



MAISON
DU FUTUR

POLICY PAPER

- N°17 -
2018

THE CHALLENGE OF THE YOUTH IN LEBANON: FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY

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The Challenge of the Youth in Lebanon: From Crisis to Opportunity

As Lebanon heads into long-overdue parliamentary elections, much focus and speculation will revolve around the role of nine young generations of voters who, despite reaching the eligible voting age of 21, have yet to practice their constitutional prerogative.¹

Generally, youth are both viewed and portrayed as catalysts of change and socio-economic development, and so any investment in them is a direct investment in the future of the country. Realistically however, the Lebanese youth have thus far been either unable or unwilling to defy the current political establishment and assume a more proactive role in the archaic Lebanese political system.

In part, Lebanon's sociological configuration— where for the time being ultimate loyalty remains sub-national, i.e. communal, and ultimate identity remains sectarian— seems to have relegated the youth to mere subjects as opposed to participatory citizens, whereas their basic rights are granted only through the mediation of a communal powerbroker rather than on account of their citizenship.

The by-products of such a reality are plentiful and have contributed to a general feeling of apathy among the younger generations who simultaneously grapple with, to name just a few issues, a lack of economic and political opportunities; political alienation if they associate outside the mainstream; and unemployment at a staggering 36% among youth— double the

¹ The last parliamentary elections took place in spring of 2009, and the current assembly has renewed its own tenure three times.

global youth unemployment rate.

As it stands, the youth do not really feature in the Lebanese political life and their involvement remains ceremonial on nearly all levels. While the majority of the Lebanese political parties house an impressive student and youth body, most of these youth groups are organically linked to their mother party and their scope of activities, more often than not, dictated by the center. Coincidentally, membership in most youth organizations seldom exceed the membership of the main political organ, yet the former does not seem to have a role on the decision-making process nor possess any veto power over party decisions.

Outside of traditional political parties, Lebanese youth comprise a hodgepodge of groups and factions, mistakenly and commonly referred to as “Civil Society”. These groups and individuals rose to prominence during the summer of 2015, following the abysmal failure of the Lebanese state to handle the issue of waste management; yet they have repeatedly failed to form a united front on issues, or to draw a common vision for political action.

Overall, at the crux of the youth movement is the Generation Z (those born from the mid-1990’s onwards). Generation Z are the most digitally connected, with a more global vision and wider access to information. While this group slowly makes their way into the workforce, the same trajectory does not apply to their participation in the realm of politics. Most, if not all, of this cohort believe that their activism is best channeled through the various social media platforms and that the traditional venues for social activism are neither worthy of their time nor sufficient to bring about change and reform.

Despite the various socio-economic obstacles they face,

these social media activists have surprisingly exhibited great resilience, as many of them are engaged in startups and the growing knowledge economy. Yet these young men and women are not immune to the sectarian and tribal systems within which they and their extended family exist. While many among them do aspire for and call for a modern civic state, mostly over social media, they nevertheless continue to request favors and jobs from their political sectarian patrons, thus propagating the current archaic clientelist system.

Therefore, contrary to standard assumptions that the youth are essentially all progressive, one should not discard the fact that a considerable portion of Lebanon's youth are in fact somewhat conservative on many social matters. This is equally true for their stance on a number of social issues, as their various calls of action has never resulted in substantial concrete reforms (the issue of civil marriage being a case in point).

In a study conducted by Charles Harb at the American University of Beirut entitled "Describing the Lebanese Youth: A National and Psycho-Social Survey" (2009), Harb affirms the strong sectarian and religious affinity of the Lebanese youth.² Harb, who surveyed 1200 Lebanese citizens aged 18-25, found that on a scale of 1 to 5, Lebanon's youth are highly sectarian, with 3.78 out of 5 possessing a strong affiliation to their communal group (SD =.8).

Similarly, the youth showed somewhat of a reluctant attitude towards interfaith marriage (civil marriage) with 33% opposed, 26% neutral, and 41% in favor of interfaith marriage. Out of these same individuals, 63% stated that they were unwilling to marry someone from a different religion, 37% stated willing to do so.

² http://website.aub.edu.lb/ifi/public_policy/arab_youth/Documents/working_paper_series/ifi_wps03_ay_Harb.pdf

Despite the alarming sectarian mindset, there still exists within the youth of Lebanon a certain cross-sectarian segment that mainly belongs to the middle-class, most of which have been enrolled in educational institutions with a diverse socio-economic, ideological and sectarian makeup. Yet this same segment has yet to form an effective pressure group capable of channeling their common perspective on number of issues that present a challenge to the majority of the youth.

Coincidentally, the two menacing challenges for the Arab and the Lebanese youth are unemployment (35%) and the rise of extremism (35%).³ Yet, 81% of the Arab youth are beyond convinced that their respective governments are utterly idle to their demands as manifested in the lack of a clear policy that addresses youth concerns.

During the waste-management crisis, the performance and vigor of the various independent political groups and activists were perceived as a reason for optimism, and perhaps a youth-led revolt in the making. For many, the upcoming parliamentary elections would provide a historic opportunity for those forces of change to properly challenge, if not dethrone, the ruling establishment.

This optimistic attitude, however, soon petered out as the different groups displayed serious schisms which ultimately led them to run on separate lists, making their chances close to none. Add to this their borderline anarchist temperaments and their tendency to adopt an unconstructive multi-messaging approach to activism.

While this paper does not provide a very positive outlook towards

³ <http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/pdf/2017-AYS-White-Paper-EN.pdf>
3,500 face-to-face interviews from February 7 to March 7, 2017 with Arab men and women aged 18 to 24.

the status of Lebanon's youth as a force for change, it does not discredit nor take away from any prospective role for them in the future. However, the youth, like the rest of the Lebanese, are disadvantaged by the current political system which reduces them to mere subjects rather than citizens capable of holding the political elite accountable. At the same time, the Lebanese population at large, by continuing to drink from the fountain of corruption and clientelism, are empowering the ruling establishment, making it nearly impossible to break this vicious cycle.

The following set of recommendations set forth several ideas and avenues to explore, all of which empower the youth and might offer some structural solutions to their predicament.

Human Rights Culture as a Cornerstone

Investing in a human rights culture should be a prerequisite; one that is premised on deeds rather than rhetoric and photo-ops. Current and upcoming political generations ought to treat “the other” based on his or her essence, which is our shared common humanity and not the accident of national origin, sex, race or political affiliation. It is healthy to diverge on political worldviews and be different in terms of race or culture. However, it is not warranted to dehumanize and character-assassinate just because “the other” shares an unaligned stance with the mainstream. Autocrats limit, if not undermine, rights and freedoms exactly on such premises, opting for the accident at the expense of the essence— our common humanity.

Additionally, the upcoming political generation should treat human rights from a universal, as opposed to a relativist, point of view. Adopting a selective approach in response to violations of rights and freedoms is a shortsighted reaction even if it serves a

political agenda or undermines an opponent. The slippery slope in this instance is self-evident, considering shifting political developments and alignments. Hence, what “works in favor of” today might “work against” tomorrow. It is a strategic imperative then to uphold a principled and universal posture on human rights issues.

Issue-Based, not Personal, Politics

Endorsing a political program based on issues and not personas requires a differentiation between methodology and ideology. The former is a trait of participatory political systems and is governed by ideas servicing the public interest; its enablers are public servants. The latter, ideology, is typically a by-product of oppressive regimes and is based on ulterior motives driven by self-continuity and/or personal settling of score; its enablers are political career survivalists.

Youth activists, whether operating in mainstream political parties, civil society organizations or independent political movements should strive to instill a culture that enables issue-based politics above all. Issues benefit the collective, and are methodically engineered and evidence-based. Persona-based politics on the other hand primarily favors the revered personality, plays into ideological tenets and often degenerates into populism.

Nonetheless, the above is not mutually exclusive. Persona-based politics can be tenable yet principally when such politics is at the service of an inclusive idea or program. The challenge, and opportunity, for young leaders and activists today is how to strike a balance between catering to the common good and evading instinctive politics and love-of-self.

Independent Political Activism or Civil Society, not Both

As events throughout the past three years have demonstrated, traditional political practice has widened the gap between the younger demographic and the ruling establishment at large. From the unresolved issue of waste management to corruption scandals, the youth feel more disenchanting and marginalized than ever before. This reasonable sense of disappointment, however, should not lead to a one-size-fits-all approach that puts the entire establishment in one basket nor in a stigma that disgraces the honorable intent of political practice.

A majority of young activists today label themselves as “civil society” hoping to evade the stigma that has become synonymous with the terms “politics” and/or “politician”. In reality, they are more “independent political activists” than “civil society”, unless they choose to revoke political practice per se and remain active under grassroots and non-governmental organizations. But they cannot be both civil society and independent political activists as this will automatically invoke a conflict of interest and a contradiction in terms.

Members of civil society organizations (CSOs) are watchdogs as they are referred to. Their role, as a third sector, is to mainly monitor, question and hold accountable officials and executives in the public and private sectors, as well as in the fourth estate. They cannot be public officials and watchdogs at once, as they simply cannot govern or legislate while at the same time monitoring themselves. Should members of CSOs decide on pursuing legitimate political ambitions, it becomes essential for them to either terminate or suspend their membership under the organizations they belong to so as to remain credible.

With the above distinction in mind, there is a great merit, if not need, for young activists to chart an independent path under each of these streams. Just like a middle class is the backbone of a healthy economy, so is civil society. It is the basis of a functioning democracy and a prerequisite to a healthy political practice.

Political Practice from Within and Without

Engaging in political practice does not occur exclusively from inside the sphere of government nor from the outside alone. In maximizing impact and influence, young political leaders, particularly the independents among them, should pursue a long-term strategy of engaging established officials from within the executive and legislative branches. This entails opening formal channels that enable them to properly inform and lobby as it relates to their causes. Their opposition needs to be issue-based, responsible and mature. Naming and shaming from the outside alone, while essential, is not enough.

If civil activism has achieved anything since 2015, it is tightening the noose around traditional politicking which, though continues, cannot go unnoticed or unchallenged anymore. Officials now feel compelled to listen to young political activists. Whether out of conviction or political-correctness, the window is there and ought to be seized.

On the other hand, young activists folded under mainstream political parties have an equally important exercise to undertake. Theirs is a challenge of working from within their party structures to renew political discourse and modernize decision-making mechanisms. Understanding that change is mainly effected through a top-bottom approach in such contexts, their role should center on positively influencing their leadership to gradually adjust to changing times. Ultimately, either the

leadership or the base will need to succumb to one the other.

Political Practice as a Continuous Course of Action

Emerging independent activists have a formidable challenge in this regard: how to remain relevant and efficient in an environment that almost exclusively favors the establishment and longstanding parties in terms of access, media and funding.

In developed countries, change is effected and irregularities are resolved either through deliberation with concerned parties, litigation through free and fair trials or finally the ballot box. None of these prescriptions have been facilitated for a majority of Lebanon's young independent activists since 2009. And that is why the upcoming parliamentary elections of 2018 present a chance for promising young political activists to begin seeding their credentials, even if they do not succeed in this round.

Yet, if the Beirut Madinati⁴ experiment during the municipal elections of spring 2016 offers any lessons, it is that independent political activists should have the will and stamina to stay in it for the long haul. Political practice is not a prestige vehicle nor is it a seasonal undertaking. It requires steady determination and patience as essential virtues. Surfacing on electoral milestones, such as municipal elections, while submerging shortly after elections does not send the right message of credibility to a

4 Beirut Madinati (Beirut my City) is a political movement that has emerged in the aftermath of the 2015 protests against the government's staggering impotence in response to the garbage crisis. The group ran in May 2016 Beirut municipality elections based on a 10-point program advocating improvements to Beirut's crumbling infrastructure, without ignoring issues of governance. It lost the elections with 40% against the "Beirutis" list, an unprecedented alliance between the country's ruling March 8 and March 14 coalitions, signaling a shift in local politics of Beirut. Though the movement failed to produce any tangible political success it had managed to disrupt political patronage networks.

yearning constituency. Losing a municipal election does not mean losing a political battle. Elections as such are a means to an end and not the end itself.

One Message, Various Messengers

Generally, the bulk of Lebanon's youth share the same set of concerns, which today mainly revolve around socio-economic issues such as employment, housing and clean environment. Yet, while these young brackets seem to agree on the pressure points they are facing, they either diverge on how to best tackle them, if they are independent activists, or defer decisions to their party heads if they are members of political parties. The civil activism of summer 2015, triggered by the government's mismanagement of trash collection, is a case in point.

Back then, the momentum on the street was favorable, the demand was legitimate and mobilization was cross-communal; nonetheless, the movement slowly receded. While the civil movement is not to be entirely held responsible for the phase-out (given its nascent attempt and the undermining role of fifth columnists), it still got basic operational truths wrong. Initially, the movement failed to capitalize on the issue of trash as the main rallying cry that could have created a quick-win and enabled a domino effect onto other pressing issues. Instead, the horizontal leadership of the movement-- which was a favorable advantage at first-- slipped into diverging, if not outright clashing, messaging that caused the movement to implode from within.

With parliamentary elections looming this spring, 2018 does not look any better from 2015. The scattered lists formation of independent political activists, inaccurately dubbed as civil society, is ad hoc per region and lacks a unified nationwide umbrella. As such, young men and women candidates appear

as favoring individual self-serving agendas, in contrast to an issue-based political program promoting collective thinking and favoring the public interest.

With this lack of a unifying message under which various voices can coalesce, Lebanon's independent political activists have yet to prove that they are a real alternative to the country's longstanding political elites and parties.

A Coalition of the Willing

Young political activists, independent or not, adhering to CSOs or political parties, are not alone in their work for the betterment of society. Early on, they should pursue coalition-building with like-minded counterparts on the local, regional and international levels alike. It is not enough to join forces over an idea. That idea needs to be developed into a program embodying a clearly detailed framework of action defining the roles and responsibilities of each.

Locally, young activists ought to align with entities sharing their vision, diagnosis and remedies, even if these entities are government or government-backed. As earlier discussed, issue-based politics should be the precursor determining such a course of action and this should be treated on a case-by-case basis.

Regionally, and considering that the youth share similar concerns and grievances across the MENA region, it is always beneficial to compare notes with counterparts so as to learn from their respective success and failures.

Internationally, exchange programs or partnerships with parties or movements espousing similar political inclinations will no doubt contribute to raising the profile of counterparts at home, be it through networking, knowledge transfer or skills training.

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