficient in practice. But the most distinct particularity of the Lebanese system was introduced when the country acquired independence in 1943, confessionalism. At that moment, the two leading political figures in the fight for independence formulated the National Pact, an unwritten agreement for the distribution of political power in the country on a confessional basis. The confessional system only allows a Christian Maronite Lebanese to become President, a Sunni Lebanese to become Prime minister and a Shia Lebanese to be the Speaker of the parliament. This form of a sectarian distribution of positions also applies to all other State institutions. This political system leads to a political game dominated by power struggles between the different Lebanese sects who often seek foreign support to strengthen their political power in Lebanon. The Lebanese citizens are encouraged to choose their political affiliation according to the sect of the politicians instead of their political programs and achievements. This behaviour of political supporters and voters has been kept alive by the illusion that representatives of the same sect would aspire to guarantee the best conditions for their community and ensure their protection. Thus a multitude of political families and parties, many of which trace their origins back to feudal lordship, constitute the political class and economic elite of the country. The religious and tribal characters of this class allow leaders to rally large segments of the society, to get legitimacy as representatives of the Lebanese people, each for their respective sect, and to limit their responsibility and accountability only to their particular groups. In order to sustain their popularity, the dependence of the society on the leaders and clientelist structures, they often procure positions in the security and administration domains for their followers. This ruling class manages to tailor the political system in a way that ensures the maintenance of

all its components in positions of power, enabling the co-exploitation of the country's resources. In that sense the confessional system renders the democratic implementation of the constitution impossible, as accountability of politicians and the political choice is limited because the Lebanese feel they have to vote for their sectarian representatives to be safe and well. As long as each party holds on to their specific clientele, that status quo is maintained and politicians don't feel the need to expand their support base through their political agenda.

The clearest manifestation of the negative impact of confessionalism on democratic practice is the Lebanese electoral system which has been shaped in a very complex way in order to assure certain parties' dominance over certain regions of the country. One of the most crucial factors which profoundly influences the outcome of elections and contributes to the continuation of the sectarian system, is the majority electoral law based on different electoral districts. The distribution of the electoral districts guarantees parties to stay strong in the regions where they have familial and sectarian support groups. As in each electoral district the majority voting system leads to the representation of forces which have a majority, smaller political forces don't stand a chance at representation. In order to determine the size of the different electoral districts, the actual size of the population is often taken less into consideration than the prevalent sect in that district. In this spirit the districts are drawn in a way that favors mono-confessional districts and the dominance of one party over one region. In addition, Lebanese are practically obliged to vote in the electoral district in which their family is registered which further perpetuates traditional political affiliations within one family and one region. The right of a secret ballot is not imperatively given in the Lebanese electoral system, because ballots are distributed to the voters by the parties themselves and no uniformity of ballots is imposed by the law. Thus voters often present themselves to the voting offices with ballots whose shape and colour already indicate to which party they belong and as a consequence who the voter is voting for.[4] On top of that the number of Lebanese citizens who have the right to vote is severely restricted. First of all the legal voting age is only 21 years, whereas the age of majority is 18. Secondly, many Lebanese in public functions, such as employees of the military, the public security forces and the custom police don't have the right to vote. And most importantly, with two to three times more Lebanese living abroad than in Lebanon, the lack of procedures for Lebanese abroad to participate in elections without returning to Lebanon is drastic. It has been observed as well that parties facilitate a return to Lebanon for elections for their supporters, a practice that can be considered as buying votes. The law also deprives Lebanese from mixed descent from their right to citizenship and thus from their right to vote as Lebanese women can't pass on their Lebanese nationality to their children. Furthermore, the Lebanese political field is still almost exclusively reserved to men. Only 3% of the deputies elected in the legislative elections in 2009 were women and the participation of women remained limited. According to the Supervisory Commission on the Electoral Campaign there is also a strong need for strictly applied rules on campaign spending and financing and neutral media, as they estimate that campaign spending was higher than the prescribed limits and media covered the elections very partially. But even parties don't

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[4] Rapport final, Liban, Elections legislatives du 7 juin 2009, Union Europeenne mission d'observation electoral

address their campaigns and programs equally to all citizens, as they concentrate their efforts and their campaigns on electoral districts which are relevant for their majority in parliament. In general one cannot detect real efforts of politicians to exceed their traditional support base, in most cases mobilization of voters is only based on sectarian and familial affiliations. The Lebanese political scene is extremely polarized since the Cedar revolution in 2005 during which two rival camps were formed, one composed of a part of the society that gathered on 8th of March and another part that reunited on the 14th of March. Since then almost all political parties have become part of two prevalent coalitions, called in reference to the events in 2005, March 8 and March 14. In this polarized political scene, the parties' adherence to coalitions is known before the elections, which limits the weight given by the elections to the coalitions. Competition between the parties is therefore almost non-existent. Furthermore the static coalitions and the majority electoral law makes it very hard for small parties who don't ally themselves with either the parties of March 8 or March 14 to be represented in the parliament. A national commission to change the electoral law was established after the elections in 2005, headed by the former minister Fouad Boutros which recommended reducing the number of electoral districts, introducing pre-printed uniform ballots and establishing an Independent Electoral Commission. A new law was adopted in September 2008, but this law didn't include most of the suggestions of the Boutros commission, but created a control body supervised by the Ministry of Interior and the number of electoral districts was even raised, from 14 to 26.[5] Discussions in 2013 about further reforms of the electoral law didn't bear many fruits. During these discussions some parties even promoted the idea of introducing an Orthodox Law code which would oblige the Lebanese to vote only for politicians of their own sect. This law would end the Lebanese citizens' right to free vote and would exclude from political participation anybody who would want to cross out their sect from official records.

Failings in the rule of law

The Lebanese legal system reflects in many ways the confessional political system and the lack of democratic, transparent and competent State institutions that characterize the political sphere. It is important to notice that the confessional system makes it mandatory for each Lebanese to officially belong to one of the 18 recognized sects in order to be protected as a citizen by the personal law code that belongs to its sect. This explains for instance that there is no Lebanese civil marriage, which means that the Lebanese always have to get the approval of one of the religious institutions for their marriage. Therefore it is nearly impossible for two Lebanese from different sects to get married. Nevertheless Lebanon has witnessed its first civil marriage in 2013 and subsequently the birth of the first Lebanese citizen without an assigned sect. Regardless of the sectarian components of the Lebanese legal system, the judicial system can be criticized for not granting just legal conditions and protection for everybody living in Lebanon. As aforementioned, women are discriminated against in the Lebanese legislation because they don't have the right to pass on their nationality. Furthermore they are not sufficiently protected by the law as there is no

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[5] Rapport final, Liban, Elections legislatives du 7 juin 2009, Union Europeenne mission d'observation electoral

legislation about domestic violence and forced sexual relations between spouses. Migrants and refugees also suffer from legislations that restrict their rights severely. Palestinians living in Lebanon for generations for example still don't have access to rights of property and certain professions. And migrant workers who are employed in Lebanon are bound to the sponsorship system which requires for each migrant coming to Lebanon to be taken under the sponsorship of a Lebanese citizen, in most cases this role is being assumed by the migrant's employer. The sponsors are required to take the legal responsibility for the migrant whose legal stay in Lebanon is restricted to the period of sponsorship. The sponsorship system allows for many cases of abuse to pass unnoticed, because the migrant is not only financially but also legally dependent on his employer and can thus be exploited more easily. The sponsor on the other hand bears a responsibility that shouldn't be lying in his hands, finding himself in a position where he often feels obliged to strictly control the migrant in order to make sure that he doesn't extend his stay in Lebanon. So the Lebanese legal framework discriminates against minorities and foreigners living in Lebanon, but there are also many cases in which Lebanese citizens suffer from the bad conditions of the justice system. Several riots in different Lebanese prisons in the recent past point to the bad conditions of prisons in Lebanon. On top of that many pre-trial detainees are imprisoned and sometimes have to wait for a long time for their trial. There have also been cases in which civilians were judged in military courts which made fair trials impossible, in particular for cases of espionage in which the death sentence is even proclaimed sometimes. The law code also doesn't fully comply with the freedom of speech that so many Lebanese proudly associate to their nation. In February 2014 a Lebanese citizen was sentenced to two months in prison for insulting the president Michel Sleiman on his twitter account.

The justice system has also failed in many ways when it comes to dealing with crimes committed during the Civil War. In August 1991 a General Amnesty Law was passed by the parliament that pardoned all political crimes committed before March 1991. This law that covers the entire period of the Civil War from 1975 to 1990 was justified by the President at that time Elias Hrawi by saying that peace couldn't be assured if political leaders and their fighters wouldn't be protected by amnesty.[6] Thus the reconstruction period of the post-Civil-War era was since the beginning characterized by a legal system which protects the powerful and neglects the victims. These characteristics remained valid as there is a continued refusal to even permit the victims to find out the truth about the crimes committed, an injustice which is rendered particularly clear by the case of the missing and disappeared since the Civil War whose family members still face the unwillingness of the authorities to facilitate their quests for information. The privileges of the Lebanese political and economic elite in the judicial system were also kept alive after the Civil War which is illustrated by the prominent special pardon granted in 2005 to Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces and a former war lord who had been convicted for four assassinations. In many cases the special treatment in legal matters granted to Lebanese in positions of power contributes to the existence of corruption and economic inequalities.

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[6] Failing to deal with the Past. What cost to Lebanon? International Center for Transitional Justice, January 2014

Economic inequalities

It is important to take the economic inequalities into consideration in order to understand the failings of the Lebanese democracy. Lebanon has been a country based on feudal lordship and proprieties for centuries and one has to acknowledge that this is still largely true nowadays. Feudal lords have managed to stay in positions of economic and political power by participating in the confessional political system. As the Lebanese citizen feels a permanent division between his sect and the other sects, it is only natural for him to turn towards an economically and politically powerful member of his sect in order to seek protection. Only that these divisions among the sects then start serving the politicians' interest and are therefore kept alive at any price, even though if one looks closer, it is clear that the economic interests of different sects aren't conflicting in reality. In reality, Lebanese of different sects often live in very similar conditions, while the economic situation of their political representatives is completely different. The economic and infrastructural problems are shared by a large part of the population but all the same the population fails to mobilize around core demands addressed to their State because their religious and political differences are constantly being emphasized. In the past years there have been frequent strikes and protests transcending sects organized by unions of teachers and civil servants, but only minimal wage increases could be achieved and other issues such as healthcare, social protection and pension rates weren't addressed. The students have also grown more and more active in the past years as a reaction to the continuing increases of tuition fees at the private universities, in a country in which only one public university exists and even the primary and secondary education has largely been privatized. The incompetence of the government and especially the Ministry of Finance is reflected by one of the highest public debts in the world, up to a total 130% of Lebanon's GDP. The population is suffering from the State's failure to address priority issues and protect the most vulnerable parts of the society by just regulations and services, so 28% of the population lived with less than 4 dollars per day in 2012. At the same time 6 Lebanese make it onto the magazine Forbes' 2012 list of the world's billionaires, all of them either from the family of ex-Prime Ministers Hariri or Mikati.[7] The political system in which political leaders have to face little accountability allows for corruption to persist and to affect many domains of the public and private sector. According to Transparency International, Lebanon ranks as 128th out of 174 countries on its corruption perception index.

A context largely shaped by the regional entanglement

The lack of national cohesion among the different sects is a phenomenon that has been reinforced for centuries by the interference of foreign powers who offered protection to a part of the society to the detriment of the development of a strong nation state. Until today the different Lebanese sects and parties still rely heavily on foreign allies who try to advance their agenda through their Lebanese proxy. As a consequence the Lebanese State was always

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[7] The Daily Star, "Lebanon makes it onto Forbes world rich list"

hit strongly by the conflicts around the region which reflected on Lebanon's internal instability. During the Lebanese Civil War the political leaders and parties formed armed militias that defended the parties' interest, representing a foreign agenda, by force. Many of these parties are still able to turn their supporters against their Lebanese fellow citizens, eventually even with violence. The recent turmoil in the Arab world is dominated by the power struggle between the Gulf States and Iran. That struggle is mostly being fought in Syria, but the increasing alienation between the Lebanese Shia and Sunni and the emergence of aggressive Sunni extremism in Lebanon is a clear consequence of these regional rivalries that are amplified by locally fought battles. While politicians continue to base their support on criteria that perpetuate the conflicts among the Lebanese and increase their dependence on foreign powers, they often use these very same conflicts and the strong impact regional matters have on the Lebanese instability as a justification for their shortcomings. Most recently the security situation has offered the politicians a pretext to postpone the parliamentary elections for 17 months. One can't deny that Lebanon given its size, location and variety of sects is naturally more susceptible to suffer from external conflicts. Especially in light of recent developments in Syria, a country that has politically always been very closely attached to Lebanon, and the economic consequences of the mass influx of refugees, it is extremely difficult to deal with the political situation. But the question of how the Lebanese State could face these issues in a more appropriate way is all the more important in such a context.

The emergence of a new political secular movement: Take Back Parliament

Gathering of the first members around core principles

Secular movements have long existed in Lebanon even though their form has changed significantly over time. Thus it is important to study the history of those movements in order to better comprehend the taken approaches of recent initiatives, such as TBP. In the 1970s before the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, the leftist parties, which were to become one of the fighting parties of the war, carried important attributes of secular movements. At the same time the pre-Civil War period also witnessed the appearance of active student movements, particularly at AUB. After the civil war and during the process of reconstruction, the main leftist parties had lost a big part of their popularity and credibility as a result of their implication in the war. A new form of secular movements made its appearance, namely civil associations and NGOs. Some of these concentrated mainly on the reconstruction of the country and contributing to its development by supporting the most neglected parts of society. Whereas others took clear political stances and acted as opposition movements against the political system.

According to Lebanese sociologist Karam Karam those civil associations established in the last years of the Civil War or in the years after the Civil War can be characterized by their refusal of a sectarian identification and by their non-violent actions concentrated in the domains of human, civic and political rights and ecological development. The Lebanese

Association for Human Rights (ALDHOM) for example is a civil association created during the last years of the civil war, in 1985 by Joseph Moghaizel who had founded the Democratic Lebanese Party with the aim of secularizing the society and the political institutions in 1970 before moving on to the associational sector.[8] The ALDHOM's main goal is to promote human rights by sensitizing the Lebanese youth. The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) on the other hand has fought for democratic elections since 1997 when they successfully opposed the extension of municipal elections.[9] Most of the secular movements in the last decades aspired to secularizing the society and the political system, but not to pose themselves as an eligible alternative to the current system.

The movement TBP that emerged in 2012 as a group of young secular activists differentiated itself from most of the existing movements by its clear political ambitions. It aimed at launching a campaign to replace the deputies of the traditional and corrupt parties by new democratic and secular deputies. The movement attracted therefore many people who weren't able to identify with secular groups before and reached relatively quickly a certain class of the youth. The initiator of the project was Nadine Mouawad, who was already very active in the feminist collective Nasawiyya. She called for a meeting on Facebook and the motivated few who got together then organized meetings and an intensive training session during which they got to know each other and discovered similar opinions and a common aversion to all the existing political parties in Lebanon. Many of the interviewed activists describe themselves as skeptical and critical and explain thereby why they had never joined any other movement before. A few core notions anchored in the concept of TBP were decisive for the activists' decision to join the movement. First of all the members united around main aspirations, namely the desire for a secular state, a just economic system and democratic representation. Secondly, all the members were very committed to internal democracy and transparency and the independence from all other movements, parties and from external actors. And finally the concrete plan of participating in elections and therefore taking political action instead of just opposing the system without offering adequate alternatives, added something new to the field of movements which allowed people who couldn't identify with secular civic activism before, to get involved. The member of TBP Nathalie Bekdache describes the project as follows:

"TBP's main characteristic is to bring a secular State that is independent from outside intervention and that is truly democratic and that at the core of it is socio-economic justice. So that was really the core, the ideals of TBP, we wanted to "take back parliament" from the politicians that are there and take it back to the people, so that the people can be represented."
(Nathalie Bekdache, 2013)

The members were also very aware of the fact that corruption is a central subject when it comes to the Lebanese political and economic system. The member of TBP and activist in student movements at Université Saint-Joseph Tamara Saade explains that spreading

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[8] *Le mouvement civil,* Karam Karam, "Des associations « civiles » à l'image d'une société rêvée", page 101
[9] *Democratic transition in the Middle East, unmaking power*; "Citizens of the void: Power-sharing and civic political action in Lebanon", Heiko Wimmen, page 28

knowledge about corruption was considered as an important means to discredit the political class and to encourage the Lebanese to claim political alternatives:

"The goal of TBP was initially to infiltrate the parliament, to create a national conscience regarding the corruption of the confessional parties and this way create an agenda, an alternative, secular platform that would work for the needs of the people."[10]
(Tamara Saade, 2013)

One characteristics of the movement was that even though people came together to fight sectarianism, there was a common belief that the divisions in the Lebanese society are not really caused by the sectarian diversity, but by economic cleavages and the exploitation of sectarian and religious identities by feudalist leaders and capitalist entrepreneurs. This common feeling among members of TBP is shared by a majority of the Lebanese who considered in 2002 with up to 87% that differences between communities are exploited in order to hide the real disparities between the poor and the rich. Nevertheless this understanding of the conditions in Lebanon is becoming less common, in particular among younger Lebanese, so in 2006 only 70% still agreed with this analysis.[11] The member of TBP Elia El Khazen explains that the activists see the economic inequalities as the main source of Lebanon's perpetual conflicts:

"We are secular and we think the problem in Lebanon is not sectarian, it's socio-economic, it's between classes and it's between those who have too much and those who have too little."
(Elia El Khazen, 2013)

In this sense the members wanted to act differently than the many civil society movements which only try to fight feelings of resentment between different sects and to spread secular values in the society. Thus they chose an approach that would directly target the political class which profits from the sectarian system in presenting alternatives who could replace the current deputies. This approach sets the initiative apart from other movements according to the member Reine Nemer:

"Take Back Parliament was more political. In a way, we didn't only want to tackle the symptoms, we also wanted to tackle the system that is creating the symptoms, which differentiated it for me from other movements."
(Reine Nemer, 2013)

Consequently TBP established since the beginning firm principles and values around which the members united and started working on elaborating their agenda, gaining popularity and finally participating in elections. Nevertheless the movement faced some difficulties when it came to projecting those core principles to a concrete political ideology that the movement could adopt and with which it could confront all political matters.

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[10] Translated from French by the author
[11] *Letters from Byblos,* Theodor Hanf „E pluribus unum? Lebanese attitudes and opinions on coexistence"

The quest for an all-encompassing ideology

During the first months the agenda writing committee was very active and papers on reforms of the electoral law and of the parliament, education, the health care system, security, women's rights, foreign domestic workers' rights, public transportation and many others were published on their website (vote2013.org). The effort concentrated on the agenda writing demonstrates the members' will to reach democratic representation for the Lebanese by providing them with a clear political program. The agenda includes many proposals which aim at improving the socio-economic conditions in Lebanon and consequently it came to hold many leftist values. At the same time the movement was based on attracting people who are united in their desire for a secular Lebanese State which provides social and economic justice without further establishing a leftist affiliation. So the form of the political and economic system they were aiming at as well as the ideology to be adopted were left open. The circle of secular people who are willing to openly challenge the system in Lebanon is limited, therefore it made sense for some of the members to try to unite those people regardless of their other political ideas as pointed out by Elia El Khazen:

"This was one of the main clashes, part of the people saying we want it to be more leftist and the other part saying, no let's just be secular. It was good to reunite seculars, but in another way it was lacking a political content and lacking a political content was in a way an advantage and a disadvantage, because you could stick with all the people you need, you can find […] common ground. But if you don't have political content, you are not a long-term project. So if you have political content you are going to lose people and we are not many already and if we are not going to have political content, we are going to have a lot of people, but not really with us."
(Elia El Khazen, 2013)

At the same time according to most members the importance of leftist values and ideologies couldn't be denied since the beginning, as all members' understanding of working towards socio-economic justice included anti-capitalist attributes. However the members seemed to disagree strongly on the extent of the movement's leftist identity. The paradoxon of wanting a political movement without political contents is one of the concerns of activist Tamara Saade:

"There was no political orientation; the ideas and concepts came from a leftist ideology that is clear and precise. But there were members who refused this, who wanted it to be apolitical, which is impossible for a political movement."[12]
(Tamara Saade, 2013)

In addition, some argue that secularism in itself is not strong enough an ideology to unite the Lebanese and offer them an alternative identity detached from their sectarian sense of belonging. Zeina Ammar explains in her note of leaving the movement that the movement would have to fall back on the prevalent and polarized ideologies of the 20th century in order to be able to make people identify with a secular movement:

"Sectarianism constitutes an integral part in most Lebanese people's identity. The abolishment of sectarianism will be accompanied by a loss of identity, a void that can only be

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[12] Translated from French by the author

filled in one of two radically opposed ways: either by a national identity or by a class identity. Secularism itself does not constitute an identity or an ideology. One can be a secular capitalist, a secular nationalist, a secular socialist, etc. Any secular political group has to make an ideological choice, it's inevitable. This choice will then affect the group's objectives, strategies and political thought."[13]
(Zeina Ammar, 2013)

While the movement was preparing to present candidates for the elections, it became clear that the lack of clear political ideologies was an obstacle to the formulation of political stances on sensitive topics. The group had put enormous effort into establishing an agenda, but on core controversies the members failed to form a clear and united stance. With time those ideological differences among the most active members turned out to be difficult to overcome. When the discrepancies not only in the vision for a future Lebanon but also in the approach of how to reach this state became obvious, many members realized the necessity of specifying their stances further. Nadine Moussa concedes that, even though many people could identify with the main principles of TBP, a movement involved in politics needs to have clear opinions on all relevant questions:

"The political affiliation […] was a big platform, a wide platform that could contain a lot of people, because it was secularism, independence and social justice. You can have a lot of people rallying around those ideas and values, but if you come down to real politics, you have to narrow it down, […] because they are going to ask you on your economic vision, they are going to ask you on your political stance on many different issues."
(Nadine Moussa, 2013)

Other activists point out that the biggest rift wasn't so much between left wing and right wing ideologies, but more about how much the movement should address issues that have regional and international implications, such as the Syrian revolution. Some argued that a Lebanese political movement should focus on issues that are clearly internal without taking outside factors as essential in making their decisions. These members emphasize that the current politicians try to blame the regional influences for the problems in Lebanon and use it as an excuse for their powerlessness, which is why in their opinion politicians should focus solely on internal Lebanese problems. In contrast, other members even advocate cooperation with movements that they can identify with in the region, as Lebanon's problems can't be regarded as isolated from its regional context. And still others simply affirm that a movement can't be viable on the national level and be taken seriously by people, if it doesn't have clear opinions about the external actors in Lebanon and the proxies of those actors. Nathalie Bekdache comments on this division among the activists that kept on recurring in debates about stances on regional matters :

"I think they are split, some people think that we should focus solely on Lebanon as an entity, just Lebanon, and some people think […] that the change we want to bring to Lebanon, is connected to the change around the region."
(Nathalie Bekdache, 2013)

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[13] Zeina Ammar, *Leaving Take Back Parliament*

Whereas most criticize mainly the lack of ideology, others blame the incoherent strategy and tactics and the internal organization for the differences that appeared among the members. Elias Abou Mrad who was a member and a candidate for the parliamentarian elections for TBP, argues that a movement can't agree on all political issues that will come up since the beginning, but that it needs a strong structure to face those questions and eventually a group of decision makers:

"There was no problem in the political orientation because we had this set of values and it's not something to discuss, because this is how we met and agreed to everything. But the organization was a continuous laboratory and one of the biggest mistakes was adopting the flat hierarchy. The flat structure really hurt us, because it was too time consuming and it was a drain. […] we needed a leader or a leader board."
(Elias Abou Mrad, 2013)

In conclusion it can be said safely that the members' vision on different topics differed and that caused problems for the movement as it evolved into a more organized and more political entity. Furthermore, the varying opinions about the right approach harmed the movement and the strategy elaborated at the beginning. The clearest illustration of the debate over the right approach comes to surface when addressing the question if the movement should participate in parliamentary elections or not.

A divisive issue: participation in elections

Since the creation of the movement the strategy of participating in parliamentary elections in order to eventually replace the sectarian and corrupted deputies by new secular deputies who would truly represent the people was explicit, even in the name of the movement. Indeed the movement's members were aware of the fact that the process of getting these deputies elected would be difficult and long-lasting. Nonetheless it was considered as important to at least provide Lebanese who don't feel represented by the two prevalent factions with an alternative option to vote for. The idea TBP relies on is that once a few independent and secular deputies would be elected and enter the parliament, the alternative option would at least start to exist and become therefore more tangible for people. But the fact that the movement focused very much on the parliamentary elections in 2013, elections that were later postponed, took the steam out of it. Until now opinions on participating in elections are divided. Member X of TBP who preferred to not have his name published affirmed that he is still convinced that participating in elections is the right approach:

"Me and many other people inside Take Back Parliament, we believe that, we cannot change Lebanon if we cannot have our own deputies inside the parliament. I cannot change the country by a protest, because they can always have a law [against] us. If you want to change the law, you have to enter the parliament."[14]

Other members see the participation in elections more as a pragmatic than an ideological choice, since a revolution against the system is not a realistic goal at this point as the

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[14] Interview with anonymous member X of Take Back Parliament on the 15th of October

majority of the Lebanese have settled for the sectarian system and wouldn't participate in an uprising. Even more so that the Lebanese witnessed a long Civil War and still suffer from recurrent conflicts and instability, especially since the beginning of the Syrian revolution. Having the example of the Syrian revolution and the intervention in Iraq in mind which evolved into scenarios of instability and sectarian violence might also add to increased scepticism towards a potential regime fall. Therefore, according to Zeina Ammar, aspiring to a revolution doesn't correspond to the mind set of the majority of the Lebanese which would have to be prepared more for the idea of an uprising. Meanwhile, she asserts that secular movements can only act from within the system they are fighting to make their voice heard:

"Ideally, everyone's energy would be poured into setting the grounds for an uprising of the people against the corrupt sectarian capitalist system and no attempts would be made to infiltrate the system and minimize its evils "from within," as the common saying goes. The problem in this specific case is that we, the secular independent people, contrary to what some might like to think, do not constitute a silent majority but indeed a very small minority. […] In the age of democracy and the rule of the majority, the minority can only hope for some representation in the political sphere and cannot possibly have legitimate claims on the system as a whole."
(Zeina Ammar, 2013)[15]

An important factor independent candidates have to take into consideration is the electoral law. Naturally the electoral law has a huge influence on the chance of independent candidates to be elected. Currently the majority system and the repartition in electoral districts prevent independent candidates from being elected or presenting their candidacy without being on one of the parties' list. For the time being it is also unknown if there is going to be a reform of the electoral system until the next elections, thus it is very difficult for candidates to prepare their campaign not knowing on which legal basis they would be competing. Nadine Moussa believes that regardless of the respective electoral law, secular movements have to try to penetrate into the political scene to show people that there could be other parties and politicians whose approach to policy making would be completely different:

"You have a terrible electoral law which doesn't allow any independents, it doesn't give them any chance, because of this majority scrutiny electoral law which is devastating. It only allows the same political parties and factions to come back with slight difference in proportion. But this is it, this is how you have to be an intruder, like they [the secular student movements] did it in the universities, you have to be the outsider who gets in, the challenger who finds its way in […]. You need an intruder who gets in and changes the whole traditional and feudalistic way of doing politics. […] If there were independent candidates who would reach the parliament, I think first it would create a big shock […] in the public opinion, that change is possible, that the two big monsters, 14th and 8th of March are not monopolizing the entire country."
(Nadine Moussa, 2013)

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[15] Zeina Ammar, *Leaving Take Back Parliament*

Like Nadine Moussa many people still believe that participating in elections is essential, because thereby an alternative choice is offered to people and it allows the movement to gain more political credibility. However, Mazen Abou Hamdan from the NGO Chaml observed that the participation in the elections has to be very well prepared and that the candidates have to be an integral part of the movement so that all the members can put their trust in them and all their efforts to support their campaign:

"The idea in itself, yes we can run candidates for the elections, was really interesting. […] I think eventually this tactics will succeed, but you need to pick the people correctly, you need to design one set of programs. So they weren't sure if they should adopt people who are running independently or if they should nominate some of their own. But I think it's a very good experience and they definitely did a first step."
(Mazen Abou Hamdan, 2013)

Many activists think the movement concentrated too much effort on the selection of candidates and the preparation for elections and then when the elections didn't take place, the members who were very involved in the process became frustrated. So they suggest to work simultaneously on other approaches and to put a minor focus on elections. Still others, Reine Nemer for instance, have completely lost hope in participating in elections, because they doubt that independent deputies in the parliament would have a big impact:

"I'm now against elections, because I don't think that elections would change anything, even if we get people in. I'm no longer a believer that change would come from within the government. I'm more in favor of the idea that change will come if we empower people and we'll have to overcome the government by itself."
(Reine Nemer, 2013)

A strong argument against the participation in elections is that if few independent candidates enter the parliament they give legitimization to the current political system and in return they don't manage to achieve much, as proved by the experience of previous independent deputies. The political activist Hashem Adnan who is part of the initiative Haqqi Alayyi, defending social rights, doesn't believe that the system in Lebanon can be infiltrated and even if few managed to get elected they wouldn't be able to do much:

"I don't think that working for elections is something feasible in Lebanon, because the election system is a system that is closed in a way to reproduce the same class of politicians, mainly people who come from family backgrounds to politics and people who inherited the positions of their fathers or political leaders. And it's a sectarian system of elections, so there is really no chance for people, for secular people or people who believe in a different kind of system. Entering the parliament, which is a strategy that many people used from the end of the civil war until now, I think this strategy failed. Every now and then we have one of them, for example there was Najah Wakim and now there is Ghassan Moukheiber and before there was Tarek Mitri and Charbel Nahas, so they are individuals who can change nothing from the inside. It all failed, because the Lebanese mafia-militia system is very strong and letting those kind of people enter is a way to absorb the change movement."
(Hashem Adnan, 2013)[16]

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[16] Translated from Arabic by the author

Even though the strategy of participating in elections has been criticized strongly by members of TBP and activists from the civil society, many members of TBP are still convinced that the participation of secular candidates in the elections is crucial or at least very beneficial in order to secularize the state. While they are aware of the fact that the process is going to be very difficult and long lasting and eventually the number of independent candidates might still be too little, they believe that it is indispensable to offer an alternative choice to the secular Lebanese. On top of that, independent deputies would then at least have an influence from within the system, for example when discussing certain legislations.

Difficulties in the outreach

TBP was successful in reaching a wide audience by means of social media, especially through Facebook. But on the ground mobilization largely failed. Activists even had trouble influencing their own social environment, because many of them weren't taken seriously. Their friends and families either thought that they were wasting their time or were afraid for their safety. Nevertheless they managed to show their families and friends that they could be involved in an alternative political movement and that their political awareness and knowledge was increasing. Member Y of TBP who prefered not to have her name published concluded that for a movement it is not sufficient to convey their messages mostly through social media:

"Our strong point was social media, but one thing to learn is that you can't rely on social media for rallying people and mobilizing them. You have to have something more concrete, like on the ground work."[17]

Overall activists were left with the feeling that they didn't manage to address and reach the people they knew they had to attract in order to become a widespread or even a mass movement. Despite efforts to work on the ground, to go to different regions, at some point TBP even established a group in Tripoli, and to talk to people directly, the majority of supporters remained from a comparable socio-economic class, frequented the same places and was therefore more likely to identify with the agenda and members. Ramy Shukr who was an active member of TBP before moving on to the Alternative Student Movement at LAU, criticizes the fact that the mobilization remained restricted to one social environment:

"We are not attracting the masses, we are only attracting what some people call 'the elites' […]. We are not attracting the workers or the majority of the country's population. I think that the major challenge is for activists to jump out of their own social circles of people who are interested in civil society into the masses of people who […] are not very involved in politics, civil society, or activism."
(Ramy Shukr, 2013)

It was pointed out that the members of TBP had problems communicating with people who live in very different socio-economic realities. Activists noticed first hand that the rift

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[17] Interview with anonymous member Y of TBP on the 22nd of October 2013

separating people from different classes and regions in Lebanon is enormous and Elia El Khazen admits that they didn't know how to overcome this rift:

"I think the message got through to people like us, who are our age, who went to college, […] but the more underprivileged we couldn't get through to them and this was a major problem, because we couldn't empathize with them, speak their language and know what their problems were, because we are not from the same socio-economic background and this created a barrier between us and them."
(Elia El Khazen, 2013)

Several activists also brought up that in the Lebanese clientelist system it is very difficult to attract people to new political movements because the Lebanese have to rely on their parties in order to get facilitated access to services such as education and health care. Furthermore parties often promise their members or supporters financial advantages like scholarships or better job opportunities. And most importantly for many people the parties represent the only assurance of security and protection against internal and external threats. Member X from TBP acknowledges that for the time being they can't entice people away from the traditional parties by promising them concrete advantages even though the Lebanese are well aware of the flaws of these parties:

"What are we offering as a secular movement? Can we offer them jobs right now? We cannot offer anything except that we are doing a complete revolution to change the system. We are offering a dream. Whereas they, [the traditional parties], have already offered them something, sometimes money, sometimes jobs. […] But deep inside I think that everyone wants a secular Lebanon and everyone hates these politicians, because they have done nothing except ruining this country for the past 100 years."[18]

But for a grassroots movement such as TBP that doesn't accept any external funding and is therefore acting from a zero budget principle it is impossible to compete with the existing political parties when it comes to financial aid and security. According to Nathalie Bekdache, in order to outrival the parties' means they have to offer an identity that people could embrace instead:

"There is no independence of the people who are voting, very few people can actually make a choice solely of what they believe in. Many of them are dependent on political parties, for protection, for livelihood… So I think it's very difficult to break that. Unless we sell something that people can believe in and that could be part of their identity, because these parties have become part of identity […], so unless we can create something that speaks to the identity of a person, so that they can believe in it, irrespective of all financial capacity, I would say it's very difficult."
(Nathalie Bekdache, 2013)

Overall, the interviews with members of TBP indicate enormous difficulties in reaching out to and mobilizing the Lebanese society. Most activists concluded that the on the ground work was insufficient and that their repertoire of actions wasn't adapted to the society, because it lacked familiarity and acceptance from the people and was therefore not apt to mobilize the population.

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[18] Interview with anonymous member X of Take Back Parliament on the 15th of October

To what extent was the initiative TBP an essential step in diversifying the political system towards including secular alternatives?

Experienced and knowledgeable young activists

Following Nadine Moawad's call for a secular political movement that would participate in the elections, many secular people who weren't politically active before came together. Thus they mingled for the first time with people who shared their beliefs and opinions on how the Lebanese State should evolve. This group of enthusiastic people has become less active after a year of intensive personal involvement and efforts, but nevertheless the group is still present, still hoping for change. Many are willing to continue learning and educating themselves in order to be eventually part of the change they envision for Lebanon. Unfortunately one can also perceive in them a sensation of burning out and lose of hope. Activists were aware of the difficulties they would have to affront by tackling the sectarian system, but they had to realize that the system is so deep-seated and the Lebanese have become so resigned and as a consequence sectarian, that the process of change will last much longer than expected. However the vast majority of the interviewed activists seems committed to staying in Lebanon and being politically active on the long run. Most activists even express that a future in Lebanon would be unthinkable for them, if they wouldn't be involved in activism that aims at bringing about profound changes. Asked about the success of the movement, all activists openly discuss the shortcomings of the movement, yet without neglecting the significant achievements they accomplished. Most notably, they all assert that personally they have learned a lot from the experience. Ramy Shukr states that TBP's campaign didn't achieve what the activists had hoped for, but that it had some effects on people, howbeit limited, insofar as it further fueled doubt in them about the sectarian system and parties:

"I can't say that it's a failure; it did have a lot of influence on a lot of people. Because of Take Back Parliament, the people we reached-out to, in person and via the media and social networks, at least now doubt the system and the sectarianism of the political parties. So we did achieve something significant through TBP, but not the primary goals we had initially set for ourselves."
(Ramy Shukr, 2013)

The months of active involvement in a political group also gave the members more confidence when it comes to discussing their opinions openly and addressing people directly. Activists Y observed that people who were involved with TBP are finding less difficulties now in becoming active with other movements or fighting for what they believe in in different domains:

"It's nice to see that even if at some point we decide that this is not exactly what we wanted, a lot of people learned a lot of skills and got more confident mobilizing people. It's good to

see that it's not going to waste, because they are using it elsewhere and maybe instead of trying to fight the whole picture, each person just goes on to a very specific cause."[19]

Evemtually the members of TBP had to accept that all their efforts and hopes put into the project wouldn't quickly yield any tangible results. Thus the members suddenly felt their burnout and disappointment and many decided to take a break. Nevertheless the enthusiasm they put into the campaign was one of the strong points of the movement which allowed it to achieve a lot in a very short period of time. Mazen Abou Hamdan working in the NGO Chaml (Non-sectarian Non-violent Youth Lebanese Citizens), a youth organisation belonging to the Lebanese Association for Civil Rights, acknowledges that the members of TBP learned a lot and acquired valuable experience. Yet, according to him, they also had to learn that they shouldn't put as much hope in one strategy in order to not become too disappointed when that strategy fails and they have to rethink it:

"I think they were quite courageous in their attempt to change. From our side we think that they were too optimistic, the Lebanese context is quite hard to change and you have to understand it all and think of various ways to tackle it. Most of the people in TBP were enthusiastic, that is always good. I think they learned a lot from the experience and it was important that they do it, but at the same time there is the risk if you have high expectations and you don't meet them, you get frustrated easily as a volunteer. So it's important to know how to absorb the frustration of your volunteers and redirect them towards a long term struggle, because really it is a long term struggle."
(Mazen Abou Hamdan, 2013)

Many members affirm that they were unexperienced and relatively unknowledgeable about politics when they first joined the movement. TBP was attempting to educate their members during training sessions. On top of that the individual efforts to become more knowledgeable and the active exchange between the members were very fruitful for that purpose.

A network of politically active people and movements

TBP's success in reaching a wide audience was mediocre. Their popularity remained mainly restricted to an upper class of educated Beirutis. Nevertheless managing to portray themselves positively and gain popularity among an educated and politically conscious part of the population is already a considerable success. TBP made many people aware for the first time of the existence of young Lebanese citizens working for an alternative political system and who are opposing the corruption of the political parties and willing to actively fight it. Member X saw TBP as a platform on which seculars could unite and decide on common actions for the future:

"Maybe TBP was like a stage for all the people having these [secular] thoughts saying that we share common beliefs, so let's put them into reality and let's attract more and more people."[20]

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[19] Interview on 22nd of October with anonymous activist Y
[20] Interview with an anonymous member X of Take Back Parliament on the 15th of October

Thanks to the public meetings of TBP and its elaborate online campaign, people started to exchange opinions and realized that some do share after all a common vision for the future of Lebanon. Mazen Abou Hamdan considers it as an important achievement that young people started being active and envisioning how the Lebanese State could be changed positively and trying out different repertoires to provoke that change:

"The most important contribution of Take Back Parliament so far is that it involved new groups of young people in activism […]. So now they are part of trying to figure out a solution. (…) the more they involve other youths […] and they drive them to experiment with protesting or whatever, the more they are aware of their rights. They are expanding with the youth base."
(Mazen Abou Hamdan, 2013)

It has also been mentioned that getting the youth to take action and to collectively express their disapproval of the system, has rendered them more audacious. It is understandable that isolated individuals who are frustrated about the sectarian and corrupt system don't feel as if they have any capability or power to bring about change. But if those individuals are integrated in a group of people disposed to take action, a positive outcome becomes thinkable. As a consequence Reine Nemer noticed that young people felt encouraged and more powerful thanks to the movement:

"It was important for me that the project involved youth in politics, so we […] started having a say in politics which is a system that is going to rule our lives and at the same time it gave people a lot of hope and a lot of courage to actually stand up. It empowered people."
(Reine Nemer, 2013)

Not only did the movement bring together people who weren't active politically before because of the lack of appealing movements, but it also got them to start following up more on what other movements and activists try to do in Lebanon. Ultimately, the exchange of knowledge and strategies between different groups is very important in such a complicated political system. According to member Y of TBP, the experience contributed positively to establishing networks and relationships between different political groups:

"I think it's nice that we built this networking thing with other groups. We started supporting each other's movements more and cooperating. A lot of networking happened and you meet a lot of individuals who are likeminded, but who don't necessarily use the same means in order to defend their cause."[21]

It is a necessary step towards the formation of more influential movements that activists become aware of the involvement of others and that they start connecting with them. The relatively small scene of political activists in Lebanon has to be in contact with each other in order to coordinate and eventually become more influential. At the same time, TBP managed to find new ways of creating a base of young supporters, and was therefore groundbreaking in addressing some parts of the Lebanese youth, despite its modest outreach to the rest of the society.

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[21] Interview on 22nd of October with anonymous activist Y

A moment of hope in the construction of tangible political alternatives

Even though many people question the feasibility of provoking long lasting and deep rooted change through the participation of independent and secular candidates in the elections, one can't dismiss that the notion of the option of a candidate who doesn't belong to the traditional parties from the factions 8th of March and 14th of March is already a huge step for the positive politicization of the Lebanese citizens. Elias Abou Mrad, a member of TBP pointed out that for a long time people were always doubting the existence of real independents, because the polarization of the Lebanese citizens into two opposing political forces was so firm:

"It broke this fear in people of someone calling himself independent, so now you feel that people can say it a lot more easily, because in the past when someone was saying I'm independent, you were always fearing that he is not really independent, but camouflaged 14th or 8th of March."
(Elias Abou Mrad, 2013)

By seriously discussing the concept of an alternative option, TBP might actually even have contributed to the infiltration of the idea of an alternative choice in different areas, such as the universities as observed by Nathalie Bekdache:

"But I think the most interesting thing is that really we contributed to a third option and as you can see, it actually seeped into universities, where they also realized that they can have a third option."
(Nathalie Bekdache, 2013)

Nadine Moussa also argues that presenting independent candidates for the elections who led a campaign and introduced themselves to the public increased their credibility in the eyes of the Lebanese. So according to her the participation in the election and therefore in the political game is the only way to really present an alternative option to the people who could then slowly turn away from their confessional political affiliations:

"The Lebanese citizens if you continue doing awareness, will tell you, yes ok we agree, but what can we do realistically? [...] You have to pose yourself as a challenger to this system, as a real challenger, on the ground, as an alternative option, you really have to show yourself [...], because politics is a lot about perception, how people see you, so in order to be a convincing alternative option, you have to get into the political action."
(Nadine Moussa, 2013)

Furthermore the candidates who wanted to run for TBP in the parliamentary elections were strengthened through the support and backup of TBP which provided the candidates with a clear agenda and the logistic and human ressources to lead a convincing campaign. In her explanation for leaving the movement Zeina Ammar speaks about the modest aspiration to offer an alternative choice to the secular Lebanese :

"The idea was simply to provide the secular minority with the possibility to participate in the country's political scene as there are very few independent secular candidates and their chances of success are very slim. By grouping secular independent candidates (carefully selected ones) together under one name and one political agenda, the hope was to give them

some credibility and increase their chances of success so that the secular independent people would have the possibility to be represented in Parliament."
(Zeina Ammar, 2013)[22]

Activists acknowledge that before aspiring to topple the system a big enough portion of the Lebanese society has to be mobilized and secularized, in order to do that presenting political alternatives appears to be a very efficient mean. There were independent candidates before TBP, but there haven't been attempts to lead an entire campaign based on a clear political agenda that the candidates could rely on and that is part of a bigger framework. Consequently the movement contributed to the gradual creation of viable and credible political alternatives in the imagination of the public opinion. However the limited scope of the movement made it impossible to consolidate the belief in political alternatives in the minds of the Lebanese.

The prospects for secular movements in the future

Through the experience of TBP and other involvements in political activism, the interviewed activists have all developed a clearer understanding of how secular movements could act henceforth. Thus their ideas about future initiatives and movements have also evolved and the lessons acquired by the experience of TBP and other movements should be retained. Ramy Shukr points to the usefulness of a forum pertaining to the attempts of different movements in order for future initiatives to be able to fall back on their experiences:

"It would be very helpful if there was a platform where activists could talk about their experiences with their movements, and the mistakes that might have been done, so that we can all learn from the mistakes and subsequently improve future movements. Then, if someone wants to start something new on the ground, they can know about past movements and be aware about what to do and what not to do."
(Ramy Shukr, 2013)

The question of a possible union and closer cooperation between all secular movements is not to be neglected. Activists are very aware of the fact that their movements will remain relatively small for the time being. Furthermore the possibility that movements could split and regroup in other constellations after a while is also well known. Therefore it is very important that secular movements help each other and manage to organize certain events together. Members of TBP have been in continuous contact with other activists and on the level of mutual support one can already affirm that the cooperation between the movements is going well. However when it comes to participating in common actions and mobilizing people together the collaboration seems to be more complicated. During the protest against the extension of the parliament for example, in June 2013, different groups from the civil society (Chaml, LADE), student movements (the AUB secular club, the Alternative Student Movement, No Frontiers and groups from USJ) and political movements such as TBP and the Union of Lebanese Democratic Youth came together and mobilized their

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[22] Zeina Ammar, *Leaving Take Back Parliament*

supporters for the protest in front of the parliament. The protest was very spontaneous and the movements didn't have a lot of time to get together and to elaborate a common strategy, so the actions to be taken were very ambiguous, leading to the eventual collapse of the protest. Activists have therefore concluded that it is very difficult to organize such events together and agree on common strategies. And as a first step it's essential according to Nathalie Bekdache that all the movements are well organized internally and know what to expect from such an action:

"I think at some point […] all these movements should be unified, because you are a small entity that is trying to fight something very big, which is much bigger than all of us. So if we split into too many groups, I think it might be contra productive. But at the initial level, when we ourselves haven't already built a strong foundation, I don't know what it is that we can do together."
(Nathalie Bekdache, 2013)

An essential point is the establishment of movements which specialize on economic rights and this way push people to perceive the corruption of the system by comparing their own conditions to those of others in similar situations and in contrast to that, to the political elites. In a way the establishment of a class consciousness in the Lebanese context would make people cease to center on sectarian divisions and focus on their rights and expectations as citizens. Talal Naboulsi from No Frontiers envisions that if the Lebanese from all sects would be made aware of the exploitation by the political leaders, they could eventually join forces:

"I think if we can focus on the economic factors that unite all classes, all religions and all sects, people might actually start to wake up. I would hope for a movement of workers that just unites and shuts down the entire country and say we want better wages, we want better working conditions. Every single sect has a political elite that has a lot of money, so people should realize that […] all the money is going to certain people. If you show them that their leaders are abusing, that's the way to go."
(Talal Naboulsi, 2013)

It is also necessary that a collective identity regardless of the sectarian boundaries is established in people's mind. For that purpose activists should point to threats that the political decision-making process implies and opportunities political change could present for a specific group of people in the Lebanese society, creating a certain non-sectarian cohesion among those people with common interests. Furthermore people will only react positively if addressed by activists well-established and familiar with the specific background they are acting in and to whom the people can relate better. In that sense Hashem Adnan considers that while a political movement should work on establishing a political alternative, the Lebanese citizens should be sensitized to their respective rights in different domains by movements that work on the ground and concentrate on the people's needs in specific contexts:

"What I believe is that we have to work on building social structures and social groups, we have to work from down, we have to work from the ground by many means, like working in universities, working with workers in different sectors, working in what we call the "closed neighborhoods", in the cities and outside the cities and at the same time creating a real

alternative that people can identify with, through their needs and also through their mentality and through the way the contemporary Lebanese human being thinks, acts and interacts."[23]
(Hashem Adnan, 2013)

These ideas reflect in a way the attempt that the former minister and economist Charbel Nahas initiated with other dedicated political personalities in May 2013. When referring to that movement "A call to save Lebanon and rebuild the state"[24] Nadine Moussa, expresses hope for a platform which could regroup different actors, such as the syndicates and student movements, in order to create cohesion between all these actors so that they unite their forces with the common goal of toppling the current system:

"It's part of this big movement of independents, it's trying to rally syndicates that are still divided, because they are 14th and 8th March, the traditional division and segregation that is paralyzing the whole country. I like this movement, I approve of it and maybe it should be the platform under which we should try to get united. The problem is that they are divided and separate, each one is struggling on their own. […] They should unite first, have a common platform and organize themselves as a united front, in order to pose themselves as a challenger, as an alternative option to this octopus, as an actual union."
(Nadine Moussa, 2013)

One can say that TBP and other attempts are still too recent and fragile to work efficiently and get united within one movement. But the activists are elaborating a clearer idea of what can be done in the next phase of activism. They are communicating more and thus laying the ground for a united movement in the future that possesses a clear political idea and strategy in order to reach its aim: building a secular, just and peaceful Lebanese State.

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[23] Translated from Arabic by the author
[24] http://beta.charbelnahas.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Nida-English.pdf

Activism continues on a smaller scale: taking back the student councils

The pluralist identity of student movements

Many of the interviewed activists think after the experience of TBP that the best way to tackle the system is to face sectarianism and the associated corruption in their respective domains, such as the work place through syndicates and the universities through student movements. Thus a couple of members of TBP decided to become more active with student movements at the Lebanese American University (LAU) and Université Saint-Joseph (USJ). Whereas there have been secular clubs at the American University of Beirut (AUB) for many years now, a group of students from LAU became active for the first time last year when they organized Take Back LAU Council inspired by the campaign of TBP. One of the members, Hassan Harb, managed to get elected as the president of the student council for the academic year 2012/2013.[25] This movement developed into the Alternative Student Movement (ASM) composed of students from LAU which attracted attention due to their relatively numerous participations in the protests against the extension of the parliament in June 2013. In September 2013 they started a big campaign on the increase of the tuition fees at LAU and they continue to present candidates who aren't affiliated with the traditional political parties for the student council's elections at LAU. Hala Hassan, a member of the Alternative Student Movement who used to be a member of TBP explains the context in which the students began to be active at LAU:

"Once Take Back Parliament started we started Take Back LAU Council and the alternative solution we are trying to present for the students of LAU. We had four candidates during the 2012 elections on the Beirut campus and one of them won, Hassan, and people started to think of us as more independent, because they didn't believe at the beginning that we would be an alternative option, because we study at LAU and political affiliations are embedded in the university."
(Hala Hassan, 2013)

Many members of the secular student movements at AUB and LAU consider themselves as leftist to different extents, however they acknowledge that at elitist universities such as AUB and LAU, it is difficult to lead such a movement under a leftist banner. Therefore the AUB secular club and the ASM aspire to be a pluralist group of students united by their desire for a secular Lebanese society and State and that can represent the interests of all students. Hassan Harb clarifies that the ASM is concentrating its efforts on gathering all the students who are willing to oppose the sectarian system:

"At ASM, we have communists, we have liberals and we all agree that we want to have an alternative choice. That alternative could be anything non-sectarian, because we are fighting the sectarian system, we are not fighting a capitalist system or a communist system."
(Hassan Harb, 2013)

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[25] „Mish Jareedi", الأحزاب مجلس أم الطـلا مجلس
http://alternativestudentmovement.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/final-mish-jareedi-6.jpg

The secular student movements are not political movements per se. They obey a number of principles, most importantly secularism, independence from political parties and a real representation for the students, yet the members' vision of a secular State differs. Thus the president of the AUB secular club, Jean Kassir, explains that the secular movements at the university can unite different people who are in favor of a secular State even if their motivations differ:

"We are not a leftist political group, what unites us is secularism, you can see it as a coalition of people who are fed up with the system and want secularism. There are other principles like women's rights, human rights and we are for civil marriage, […] but it's not very ideological, it's not very political in the sense that we are very pluralist, we have different members, we have people who are openly leftist/communist and you have people who consider themselves liberals and they want secularism because it's compatible with their views."
(Jean Kassir, 2013)

Consequently, the student movements try to attract all students through their efforts to defend the students' rights and to reduce the sectarian parties' influence on the student bodies. Their identity is supposed to appeal to students who are unsatisfied with the conditions in their universities and don't feel represented by the current student representatives who only represent the interest of their respective sectarian party.

The repertoires of student movements in Lebanon

The clubs' functions are limited to the promotion of secular values and ideas and to the defense of student rights. When it comes to raising awareness, the clubs organize cultural events and lectures that educate for example about the meaning of secularism against the common misconception of confusing it with atheism or about the proposals for electoral laws or civil marriage. But both the ASM at LAU and the secular club at AUB consider the participation in the elections for the student council as their most important means, because thereby they manage to present an alternative agenda and actually declare what they would do in defense of the student rights. The elections this year at LAU and AUB went well for ASM and the AUB secular club who succeeded in getting several candidates elected in different faculties. Hassan Harb from the ASM comments on the hitherto achievements by means of elections:

"Two years ago or last year even, all the discourse was [centered] on 8th or 14th of March during the elections. Now there is 8th and 14th of March and an alternative, the Alternative Student Movement. That's one of the most successful points that the ASM has brought in one year."
(Hassan Harb, 2013)

The movements hope that students would put their trust in the secular groups, because they would simply chose the better alternative for their interests. For that purpose Jean Kassir considers the elections as an efficient method to discredit the other candidates who are elected based solely on their political affiliation and the power provided by the sectarian parties who back them up:

"The elections are the best way to show the AUB student how the system is corrupt and failed and is leading nowhere, because they are electing candidates simply based on their political affiliation and the students really see that those representatives are totally useless. So part of the elections is a good way to show that we are the alternative, not just because secularism is better than the current status quo, but because we are hardworking and we will do something for you, based on merit and not on sectarianism. So it's kind of an example of how, if our values are implemented, the State will be."
(Jean Kassir, 2013)

However there are also critical voices for example from the secular movement No Frontiers at AUB whose members affirm that the participation in elections doesn't lead anywhere. Nevertheless Talal Naboulsi, a member of No Frontiers, appreciates that more secular student representatives are being elected in the elections for the student council. So, irrelevant of how much they can achieve later on as members of the council, he acknowledges that the secular student movements manage to attract more attention through elections and thereby make their agenda and opinions a topic of debate:

"We don't see that these student representative committees actually have any power. So what I am trying to say is, that it depends on how you look at it, if you look on it as a succession of elections and popularity, then yes the student clubs are increasing in popularity, they are having more people winning in the elections."
(Talal Naboulsi, 2013)

The participation in elections should certainly not be the only field of action of the secular student movements, it is equally important that they defend the students' interests by specific actions, for example against the increase of tuition fees. In addition to that, the movements' functions as clubs that encourage political education, participation and secular values inside the university are important in familiarizing a certain group of the society with such ideas. But without a doubt the elections are an important occasion for the movements to express themselves. And only if the rise in the popularity of the secular student movements is reflected through the results of the elections, the students will start to conceive that other options independent from political parties can exist and can even be powerful.

Possibilities for the future

Asked about their aspirations for the future, Jean Kassir of the AUB secular club and Hassan Harb from the ASM can imagine the movements to take the form of a students' union which would eventually lean towards the left, but nevertheless represent the interests of all students. In Jean Kassir's opinion such a students' union could efficiently tackle problems that the students face in their universities:

"The secular club is meant to focus on one main thing, which is fighting sectarianism and this mentality. And I think we can't do much more than that, what we could do is be kind of a syndical political group which is totally absent from all the campuses and this is close to the left, [...], when we talk about tuition fees, about transparency and financial aid, this is close to what I can imagine to be a leftist students' union."

(Jean Kassir, 2013)

Hassan Harb imagines a students' union on the long run to even encompass all Lebanese students so that the students could become more influential in fighting the political parties present on all campuses of all universities and defend student rights more successfully. But in his opinion it is important that this students' union has a clear agenda under which all students could come together:

"Maybe the most important step that should be taken is to create a students' syndicate or union. So if any student from any university opposes something, all the Lebanese students join. […] They have to found a students' union that has a clear agenda and is far from all the political parties. Different attempts happened, but it was clear that they derived more of a far left, but it has to unite the leftists and the seculars. We have […] about 150 thousand students in Lebanon, they need to be all under this political agenda, so that we get somewhere."[26]
(Hassan Harb, 2013)

It is desirable that the students find some way to affront the parties' influences on campus life and the corruption in the administrations of the universities resulting from the parties' political interference collectively in a movement that would bring together students from different universities. But this sort of cooperation is even difficult to arrange between universities that resemble each other in structure and nature. It will be much more difficult for the movements at AUB and LAU to work together with students from the public university, the Lebanese University. However Talal Naboulsi emphasizes that the Lebanese University is essential if they want to reach out to the majority of the Lebanese students:

"If you really want to go for change on a student level, the Lebanese University, that's where you have to go, because those [students] represent the real people of Lebanon."
(Talal Naboulsi, 2013)

There is much to be done concerning secular student representation. The movements have to grow in different universities. Whereas the movements are established since a relatively long time at AUB, the movement at LAU is quite new, but has established itself quite steadily in a short period of time. At Université Saint-Joseph there are attempts of secular groups, but generally the movements at USJ appear disunited and little active. At the Lebanese University, one can remark few active students who try to come up with small creative initiatives and a new movement, the al-jabha al-toulabiyya al-wataniyya (National Students' Front) has recently be founded in order to defend the student rights based on a secular and leftist agenda. All in all it's a positive development that the movements have become more active and once all of them established their base solidly and manage to cooperate more successfully, it is thinkable that they will eventually contribute to the formation of a national students' union.

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[26] Translated from Arabic by the author

Impact of the student movements on the Lebanese political life

The members of ASM and the AUB secular club realize however that it is very difficult to act outside their sphere of action, which are the universities. The civil society activist, Hashem Adnan also considers it as important that the students limit their actions and aspirations first of all to what they can do and achieve in their respective universities:

"The students for example, if they concentrate on the work inside the university, they can become very influential and they will acquire a sustainability in the universities. They will lose if they try to do something bigger than they are on the national level, they will lose because they don't have this capacity. But if they are part of a big social network that is efficient and the work between them is coordinated in a specific way, to complete each other, then something has to happen."[27]
(Hashem Adnan, 2013)

Nevertheless the student movements could have an effect even on the national level in the sense that in the universities the attitude and values of the next generations of Lebanese citizens are being shaped. Members of student movements from The Lebanese University and the Université Saint-Joseph pointed out that in the universities students are faced for the first time with issues and responsibilities comparable to those they face as citizens as well. The students' elections for example can be a good preparation for democratic participation and involvement on the State level. Marwa Chaabane who is one of the founding members of the recently created al-jabha al-toulabyyia al-watanyyia complains about the fact that there haven't been any elections for the student council at the Lebanese University since 5 years:

"Who decided that you are going to be in this council? I didn't decide, I'm a part of this university, I'm a student in this faculty and I didn't decide whether you or the other one is going to be in this council. I need to vote, [otherwise] how can I face another battle let's say, when I want to elect the parliament, the Lebanese parliament? This is an activity that a student should get used to, starting from university until he goes into the political life of his country."
(Marwa Chaabane, 2013)

Furthermore if students are used to secular and alternative choices and spaces in the university they will expect the same from the State they are living in. If they witness a range of pluralist groups who coexist within one university and come to agreements through democratic procedures, the coexistence of different political groups, outside of 8th and 14th of March will become more conceivable. Tamara Saade from the student movement Iz3aj (Disturbance) at USJ expresses the hope that the work of the student movements would affect the State:

"The issue that should be the priority is the importance of the student, the importance of his voice on a social level. We try to create an alternative, secular, independent, progressive and pluralist space, and at the same time we would like very much that it would be reflected on the outside of the university. For us, the university is a smaller example of what is happening

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[27] Translated from Arabic by the author

on the outside and therefore I think that change can happen inside the university and then on a larger scale on the outside."[28]
(Tamara Saade, 2013)

One has to consider nevertheless that the students, especially at AUB and LAU, represent a very small proportion of the Lebanese society and even if the students at these universities were to become more sensitized for their political rights, the importance of alternative options and secular values thanks to those movements, their influence on the national level would still be very limited. There is also a high risk of these movements to be volatile as the period of activism is limited to the few years spent at universities. This is particulary true if one considers that many students of the private universities and especially those who are frustrated about their country's situation and don't rely on parties to ensure their future in Lebanon are likely to leave Lebanon and live abroad after finishing their studies. Talal Naboulsi blames mainly the lack of connection to other social classes for the deficient impact student movements have on the political situation:

"The students usually, in every country and in every revolution, […] are a major factor. But […], the strongest secular movements are at AUB and LAU, […] which is made up of whom exactly? People that mostly have no contact with the poorer class. This society here is all elitist, so what we do, in terms of what it does to the outside, minimal, below minimal, we don't honestly affect what is happening in Lebanon."
(Talal Naboulsi, 2013)

In conclusion we can say that political education and empowerment of the students is very important, so that they will first demand more rights and legitimate representation as students from their universities and then as a logical continuation as citizens from their State. But if these movements remain limited to the private and elitist universities as currently, one can't expect that they will influence Lebanon's political development much. Therefore it is crucial to follow up on what is happening at the Lebanese University and one could only hope that a movement such as the "al-jabha al-toulabiyya al-wataniyya" will be able to prove its independence and capacities as a movement and therefore become more known and accepted in a university that is highly sectarian and politicized. On top of that it seems very important that these movements continue supporting each other and cooperating with each other between all the different universities in order to form a united voice of students.

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[28] Translated from French by the author

Conclusion: a sprint that was suddenly turned into a marathon

In a deteriorating political, economic, judicial and security situation members and supporters of TBP felt pressure to achieve change urgently in order to prevent Lebanon from sliding further into a spiral of violence and corruption. This feeling is reflected by other recent movements such as Charbel Nahas' movement which is even called "A call to Save Lebanon and rebuild the State" expressing that Lebanon is truly on the verge of collapsing. During one year TBP's activists put therefore extraordinary effort into a project they deemed not only worthwhile but indispensable. Hence, the activists succumbed to frustration in the face of the outrageous audacity of the deputies who postponed elections for 17 months and the apathy of the society which only responds to sectarian slogans. At that moment the movement failed not that much because of the undeniably existing disagreements on the right approach and ideology, but rather because it appeared clearly that the struggle against political sectarianism in Lebanon will last much longer and eventually it might still not yield the awaited results. Elias Abou Mrad described their involvement as an exhausting sprint that was suddenly interrupted when the elections were postponed, and transformed into a marathon.

The activists were far from being naïve before joining the movement; however the goals set for their initiative were albeit modest, still too ambitious for too little time. The emergence of TBP inspired hope, because the willingness for change among a part of the youth was illustrated, however their attempt to become a sustainable political alternative remained restricted to a short momentum. Despite the limited durability of TBP the experience indicates that a part of the Lebanese society won't resign indefinitely to the current system and is becoming more organized and experienced. In their lasting discontent with the system they will unavoidably reach out to their environment and draw attention, such as the student movements which continue to defend student rights and raise awareness. Even though the sectarian mentality of the Lebanese is an undeniable reality, one cannot say that the Lebanese are satisfied with their living conditions and that they are not critical towards the State they are living in. While working on the ground, members of TBP were surprised by the positive reception they encountered and the open-mindedness with which people reacted towards the idea of political alternatives.

What appeared to be lacking are concrete and conceivable alternatives in the form of a party or trustworthy political figures that could drag people away from their sectarian and familial affiliations. In that sense TBP can be understood as a necessary step and successful first approach to the long term plan of increasing public awareness on the shortcomings of the Lebanese political system and the political leaders, even in their immediate sectarian environment, and presenting plausible and credible alternatives which inspire confidence and can eventually give strong enough incentives for people to take the risk of changing their political allegiance. The movement TBP was a promising initiative when it comes to working towards real political alternatives, because it openly challenged all the sectarian parties.

TBP had internal shortcomings to affront during the structural phase of the movement. Certain problems concerning their internal organization can be attributed to the youthfulness of the movement, and therefore can be expected to be overcome with more

experience and political maturity, which many of the movement's members seem to have acquired during that year of activism. The recurrent debates about the movement's identity and ideology towards the end of its activity suggest that the discrepancies in the economic vision and on regional matters among members proved to be more difficult to overlook and were a leading factor in bringing TBP to an end. It became more reasonable for some members to continue their activism in groups with which they have more common ground concerning their political ideas and the approach they want to choose to realize them. The members' commitment to a set of principles and rules, such as transparency, independence and internal democracy, was one of the strong points of the movement. These principles contributed greatly to the movement's positive reputation and the members' identification with the campaign and therefore their enthusiasm.

However, TBP managed to gather these activists, despite the diversity of their political opinions, around core demands for a whole year. Thus There doesn't seem to be an obstacle to combining efforts in a collectively fought battle against the current system, be it from a framework of different movements. Perhaps it is indeed too challenging for one movement with a limited number of volunteers to tackle the whole system and to reach out to all the segments of the very complex and diverse Lebanese society. The constellation of members reduced to a certain socio-economic class created problems of communication with Lebanese from other backgrounds. It is self-evident that it is easier to mobilize and politicize citizens in their own environment and by addressing their specific identity, problems and interests. According to McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, mobilization requires pointing out to the existing social sufferings and threats in order to create a collective identity. It seems necessary for a movement like TBP to cooperate closely with movements that work directly on issues that concern the parts of the society that the members of TBP had little access to. Consequently, the struggle against the Lebanese political system is one that has to be fought on many fronts simultaneously. In this research, this claim is rendered evident by the experience of secular student movements, which tackled issues concerning students within the universities and gained considerable support.

Despite TBP coming to an end, activists can still learn a lot from the experience in order to enhance the repertoire of Lebanese secular activism. The experience is for instance illustrative of the efforts that have to be put into the education and encouragement of activists. If a movement is intended to be sustainable, it needs to find a way to make use of their activists in a way that is not too time-consuming, but efficient and fulfilling for the individual, for example by setting smaller, more reachable goals that are part of a bigger strategy.

Ultimately the difficulties TBP faced and led to its collapse shouldn't discourage people of the overall promising idea it was based on. From aggressive sectarian discourse and resentments to suicide attacks and assassinations, the conditions kept on deteriorating in the year during which TBP was active. Due to the security situation –as politicians claimed- elections couldn't be held on time. At the same time, they failed to address any issues that render Lebanon so instable and explosive. Nowadays, with an extended parliament, a government that took 10 months to be formed, and a soon to be expired president, the incompetence of the political system has reached a new low, with many people even saying

that the State has ceased to exist. The activists realize that in such times people tend to rely even more on their community and trust others less. But as Nathalie Bekdache affirms, such a period is fit to point out the failures of the system and the need for permanent and drastic change:

"There was a lot of enthusiasm in TBP, a lot of passion and a lot of belief, because you have to believe in the impossible, you have to believe that it's possible at some point, although there are so many obstacles […], especially now, during this crisis, where the politicians can just use this crisis to rally their own people around them, so it's even more difficult for you to come in. Or it could be an opportunity as well, because it exposes the fact that everybody is useless and nobody can give a solution and maybe a third option is possible."
(Nathalie Bekdache, 2013)

It can only be hoped that during those times, the activists will continue being politically involved and won't bow down to the inevitable disappointments that they're going to face and that many others will follow with time and even before the end of the track becomes visible.

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