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Lebanon

The You Stink challenge in Lebanon

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Last year's huge demonstrations over the garbage collection crisis in Lebanon have led to an electoral breakthrough.

In summer 2015, the streets of Beirut saw another expression of the Arab uprisings that have swept across the Middle East and North Africa since early 2011. Tens of thousands of people took part in protests over garbage collection and disposal, which quickly turned into a wider expression of anger at systemic corruption. The two rival wings of Lebanon's ruling establishment—identified by their allegiance to either the March 8 Alliance, including the Amal Movement and Hezbollah, or the March 14 Alliance, led by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and generally supported by the U.S.—were implicated.

A combination of state repression and divisions inside the movement, which authorities ably sought to exploit, forced the protesters from the streets. But now, a new electoral campaign called Beirut Madinati is challenging the ruling parties in municipal elections, becoming the latest expression of lingering anger at the political status quo in Lebanon.

In the first installment of a two-part interview, Farah Kobaissy and Elia El Khazen, both members of the Socialist Forum in Lebanon, talked to Wael Elasady about the Beirut Madinati campaign and what it says about social and political dynamics in Lebanese society.

Can you explain to us what the Beirut Madinati campaign is and how it started?

Farah: It began when a group of people, after the You Stink protests, said that we not only want to protest the situation, but we also want to give people some kind of alternative or project. This was the starting point, and people began meeting.

Later on, Beirut Madinati brought together hundreds and hundreds of volunteers who were excited about the idea of standing in elections for the first time and independently competing against the ruling political parties in Beirut. They also had a positive message to present to society. We have an alternative, we have a project, and we want to gather people around it.

So on the one hand, you had Beirut Madinati running, and on the other, you had a list that was gathering together most of the ruling party figures from both the March 8 and March 14 camps [the rival factions of the political elite that have dominated Lebanese politics]. In other words, various forces opposed to one another—the Future Movement, Amal, Lebanese Forces—were running together on a list.

Those running on the ruling parties' list were people like the CEO of Solidaire, a company that owns and is developing large tracts of downtown Beirut. It was clear we were running against those who have wealth and power. They have been the ones forcing people in Beirut out of their homes and handing it over to real estate developers.

The election result for Beirut Madinati was very important because it won almost 40 percent of the vote in Beirut. This is fantastic, and it tells us a lot about the situation in Lebanon and the amount of social anger at the ruling political parties and their policies. For a campaign that is only a few months old and seriously competing against parties that have held power for years and control the major media outlets and the economy, this is remarkable. It is worth stopping and thinking about the message this holds for us.

Also, the elections are not only taking place in Beirut. The success around Beirut Madinati in the capital gave confidence to others and provided a push to run independent efforts in the south of Lebanon against the Amal Movement and Hezbollah candidates. This happened in various villages, where independent candidates were able to run and won support from various families and also from the Communist Party. In some villages, the Communists were able to win all the seats. Something is happening and moving and shaking, and we want to build on it.

Elia: It's important to point out the differences between the municipal and parliamentary elections, which have led to them becoming the place in which this political moment is being expressed.

In the parliamentary elections, what they have done is to compartmentalize things geographically in a way that ensures victory for the traditional political parties. In the municipal elections, this isn't the case, so you can see the discontent in a more direct way, and people are more likely to vote. People feel like their vote has meaning at the municipal level, but in the parliamentary elections, it's nearly impossible at this point for independent voices to emerge.

What were the main issues driving support for Beirut Madinati?

Farah: There is a lot of discontent in the street regarding the internal policies in the country, especially those that affect the everyday life of people in the city, such as housing, electricity, water, garbage, pollution and 100,000 other urban problems. People were expressing their utmost outrage against the ruling parties.

Second, those who usually have allegiance to the ruling political parties wanted to punish their leadership for running on joint lists. For example, people who traditionally were saying we would vote for an Amal candidate, but we don't like Hariri, now are voting for Beirut Madinati because their first choice, Amal, is running on a joint list with someone else they oppose. This alliance between the competing ruling parties was a total shock for people.

The usual political discourse coming from these parties is to pump up sectarian and political clashes between people—and now all of a sudden, they are united in one list? No, I will not vote for you. People weren't satisfied with this alliance. This, combined with the economic and social outrage, is what accounts for the results.

What was the program of Beirut Madinati?

Farah: The program of Beirut Madinati was written by some academics and professionals who have a kind of social orientation. So basically there were 10 points dealing with creating more public spaces and gardens; traffic and public transportation; the garbage crisis and role of the municipality of the garbage management.

The program was about everyday life problems facing people and how to make the city more inclusive. It wasn't a socialist program; it was more of a liberal program with a social aspect to it. I think it was good.

We can criticize the program: for example, on the question of housing, it was not very clear, since the campaign didn't want to enrage entrepreneurs. There wasn't a clear position regarding the real-estate developer Solidare, which has been responsible for much displacement of local residents.

But it was good as a lesson; for example, it helped me learn how to run with people who don't share with us the same opinion and same program and same vision, but we can actually discuss this and put forward a basic program that might resonate with people. As socialists, we have our program, our policies to push, but at this moment, I think it's important to unite with people who are against this system, even if they don't totally share with us the same political

vision.

What were the goals of your participation and the participation of Socialist Forum?

Farah: I was running in Beirut with Beirut Madinati as an independent, not as a member of Socialist Forum, because the campaign has a general rule that it doesn't accept people running in the campaign who are affiliated with political parties.

This, I think, is a problem. Although I understand why they have this position, I don't agree with it. They made this rule to keep out people who are part of the ruling political parties from being a part of the campaign, and especially because nothing else really exists as far as political parties outside the ruling parties that dominate the system.

There's Socialist Forum, but generally, all the political parties are part of the political system, even the leftist ones. So I had to run as an independent.

The reason why I ran—and why we decided in the Socialist Forum that I should run as an independent—is that we saw it as an opportunity to link up with people who are not in our direct circles in neighborhoods, where we would otherwise never have contact with them.

Despite a lot of experience organizing and doing a lot on the political front since 2011 with the anti-sectarian movements and then the You Stink movement in 2015, there is a kind of detachment between these movements, on the one hand, and our social movement, on the other. So it was a very important opportunity in this way, and we need to build on it.

What is also very important with this campaign for me is that it redefined for us what politics means. Beirut Madinati is redefining politics over what kind of city we want, what kind of housing we want, what kind of infrastructure. These are very important questions, which are very political as well.

What do you see as the next steps now?

Elia: I think that it is very important that we continue the struggle, even though we have ideological differences with most of the people running as independents against ruling class parties. I think it's important to be involved with the hundreds of volunteers on the ground who are getting politicized through the elections or through street protests because they are learning how things are done, how political parties gang up with each other when it comes to their own class interests.

I think people see through this, and they look for alternatives beyond the electoral campaigns. Which I think you can feel when you yourself are engaging with Bernie Sanders' volunteers, who might at first not see something beyond the presidential campaign, but eventually if you continue interacting with them, inviting them to meetings, inviting them to reading groups, challenging their ideas that this should go beyond the election, they may.

I think people need an alternative, and they eventually look for one—if not us, then someone else. So we need to be in every battle. I think the volunteers are key, such as the people who come to the open spaces to discuss the program of Beirut Madinati. I think the connections that Farah was able to make with the people, the problems that she heard, the deep discontent, is key.

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The main idea is that there is an alternative—that's key, and the fact that people are voting for it is key, especially in the south, where it had been assumed that the pedestal inhabited by Hezbollah was unassailable. You have a lot of candidates from the Communist Party and independents who are able to challenge this dichotomy of Amal and Hezbollah.

Can you talk a little bit more about the main political forces in Lebanon like the March 8 and March 14 coalitions? What is the significance of these coalitions running together? What is their social basis, and why do you think they would run together?

Farah: We are in a moment that is post-March 8 and March 14. We are in the moment where people are discovering more and more that what unites these two factions is way more than what divides them.

So what are the March 8 and March 14 movements?

It goes back to 2005, when there was the so-called Cedar Revolution. There were a number of mobilizations after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri at the hands of the Syrian regime. Millions of people went into the streets calling for the Syrian regime to release its grip on Lebanon and for the Syrian army to leave the country. This camp was supported by the U.S. in opposition to the Syrian regime—it became known as March 14.

Then you had the March 8 camp, which was composed of Hezbollah, Amal and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and other nationalist forces, which were allied with the Syrian regime and actually didn't want it to leave Lebanon. These camps actually were formed at that moment.

But within movements at the local level and in response to Lebanon's trade union movement, we see how these political divisions tend to disappear. The March 8 and March 14 camps have joined forces to smash these movements—for example, when tens of thousands of professors and public employees were organizing demonstrations for three years in order to fight for salary increases, among other demands. Both camps united against their demands.

So each of these camps has a political background aimed at securing the interests of the wing of the bourgeoisie that they represent, but then they come together to smash any social movement.

Every party has its own social base. For instance, Hezbollah draws from various social categories within the Shia community, but mainly, its members come from the petty bourgeoisie. But the professional leadership of Hezbollah is more and more drawn from the Shia bourgeoisie, and those who made money in Africa and other places. Increasingly, there is a rising bourgeoisie among the Shia.

Hariri, the leader of March 14, represents the big financial bourgeoisie. His political party is the Future Movement and is supported by Saudi Arabia. Because of the sectarian nature of these political parties, their base cuts across social classes. So there are a lot of contradictions in these parties and even within Hezbollah, in class terms.

Can you talk some about Socialist Forum in Lebanon?

Elia: One example of what Socialist Forum has done was to help organize the alliance called Al Sha'eb Yurid (The People Want) during the protest movement last year. It was the only component in the struggle pushing for a more radical understanding of the structural problem of capitalism instead of the liberal reforms pursued by other forces.

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It was the only organization that had parity between women and men—many women who participated in the Al Sha'eb Yurid voiced that this was one of the only spaces where they could participate in politics without men interrupting them.

This was a very good experience in leading the political voice of the movement. This has helped us to put forward the Socialist Forum's political views, which has ultimately helped us in recruiting a lot of people who were interested in our analysis of Lebanese society.

Farah: Socialist Forum was the result of a merger between two leftist tendencies in the country—the Fourth International Tendency and the International Socialist Tendency in Lebanon. It's a political group and organization that works towards socialism.

We work on different issues related to social justice, equality and secularism. We organize Marxist study groups. We organize conferences and protests around different practical and political issues. We also try to build solidarity with workers, and we try to organize, whether in our workplace and neighborhoods.

We have a newspaper called [Al-Manshour](#), which we print and sell, and we have a journal published in Arabic called Permanent Revolution, which we edit, but which many socialist organizations in the Arab world contribute to it. It's printed in Lebanon and available online. We have been raising funds lately to organize a center, and we think a center will also boost our activities and encourage more people to join.

There are a lot of things happening in this country and in this region, and we are full of hope for the future. Personally, I am very optimistic and so excited about the coming years. I think they will bring a lot of change.

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