

Extended Arenas of “Hirak”: Anti-Sectarian Electoral Contestation in Students and Syndicates’ Elections

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Abstract

This article underlines how and in what ways anti-sectarian independent groups competing in (university) students and syndicates elections against the traditional political parties set a precedent through their electoral contestations and mobilisations. This article demonstrates that these elections contributed to the creation of collective consciousness reflected by a generation of activists advocating for anti-sectarianism and demanding change of the system. It exhibits how student councils and syndicates acted as extended arenas of “Hirak” (in Arabic “movement”), protracting traditional street mobilisation, in their fundamental role in contesting the existing political system. It explains the articulation of the university students’ and syndicates’ movement and the October 2019 thawra.

Keywords: Lebanon, Activism, Emerging Political Actors, Students, Syndicates, Lebanese Sectarian System, Social movement

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Introduction

With the culmination of the “October Revolution” in 2019, Lebanon witnessed the rise of anti-sectarian independent groups competing in (university) students and syndicates elections against the traditional political parties. Their electoral victories brought about hope in the challenging of the entrenched sectarian political system, but more significantly, was utilized as a predictor to power shifts in the May 2022 parliamentary elections.

While the students and syndicates elections are indeed indicative of the winds in which parliamentary elections could blow (Kayssi 2020), however, they could not be considered indicative of a *power* shift in the country. Other fundamental factors do play a decisive role in political power production translated in the securing of parliamentary seats, starting from the electoral law put in place to the established coalitions and reaching the eligible cast of votes. As such, the reading of these elections in challenging the entrenched sectarian system should extend beyond the mere interpretation of electoral outcomes. Instead, it should focus on the particularities of contentious mobilisation they give rise to. In doing that, the set “presumptions” of the parliamentary elections in Lebanon would not be misleading.

In extending this reading, the paper focuses on underlining how and in what ways these opposition and anti-establishment groups set a precedent through their electoral contestations and mobilisations. First, it demonstrates that these elections contributed to the creation of collective consciousness reflected by a generation of activists, especially the youth, advocating for anti-sectarianism and demanding change of the system. Second, the paper exhibits how student councils and syndicates acted as extended arenas of “*Hirak*” (in Arabic “movement”), protracting traditional street mobilisation, in their fundamental role in contesting the existing political system. The “*Hirak*” of university students manifested in the elections is also understood in this paper as part of the broader October 2019 “*thawra*” (revolution), as labeled by the array of mobilized actors who embodied it. The *thawra* was immediately characterized by a steady anti-establishment posture, epitomized in the overarching slogan “Killun ya’ni killun” (All of them means all of them) to express the attribution of the full responsibility for the socio-economic and governance shortcomings affecting peoples’ everyday lives to the entirety of Lebanese sectarian forces (Manduchi and Tufaro 2021). To understand the articulation of the university students’ and syndicates’ movement and the October 2019 *thawra*, the paper will examine the trends of anti-sectarian electoral contestation starting from the Beirut Bar Association’s elections in November 2019 up until the university students’ elections in 2021.

I. Professional Syndicates

I. The Beirut Bar Association

As the country witnessed an unprecedented widespread mobilisation and street protests against the Lebanese sectarian political establishment in October 2019, collective contention soon followed in institutionalized circles. The “October Revolution”, as it came to be dubbed, shortly became interconnected with the students and syndicates’ elections (Nassar 2021). The mounting anti-establishment “*Hirak*” of the Lebanese, extended to these institutionalized circles as well, contesting the entrenched sectarian powers. Over the past few years, the Mada^u-linked secular students’ clubs and liberal professional syndicates’ environments have played a fundamental role in advocating for secularism and calling for the change of the political system in place.

As the “October Revolution” entered its 32nd day of protests, the Beirut Bar Association (BBA) on 17th November 2019, declared the historical victory of independent candidate, lawyer Melhem Khalaf, to head the Bar (Azhari 2020). The win was considered a milestone since it marked the first ever election of an independent candidate with no political affiliation, garnering a total of 2,341 votes (Abi Raad 2019). Competing against him was a candidate backed by several political parties, among which the Free Patriotic Movement, the Lebanese Forces, the Progressive Socialist Party and the Future Movement. Khalaf was considered by independent lawyers as well as Lebanese activists, as the candidate of the uprising, and his victory as its first electoral success with hundreds of lawyers chanting “Revolution, Revolution” (Azhari 2020). Since then, Khalaf has taken a stance in defense of the uprising, marking a significant departure from his Free Patriotic Movement affiliated predecessor, Andre Chidiac, who failed during his term to support the demonstrators and remained silent on arbitrary arrests and detentions (Abi Raad 2019).

Through the Lawyers’ Committee for the Defense of Protesters (LCDP) established in 2015 in partnership with the “Legal Agenda” (an action-research center based in Beirut), the Beirut Bar Association, with some of its members active in the Committee, played a regressive role in defending

the detainees amongst the protesters. More importantly, the BBA has provided through the Committee support and legal and constitutional knowledge in discussions happening in different squares across the country^[2]. The Committee, an independent, non-funded, non-hierarchical collective of lawyers, which was formed during the witnessed “You Stink^[3]” demonstrations, aims to represent people charged with crimes related to demonstrations or acts of civil disobedience (Haidar 2020). With the beginning of the “October Revolution”, the Committee adopted an updated, two-pronged strategy: first, emergency defense and counseling for protesters upon arrest, and second, strategic litigation against state actors (Ibid). The BBA posed as *the* main defender of the revolution and support to the protesters who were arrested in various contentious episodes, playing a crucial role in securing their release (Abi Raad 2019). Nonetheless, it is important to underline that the mobilisation of the lawyers’ syndicate was not exclusive to that of the Beirut Bar Association. The Tripoli Bar Association posed as well as a pioneer since the beginning of the 2019 protests in embracing the protesters’ demands. It also established an exclusive hotline at the disposal of the demonstrators in the North and tasked the lawyers to defend them in case of their arrest (Ayoub and Franjeh 2020). In the wake of the Beirut explosion in August 2020, the BBA led a volunteer lawsuit on behalf of the families of the victims, presenting a unique case of judges and lawyers serving the community, while the actual-government led investigation stalls (Geha 2021). The LCDP also contributed to the spread of legal and human rights awareness through its issuance of several statements emphasizing the rights of citizens before the authorities, and holding dialogue sessions in several regions across the country (Ayoub and Franjeh 2020).

Two years later, the election of Khalaf’s successor, partisan candidate Nader Gaspard backed by the Future Movement, Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement, was framed as a “blow” to the independent opposition groups (Browne 2021). He secured 1,888 votes in the first round of elections and 1,530 votes in the second, winning him the leadership of the Bar Association (Ibid). The anti-establishment opposition groups were divided among two lists: “Nakabetna” (Our Order [of Lawyers]) supported by “Beirut Madinati” (Beirut Our City), and other October 17 uprising related groups such as “Mada”, “Li Haqqi” (My Right), “Mouwatinoun wa Mouwatinat Fi Dawla” (Citizens in a State) and the “Jebhat al-Mou’arada” (Opposition Front) also backed by other opposition groups such as “Khat Ahmar” (Red Line), “Taqaddom” (Progress) and the Kataeb party (Hourani 2021). “Nakabetna” list advanced two candidates to compete for the Presidency of the Bar, Ramzi Haikal and Moussa Khoury. The electoral losses of the opposition were attributed to the lack of cooperation among anti-establishment groups or the inability to form a unified opposition alliance/list (Ibid).

2. The Order of Engineers and Architects (OEA)

More than a year after the opposition’s victory in the BBA, anti-establishment forces fought another battle in another syndicate. Independent and anti-establishment-backed “Al-Naqaba Tantafid” (The Syndicate Rises) secured a remarkable victory against an alliance of traditional political parties in the elections of the Syndicate of Engineers and Architects in July 2021 (Chehabi 2021). Their candidate, Aref Yassine, was able to garner nearly 70% of all the votes, receiving a total of 5798 votes out of 8842 (Ibid). In addition, the opposition alliance won 221 seats out of 283 in the general assembly and 15 seats out of 20 in the different sections (Assaf 2021).

On their official website, the coalition describes itself as per the following:

“The Syndicate Rises” is a coalition composed of several active revolutionary groups across many regions in Lebanon, aiming to strengthen syndicate work, present an alternative program and reach decision-making positions in the syndicate. A program, that is not only limited to the process of internal reform of the syndicate, developing its role and infrastructure, and enhancing the role of the Council of Delegates as an independent platform for reporting, monitoring and accountability, but also extends beyond that to dedicating its role at the national level and strengthening it line with what serves the public interest, and ensures the continuity of the syndicate struggle. This coalition was born from the womb of the October 17 uprising, and was built on the accumulation of struggles, experiences of groups and individuals in the syndicate, civil and environmental work which contrasts that of the establishment (“Sulta”), whether inside or outside the syndicate. And it sets out with a clear vision and firm steps in devotion to the principles of the “Thawra”^[4].

In its elaboration of its devised program, the coalition underlines the broader role of the OEA syndicate, particularly after the collapse of the country. It states that the role of the syndicate extends beyond the interest of the affiliated engineers and architects, to include the interests of the whole society, “as it must be at the forefront of the struggle to impose political change^[5].”

The program of the coalition advanced action plans across several levels: the organisation of the profession itself, the rights of the engineers and architects and their safeguarding, employment opportunities as well as on the internal organisation of the syndicate. With regards to the organisation of the profession, it called for setting binding standards for engineering designs and specifications, working on the implementation of the actual laws and their development in addition to setting up a binding mechanism in relation to law 220/2000^[6], among others. In terms of employment opportunities, the program cited the study of market exigencies to respond to the economy’s needs across various engineering disciplines, and the activation of the “Vocational Guidance Center” as well as the creation of new job opportunities. With regards to the safeguarding of the rights of engineers and architects, the advanced program cited the preservation of the syndicate’s savings fund through various actions that will be taken and these include the following: the employment of the funds in production and cooperative investments contributing to society, the examination of corruption files and holding those responsible accountable, the recovery of the stolen money, the securing of alternative revenues for the syndicate, in addition to the strengthening of retirement and hospitalisation funds and end-of-service compensations. In the internal organisation of the syndicate, the program outlined the creation of new branches of specialisation and the update of the electoral law, to enable electronic voting and expatriates vote from abroad. The cited actions stipulated by the coalition mirror the “Thawra’s” vocal demands across several levels. In other terms, the devised program of the “The Syndicate Rises” is embedded within the broader contentious mobilisation, and the advanced demands represent part of the broader anti-establishment contestation, hence acting as an extended arena to the “October Revolution” movement.

II. University Students Councils

Universities in Lebanon, and in particular private ones, house various kinds of student *clubs*. They are divided into multiple categories: ranging from political clubs (primary participants in student council’s elections) to cultural clubs, and charitable clubs (such as for instance the Red Cross Club), among others (Anstorp 2020). Many student clubs have long been a hub for political mobilisation (Lefort 2013).

For instance, AUB houses 71 student clubs, and many of the boards of these student clubs and academic societies have repeatedly been the target of political parties on campus, as it has been well documented (Harik and Meho 1996). Political student clubs, unlike the secular clubs, represent traditional political parties and are also backed by them (Anstorp 2020). These clubs, henceforth partisan clubs, receive extensive material support from their donor party that they channel into their electoral campaigns (Bray-Collins 2016).

With the growing resentment over the years of sectarian political parties' representation on university campuses, some groups started to organize as an alternative, notably with the "Secular Club" founded in 2008 at the American University of Beirut. It was established "to mobilise around a rejuvenated form of secular opposition in Lebanon (Buljo 2020)". Their opposition was not just against the presence of sectarian parties on campus, but also against the whole sectarian political system. Thus, their anti-regime's stance was quickly linked to the broader national political climate off campus through their participation in demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions and social media campaigns.

In 2011, with the "Isqat An-Nizam At-Ta'ifi" movement, another secular club was formed at the University of Saint Joseph (USJ), known today as the "USJ Secular Club", and the "Alternative Movement" was founded at the Lebanese American University (LAU) in Beirut, a like-minded club. Since then, secular clubs and student movements have expanded across Lebanese universities (Al-Amil 2018) and starting from 2012, an increasing number of secular clubs have started to compete for seats in student council elections at their respective universities. In 2016 and post- "Tol'et Rihetkon" (You Stink) movement, the AUB and USJ Secular Clubs united their efforts and established the "Mada Network", which was supplemented by the LAU Alternative Movement and later by the Notre Dame University (NDU) Secular Club. The Network aimed at uniting the efforts and activities of its members across universities and "help universities that still do not have a secular club".^[7] Most recently, in February 2021, and in the sole national public university, the Lebanese University's (LU) Secular Club was established: "As a Secular Club coming about from our national university, the Lebanese University, we have decided to unite our forces, distancing ourselves from all forms of division and favoritism, to take one step closer towards a free and just society, aiming to create a student body that functions under the principles of democracy, secularism, pluralism, and social justice".^[8]

The importance of university students' elections lies in the fact that they have often historically reflected the shifting winds of Lebanon (Kayssi 2020). The winning of the majority of seats by a pro-independence coalition in council elections at AUB back in 2004 against the Syrian occupation is a great representation of that. Over the past few years, with the rise in secular clubs and student movements across several private and public universities in Lebanon, they started to compete for seats in students' council elections (Chehayeb and Majzoub 2021). Since 2012, anti-establishment and independent candidates have increasingly been able to challenge their partisan competitors in student council elections (Geha 2018). Their institutionalised organisation emerged as an alternative to the heavy presence of sectarian parties across university campuses. Their anti-sectarian slogans and positions built on a growing resentment of the sectarian political representation and the clientelist campaigning tactics, and sought to challenge the existing political rhetoric that dominated campus (Chehayeb and Majzoub 2021). The significance of electoral engagement and organisation of independents across universities was framed by the "LAU Secular Club" in a tweet as being part of the broader struggle at a national context: "Students, particularly the Secular Clubs, were an instrumental

part of the October 17 revolution, and an important force in the demonstrations following the August 4 explosion^[9]. University elections is a platform in order to empower such growing voices.^[10]

The most resonating electoral achievement across student councils unfolded in 2020, just months after the “October Revolution” and the Beirut Port explosion on August 4. Students who identify as secular independents at LAU, AUB, USJ as well as others won unprecedented large shares of seats in student councils (Kayssi 2020). At the Saint-Joseph University in Beirut, the “Taleb Secular Campaign” mobilised in December 2020, underlining the importance of the university’s elections amidst the surgency of contentious anti-establishment mobilisations in the country: “This year’s elections are of special importance: Politics is no longer monopolized by the sectarian political parties. An alternative progressive force wants to be represented.^[11]” The secular campaign achieved a major breakthrough winning 39 seats out of 101 before the votes were cast since nobody stood against them. It ended up winning 85 seats and securing council presidencies in the 12 faculties they contested (Kayssi 2020). The situation was similar at the Lebanese American University (LAU) with the “LAU Secular Club” winning 14 out of a total of 30 student council seats which they ran for, at the two campuses in Beirut and Jbeil. At the American University of Beirut (AUB), independents won 80 out of 101 seats, with the boycott of several partisan affiliated clubs citing the “undemocratic process” of virtually held elections and the current “delicate circumstances” in the country (Issa 2020). The Rafic Hariri University elections ensured a remarkable victory for independents, with 4 seats out of 9 in a tie with Future Movement affiliated candidates^[12].

In the pre-elections’ campaign of 2021, the “LAU Secular Club” tweeted: “Participating in student elections is a form of resistance against this regime. In a country where repression prevails, our savings are stolen, Beirut blast victims receive no justice, and electoral violations are in the thousands, changing the regime starts with the youth. Vote secular, democratic, progressive!^[13]” However, electoral results came not as desired. They were referred to as a “setback” in some universities. Down from 14 of the past year, independents in LAU ensured 9 out of 29 student council seats, with the boycott of the online elections by partisan supporters. In the second round of elections, secular candidates won president and vice-president seats of the student council in Beirut^[14]. The situation was different in USJ where the “Secular Club” announced on Twitter its winning of 98 seats out of 133 seats with the Presidency of 10 faculties out of 15. In AUB, the “Secular Club” was able to ensure 5 seats during the first round alongside 13 seats for other independent candidates. In the second round, it won all cabinet seats in the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences (FAFS) Student Representative Committee elections, and in the third round it secured the treasurer seat within the cabinet of the University Student Faculty Committee (USFC)^[15].

As stated earlier, these anti-sectarian students’ movements have overlapped with, and at times been at the forefront of, the country’s recurring anti-establishment protests (Al-‘Amil 2016). During the “You Stink” movement in 2015, the AUB Secular Club together with their partners at LAU and USJ protested with other civil society organizations against the government’s corruption and mismanagement of public services (Anstorp 2020). One year later, the “Mada Network” was launched by various student secular groups posing in opposition to the traditional political parties (Chehayeb and Majzoub 2021). It was meant to unify the members’ activities across universities and “help the universities that still did not have a secular club^[16].” Currently, MADA-linked secular clubs are present in 10 out of 40 accredited Lebanese university institutions, including: the American University of Beirut, the University of Saint

Joseph, the Notre Dame University, the Sagesse University, the Lebanese University, the Beirut Arab University, the Lebanese International University, the University of Antonine, the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik and the Lebanese American University (Tufaro 2021). Likewise, Mada mobilized in the widespread protests of the “October Revolution” under the name of “Students of 17 October” (Daou 2019). It provided new spaces for movement-building where student groups organised and mobilised in coordination with other campus groups and broader civil society, holding public discussions about economic and political issues in downtown Beirut and Nour Square in Tripoli (Chehayeb and Majzoub 2021).

Their participation in protests post-October 17 included ones in and off campus, forming marches from universities to main protest squares, and even the setting of their own tents in downtown Beirut. They were mainly protesting against unemployment, immigration and brain drain, and calling for the establishment of a secular system that promotes social justice and gender equality (Arab NGO Network for Development 2019). The country’s only public university, the Lebanese University, was particularly active in these protests and beyond, with the Lebanese University Student Coalition hosting various discussions and joining efforts with other student clubs and leftist groups (Ibid). Solidarity with other decentralised groups was also expressed amidst the violent confrontations in January 2021 between protesters and the security forces, as the former protested the government’s Covid-19 imposed measures and the political class’s inaction in the face of economic collapse. In this context, the “AUB Secular Club” tweeted: “After the continuous marginalization of the city of Tripoli at all developmental, economic and social levels, the complete closure came to stifle the situation of the residents of this city even more without the actual existence of any social benefits or guarantees that mitigate the impact of this crisis^[17].” Likewise, the “LAU Secular Club” expressed support to the residents of Akkar as an explosion rocked their city: “From here, we say that there is no salvation for the people from the ruling class and system except through radical and urgent change, and that is through organisation and mobilisation behind political projects aimed at protecting people and society. For years, the impoverishment and marginalisation of Akkar and its citizens, while their cronies get rich - as well as on the complicit army apparatus that allow monopolism and smuggling.^[18]”

Conclusion

Over the past few years, the rise of anti-establishment secular groups in Lebanon has extended beyond their engagement in protest mobilisations to include electoral contestation, particularly in professional syndicates and university student councils. In an unprecedented manner, independent lists as well as candidates were being advanced as opposing political establishment candidates, represented by traditional political parties. The achieved electoral breakthroughs, particularly those in parallel to the developments of the “October Revolution”, prompted the enlarged interpretation of electoral outcomes in a dichotomic manner. As such, electoral results were considered either as a “breakthrough” or as a “setback”, subsequently ushering in a hopeful success or a feared defeat against the entrenched sectarian establishment in the parliamentary elections in 2022. In other terms, some were employed as a predictor of power shifts in the first post-“October Revolution” elections at a national level.

This paper has sought to dismiss this narrow interpretation of electoral outcomes, arguing that it overlooks important advancements achieved by these actors in terms of contentious mobilisation. Along this line, Abi Raad (2019) notes that “electoral victories of independent syndicates and student councils

should be seen as a microcosm of the larger struggle in Lebanon's streets not in symbolising small wins on the road toward bigger ones in future parliamentary elections". The present paper has further extended this reading, questioning how both electoral "victories" and "setbacks" of opposition forces have likewise set a precedent and in what ways they did so. This was made possible through the trends of anti-establishment electoral contestation and its interconnected contentious actions across professional syndicates and university student councils, starting from the Beirut Bar Association's elections in 2019 and reaching the recent 2021 student council elections.

In doing so, it unfolded how these electoral contestations contributed to the creation of collective consciousness in parallel with the emergence of narratives focused on demanding change to the political system and advocating for secularism. The paper also highlighted how contentious collective action of university student clubs and professional syndicates transcends that of "electoral boundaries", increasingly acting as extended arenas of "Hirak". In addition to their prominent participation to protest mobilisations, university student clubs and professional syndicates also constitute a protraction to traditional street contention through the various roles they exercise in their fundamental role in challenging the political system. In sum, the paper aimed at demonstrating that indeed alternative opposition forces have emerged in Lebanon and have brought about significant socio-political advancements, if not solely examined as being determinants of electoral and political behaviour.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Mada Network was established in 2017 per initiative of the Secular Clubs of the AUB and the USJ, with the double aim of enhancing the rootedness of independent groups within the campuses, and integrating university youth in the national social, political and economic area.

^[2] Arab NGO Network for Development, 2019 Lebanon Revolution: Wicked Politics and Shaken Socio-Economy, 21 November 2019.

^[3] The “You Stink” movement in 2015 was sparked by the failure of the Lebanese government to find a solution to the garbage crisis which emerged when landfill sites were closed and consequently piles of unsorted garbage started accumulating in the streets of Beirut and Mount Lebanon.

^[4] Official website of “Naqaba Tantafid” list, Accessible at: <https://naqabatantafid.org/>, last accessed on 10 May 2022.

^[5] Program of “Naqaba Tantafid” list, Accessible at: <https://naqabatantafid.org/index.php/nts-program/>, last accessed on 10 May 2022.

^[6] The Lebanese Law 220/2000 refers to the rights of people with disabilities in the fields of education, rehabilitation, employment, and access to services. However, the implementation of this law has been limited because of the removal of penalties and no alternative enforcement mechanism was put in place.

^[7] Coffee & Politics, “al-Nawadi al-?Ilmaniyya fi Jami?at Lubnan” (Secular Clubs in Lebanon’s Universities), YouTube, 23.02.2020.

^[8] Twitter account “LU Secular Club”, 13 February 2021.

^[9] After the 4th August 2020 Beirut Port explosion which caused the deaths of hundreds of residents and the injury of thousands, protests erupted in the capital with angry demonstrators demanding the ousting of the country’s *zu’ama*, considering the explosion as *the* manifestation of their corruption and negligence.

^[10] Twitter account “LAU Secular Club”, 20 September 2021, “Why are university elections important for our wider national developments?”

^[11] Twitter account “USJ Secular Club”, 3 November 2020.

^[12] Twitter account “Beirut Madinati”, 2 November 2020.

^[13] Twitter account “LAU Secular Club”, 5 October 2021.

^[14] Twitter account “LAU Secular Club”, 16 October 2021.

^[15] Twitter Account “AUB Secular Club”, 27 October 2021.

^[16] Coffee & Politics, “al-Nawadi al-Ilmaniyya fi Jami’at Lubnan” (Secular Clubs in Lebanon’s Universities), YouTube, 23/02/2020.

^[17] Twitter account “AUB Secular Club”, 25 January 2021.

^[18] Twitter account “LAU Secular club”, 17 august 2021.