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The Critical State of Youth in Lebanon: Past Breaking Point and Organizing for Change

Fadi Nicholas Nassar

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Sadat Tower, Tenth Floor
P.O.B 55-215, Leon Street,
Ras Beirut, Lebanon

T: + 961 1 79 93 01
F: + 961 1 79 93 02
info@lcps-lebanon.org
www.lcps-lebanon.org

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Fadi Nicholas Nassar

Fadi Nicholas Nassar is a research fellow at the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies and Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the Lebanese American University.

Introduction

Three years into Lebanon's debilitating and still unresolved crisis, the country's future lifeline—its youth—are being pushed past breaking point. On the one hand, the magnitude of the crisis has shaken the popularity and public legitimacy of traditional parties, presenting new openings for alternative or independent candidates to compete over electoral slots. On the other, the weight of the pressure brought on by the protracted crisis is fueling despair and undermining confidence in the political process. Where do youth stand amidst such an uncertain and volatile context?

To answer that question, this report sheds light on the political objectives and concerns of youth voters, aged 21 to 29, and unpacks the strategies, tools, and challenges facing youth campaigners in the syndicate and university elections in the build-up to the 2022 parliamentary elections. In doing so, this paper seeks to identify the major priorities and concerns of Lebanese youth and assess the campaigning, organizational, and leadership capacities of youth movements in elections since 2019.

I Methodology

This project draws on a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods: a youth-targeted survey, five focus groups with youth organizers in the syndicate and university elections, and dozens of semi-structured interviews with youth leaders, campaigners, and activists.

Survey

The ultimate objective of the survey is to better clarify the voting behavior and variables that influence youth political participation. The survey was carried out between April 21 and 29, shortly before the May 2022 parliamentary elections. The sample size was restricted to 500 respondents. Respondents were selected based off the number of electors aged 21 and 29, in the two electoral districts of Beirut—Beirut I and Beirut II—and equally represents both women and men. The poll was implemented using the in-person interview technique (CAPI), with a margin of error estimated at 4.4%. To be clear, sect and age were controlled, drawing on a representative sample from Beirut's two electoral rolls. The number of respondents to the poll of each confession,¹ like Sunni or Shia, reflect the number of members of that respective

¹ For more on the complex history and dynamic relationships of religions and sects in Lebanon, refer to (Faour 2007).

confession registered in Lebanon's electoral rolls for Beirut I and Beirut II.

Focus groups

Complementing the survey are two focus groups with youth participating in university elections and three focus groups with youth campaigners participating in syndicate elections. Regarding the focus groups with university students, one focus group consisted of students belonging to secular clubs and the other members of 'independent' groups that participated in the elections. A diverse range of Beirut-based universities were selected, but are kept anonymous to protect the security and safety of discussants. Due to logistical limitations, focus groups with every syndicate could not be achieved. Instead, three syndicates were selected: Beirut Bar Association, Order of Engineers, and Order of Dentists. Although not an exhaustive list, their selection reflects three distinct categories: a syndicate election where traditional parties won (Beirut Bar Association), a syndicate election where an independent coalition won (Order of Engineers), and a syndicate election disrupted by violence and clashes (Order of Dentists).

All five focus groups were conducted to deepen the understanding of certain aspects of the survey results and gauge response of the participants to: 1) the use of social media to combat disinformation campaigns, 2) the efficacy of youth-targeted messaging to draw out youth voters, 3) coalition building between youth organizers and alternative groups, 4) influence of youth organizers on voter turnout of non-youth voters. A snowball approach for the recruitment of focus group participants was applied for each of the five groups.

Semi-structured interviews

Dozens of semi-structure interviews with youth organizers, voters, and candidates that participated in the syndicate elections, university elections, and the May 2022 parliamentary elections were conducted in June 2022, to better assess the degree of continuity of youth involvement throughout these different formalized modes of political participations. Complementing the focus group discussions, interviews focused on four core areas: 1) the use of social media to combat disinformation campaigns, 2) the efficacy of youth-targeted messaging to draw out youth voters, 3) coalition building between youth organizers and other independent actors, 4) influence of youth organizers on voter turnout of non-youth voters.

II Background

In a period of three years, Lebanon went through a series of momentous events—a nationwide popular uprising (commonly referred to as ‘thawra’), a systematic suppression of that uprising, the Port of Beirut blast, and a protracted economic and financial crisis—which have collectively (and individually) shaken the core foundations of the country’s political, economic, and social system.

In early October 2019, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators mobilized to denounce the country’s political establishment and the larger social, economic, and political system.² At first, political momentum appeared to favor this people-powered movement. In a matter of weeks, then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned. Furthering this momentum would be the victory of independent candidates in syndicate elections, typically captured by established political parties. Most notably, in 2019, Melhem Khalaf, secured a decisive victory to head the Beirut Bar Association against a candidate endorsed by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), the Future Movement, Hezbollah, Amal, and the Lebanese Forces.³

Yet, these developments also came within a context of increasing political violence towards demonstrators, dissidents, and journalists. The intensification of such violence and other modes of repression like restrictions on the freedom of assembly, arbitrary arrests, and further incursions on freedom of expressions encroached on the borders of civic space in Lebanon.⁴ The escalation of violence, particularly by state authorities, during crackdowns on protest heightened the insecurity that came with participating in anti-establishment politics.⁵ When asked, the majority of the respondents in our poll who did not participate in the 2019 protests cited not feeling safe as the main reason they did not partake.⁶

The shrinking of civic space in Lebanon and intensification of political violence also came in a context in which the government and established political actors entrenched their positions. Then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s resignation did not set a precedent that led to similar resignations in the country’s other branches, like the legislative, executive, or judicial branches. Hassan Diab, the interim prime minister who succeeded Saad Hariri, for example, resisted persistent calls for his resignation up until after the Port of Beirut blast in August 2020.

2

(Nassar, 2019); (Al Jazeera, 2019); (Makdisi, 2021); (Baumann, 2021).

3

(Azar, 2019).

4

For documentation of the progressively shrinking civic space in Lebanon, refer to (AbiYaghi and Yammine, 2020). To read about the pushback from civil society to these pressures, read (Vérts et al, 2021).

5

(AbiYaghi and Yammine, 2020); (Daher, 2022); (Nassar, 2022).

6

332 did not participate, of which 21.1% cited not feeling safe, 10.2% worried about future repercussions, 5.8% were concerned with social backlash, and 5.0% with family concerns.

While the port of Beirut blast triggered renewed social and political mobilization and anti-establishment protests, the country's main political institutions remained largely unmoved, with only few members of parliament and the interim prime minister resigning.

Not only were political violence and other forms of repression raising the costs of anti-establishment politics through demonstrations, such protests were not affecting the behavior of government actors. In other words, the costs for participation were rising without any clear indicators that demonstrating would lead to material successes, like the resignation of public figures.

This dynamic exposed a key dimension of political power in the country. Lebanon's establishment derives its power, not from public support, but through a combination of violence, patronage and despair, as well as exclusive control over public institutions and positions in government.

Accordingly, the size and frequency of protests decreased as attention moved towards competing over these public positions and the legitimizing space they offered, marking a shift towards the participation of non-traditional and anti-establishment actors in more formalized politics. Explaining some of the dynamics driving this shift towards participation in more formalized politics, one youth organizer stated:

We started becoming a political party...because we thought that if we stay on the road protesting and shouting, this will be a pressure, but we need to get things done. We need to work... need to do something. So that's where we shifted from being just a group of people to an actual political party. We started working on our manifesto, internal bylaws and all, and then we became a political party and we created the internal categories or committees and boards. I was running for the syndicates and unions committee because I believe that this is a smaller scale that we can work on for the upcoming parliamentary elections. So, I was elected as the chairman of the syndicate committee. That's why I continue, because I believe it's a smaller scale for the parliamentary elections...it's very important. It's not just that the institution is very important. You want to start the change.⁷

This three-year span (2019-2022) saw mixed results concerning these more localized elections. While an independent candidate won the election for the Beirut Bar Association in 2019, a candidate

⁷ Interview with lead youth organizer. June 2022.

backed by established actors won the election in 2021. Yet, this should not be misconstrued as an entrenched reversal of the pre-2019 order. Independent and alternative coalitions saw victories in the same year, as with, for example, the victory of the Naqaba Tantaqid ('The Syndicate Revolts') in the elections of the Order of Engineers.

The varied results of the syndicate elections, especially in 2021, demonstrated the uncertainty of electoral outcomes, pushing back against narratives that either the collapse or control of Lebanon's establishment was certain. Adding to that uncertainty was the incidence of continued political violence that threatened to undermine the democratic and liberal processes over these elections, as exemplified by the clashes during the syndicate elections of the Order of Dentists.⁸ University elections echoed this pattern of uncertainty, mixed results, and the looming threat of violence. While 2020 saw breakthrough wins for opposition candidates and decisive losses for traditional parties, mixed results followed as did cases of violence and the discontinuing of elections.⁹

During this period in the build-up to the parliamentary elections, two challenges emerged for anti-establishment actors. First, was the question of who qualified as part of the anti-establishment movement, and indeed, the establishment. To explain, parties like the Kataeb or Communist Party were traditional political parties but aligned with certain actors within this emerging 'opposition movement.' Informal and formal alliances between these parties and different coalitions within the larger umbrella of 'the opposition' became a divisive issue. Second, was the difficulty of forging consensus between varied and numerous new actors vying to participate in this process. Divisive personalities, limited structures that fostered consensus building, strong ideological differences, all against the backdrop of a debilitating economic depression, fueled the fragmentation of this new movement.¹⁰

The three years since the onset of the thawra were a volatile and tumultuous period. The combination of political violence, heightened anti-establishment public sentiment, and government intransigence resulted in a focused contest between traditional parties representing the establishment and emerging 'change' actors seeking to unseat them. The May 2022 Parliamentary elections exemplified the very uncertainty of that context: it saw the highest number of independent and alternative actors in Lebanon's history join parliament, yet no clear majority controlled the legislature, as some traditional parties also

⁸
(L'Orient Today, 2021).

⁹
(Nassar, 2022); (Daher 2022).

¹⁰
Reflecting on drivers of division, one youth campaign organizer, explained '...part of the dichotomy was on choosing names...names of candidates. This was the main issue. In Lebanon, and because we're still new in this, groups want themselves and only themselves, and nevertheless disregard the substance or the content of their political party, their new emerging political party, they want their candidates to be on the list or in the parliament later on. This is the main issue...The issue is that the heads of these, not heads... sometimes their coordinators or whatsoever, want to form political parties for themselves, to brand their name to, to market themselves... and to run for the elections.' Interview with youth organizer. June 2022.

saw gains and others losses. The unclear results further emphasize the significance of the elections themselves, or better yet, the new arenas of competition between traditional parties and emerging ‘change’ movements. The question our paper focuses on is what role did youth play in all of this, both as voters and campaigners.

III Youth Priorities and Concerns

Prior to 2019, political participation in electoral processes in the country was relatively low and outcomes strongly favored traditional parties. There were breakthrough victories for independent actors prior to the 2019 uprisings, as with the victory of the independent candidate Paula Yacoubian in the 2018 parliamentary elections. The magnitude of the 2019 thawra and the three-year crisis, however, presented the most significant challenge to the control of traditional parties. While that control was challenged, no clear ‘alternative’ bloc, leader, or party emerged that appeared to attract the majority of independent-leaning or ‘change’ voters.

To better gauge youth perceptions, as voters, our survey asked them on issues pertaining to syndicate, university, and parliamentary elections. The timing helped offer important insight before the elections in this period of uncertainty. While Beirut is not representative of Lebanon, it is an arena where independents and ‘change’ candidates saw breakthrough victories in 2018 and 2022, and offers a cosmopolitan mix of the country’s diverse economic and sectarian population.¹¹

The survey highlighted two patterns:

First, youth in the country’s capital have been hard hit by the crisis and are in state of acute vulnerability. A majority of those surveyed had to reduce food consumption (55.4 %), with an even larger proportion reducing their use of basic necessities, like lighting, heat, and water (64.2%), as well as refraining from (or postponing) the purchase of necessary clothing (65%) over the last six months. A staggering 58.2% of respondents reported that they had not held a job in the past 12 months.

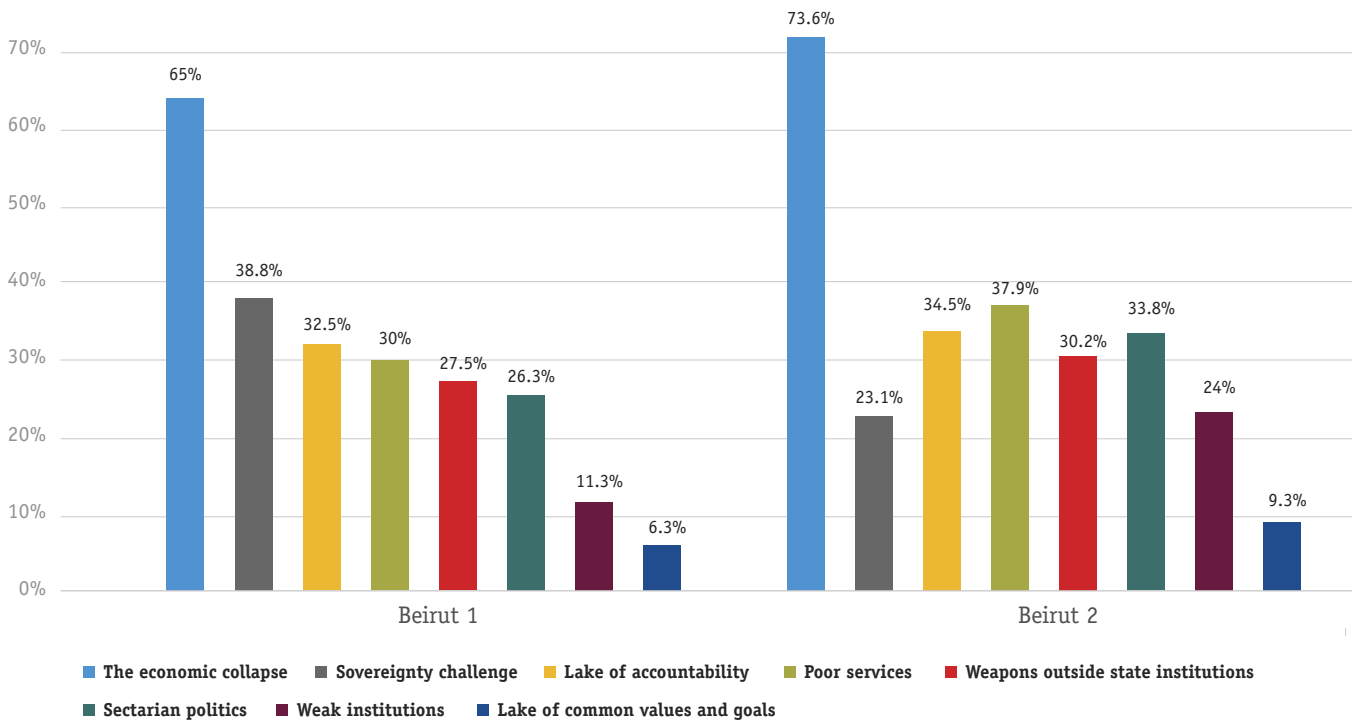
This data reflects the high levels of nationwide youth unemployment in the country resulting from the economic meltdown. According to World Bank estimates, youth unemployment nearly doubled from around 23%, prior to the crisis, to an alarming 40%.¹² Consequently,

¹¹ For a more comprehensive poll, consult (Abed et al., 2022).

¹² (World Bank, 2020).

the economic burdens put on youth loom large over their priorities and concerns. The top three economic issues respondents wanted to see the government prioritize were: rising unemployment (23.5%), currency depreciation (22%), and basic services (15.4%).

Figure 1 What are the three most important problems facing Lebanon today?



While youth in Beirut I and II polled similarly in their responses throughout the survey, we noticed an important distinction in their ranking of the major problems facing Lebanon. The top three problems identified in Beirut I were the economic collapse, sovereignty challenges, and lack of accountability. Meanwhile, in Beirut II, the order saw a slight difference, with the economic collapse, poor services, and lack of accountability ranked as the major problems facing the country.

The shared concerns towards the economic collapse and lack of accountability underscore a joint emphasis, not just on the economic implications of the crisis, but also the underlying drivers and actors responsible for it. In other words, justice for the fall (and the fallen) appears to stand auxiliary to recovering from the collapse.

How 'sovereignty' (and the challenges to it) fit into that calculus appears to be an area with little consensus. The survey sample is too small and limited to draw any significant conclusions, but the

discrepancy does point to a longstanding debate in Lebanon over the sequencing of where to place Lebanon's sovereignty—and those responsible for undermining it—in assessments of Lebanon's economic crisis and pathways out of it.¹³

Perhaps, the higher prioritization of poor services could be a reflection of the growing inequities within Beirut (and the country), especially in impoverished neighborhoods, and the increasingly dire and unequal state of public service delivery and deteriorating infrastructure. New studies could add clarity to this by zooming in on neighborhoods and their access to key services, like electricity and water.

The second notable pattern is the minimal confidence youth have in Lebanon's government and the country's political and economic system. In their perceptions of the government's handling of two of the country's major crises—the country's ongoing economic crisis and the handling of the Port of Beirut blast—the majority of respondents expressed high levels of dissatisfaction.

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See for example, (Nassar, 2021) and (Shehadi, 2021).

Figure 2 How would you evaluate the government's response to the economic crisis since 2019?

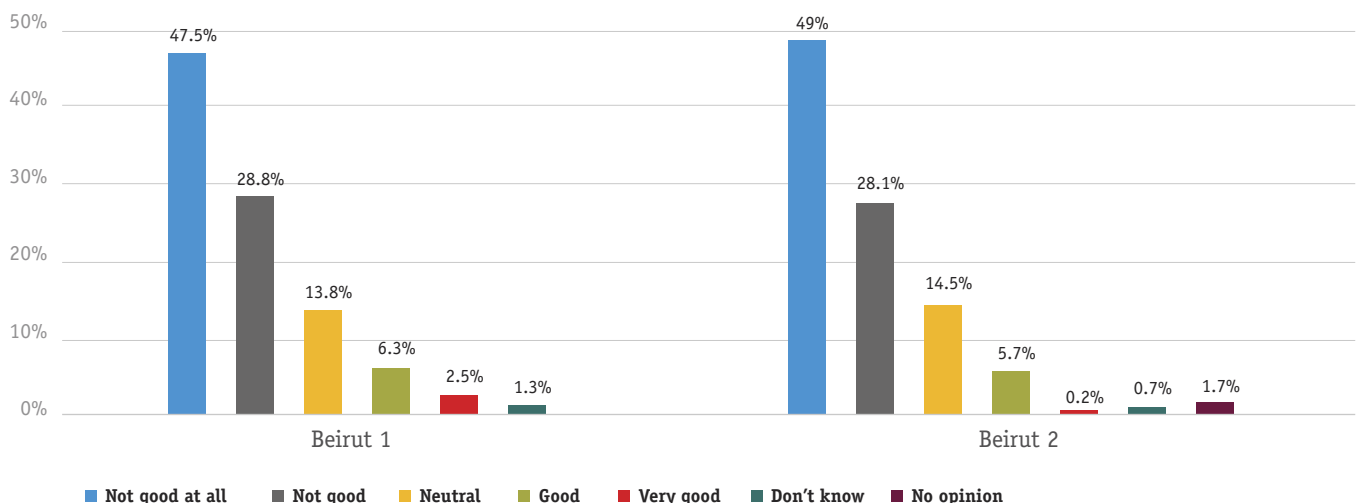
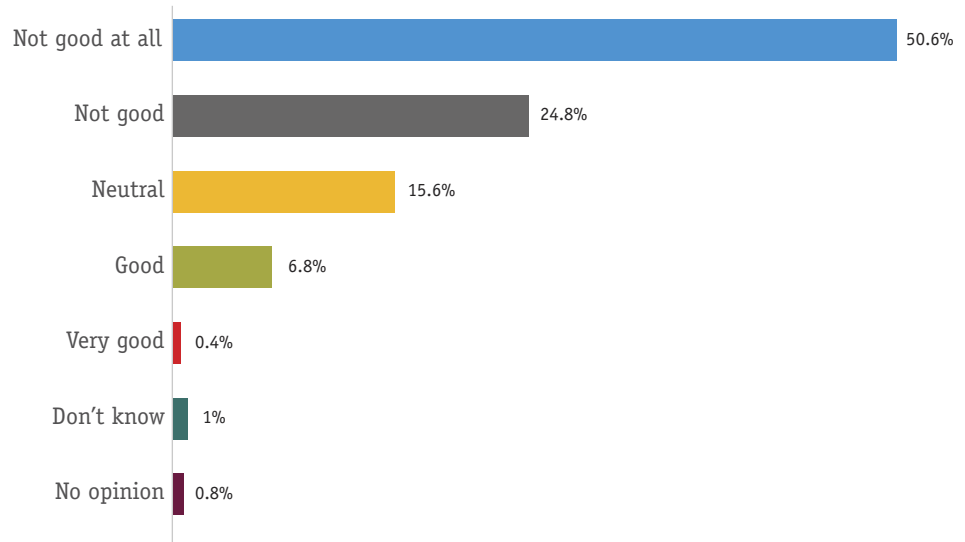
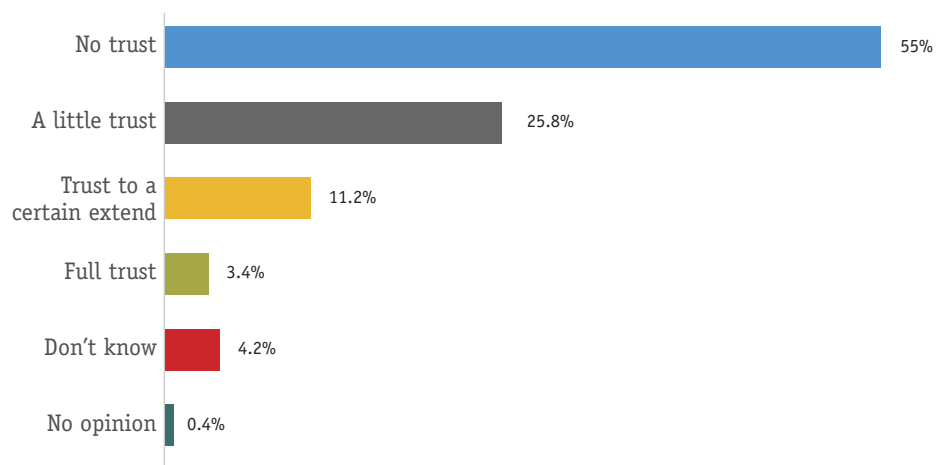


Figure 3 How do you evaluate the government's response to the Port of Beirut Blast?



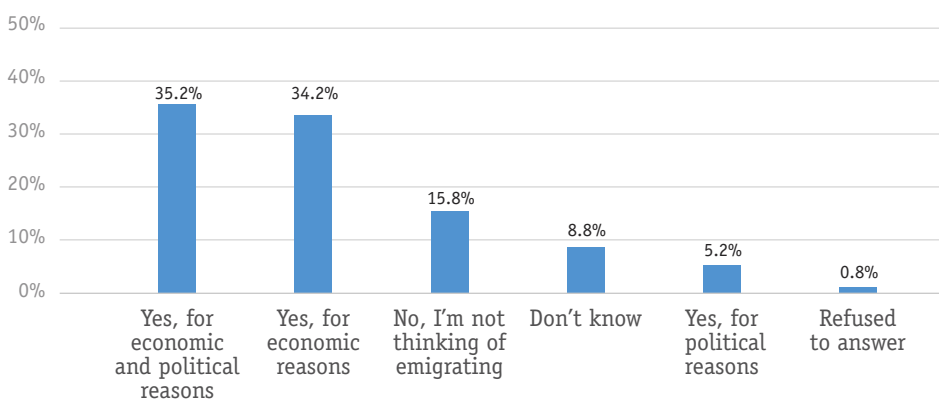
These alarming low levels of confidence are similarly reflected in their (lack of) trust in the new government. Not only did the majority of respondents have no trust in a new government (55%), only a slim minority (3.4%) had full trust in a new government to resolve the crisis.

Figure 4 How confident are you in a new government being able to resolve the crisis? (1-5 scale, 1 lowest)



The combination of this extremely adverse context and the minimal confidence youth place in the government to lead the country towards a sustainable and just recovery appears to be a significant driver of despair and youth alienation. Demonstrating the impact of that despair, when asked about their outlook on the future, the vast majority expressed some level of pessimism, and only 1.4% expressed outright optimism. Consequently, only around 15%-16% of youth polled expressed that they were not thinking of emigrating permanently from the country. Respondents cited economic and political reasons (as well as just economic reasons) as their main reasons for seeking permanent emigration.

Figure 5 Do you want to permanently emigrate from Lebanon?



The drastic rise in emigration and high levels of desire for permanent emigration indicate a deeper crisis of confidence in the country's social contract. Put simply, is this massive exodus a function of limited economic opportunities, increasing hardships and adversities, or a loss of confidence in the ability of the country to ensure key attributes of human security are protected?

After cross-tabulating respondents' desire to emigrate permanently, their perceptions of personal insecurity, and their confidence in the new government, we observed a relationship between feeling unsafe to vote freely and a desire to permanently emigrate, as well as a relationship between a lack of confidence in government to resolve the crisis and a desire to emigrate permanently. It is important here to stress that 52.6% of respondents expressed that they did not feel safe to vote freely in the electoral process versus 41% that did.

It may appear to be intuitive, but these two relationships press us

to frame youth emigration through the prism of state failure and systemic alienation. Youth in Lebanon are not simply leaving or aspiring to migrate out of the country, they are being forced to. And as the channels of formal migration narrow, particularly to those most vulnerable, irregular modes of migration will become critical routes out of Lebanon.

Youth in Beirut and the country at large are on the precipice of despair. This data raises many questions and directly challenges any attempts to frame Lebanon's unravelling as a 'manageable' status-quo. But three years into the country's protracted crisis, one thing is clear: Youth are not failing Lebanon; the country is failing them. And time is running out.

IV Youth as Organizers, Campaigners, and Leaders

The youth-targeted survey drew attention to an important observation: while youth are largely alienated and frustrated with the government, the weight of that pressure and the collective strain of the crisis is undermining youth confidence in the political process to resolve these crises. While such an observation may help explain the lower-than-expected voter turnout in Beirut, for example, it does not explain the notable breakthrough victories not just in the 2022 elections, but in the earlier university and syndicate elections. Since 2019, grassroots movements organized to compete across the spectrum of elections and won important victories, managing to put up competitive campaigns, despite the structural obstacles facing independent candidates.

The combination of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with youth organizers and campaign leaders drew attention to four key observations on the role and impact of youth in shaping these new campaigns throughout such a high-stress, crisis-context.

First, social media appeared to be a primary tool for youth campaigners to mobilize voters and respond to anti-democratic practices like smearing, intimidation, or disinformation, and in mobilizing voters across ages.¹⁴ Second, youth participation in campaigns strengthened the efficacy of youth outreach. Third, youth were not just participants but leaders in the campaigns of independent and anti-establishment coalitions.¹⁵ Fourth, youth campaigners did not restrict their activity to youth, and appeared to have a positive influence on the participation of older voters.¹⁶

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For more on social media, voter turnout, and the broader political participation in Lebanon, see (Abed et al, 2022).

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Highlighting the logistical and organizational participation of youth on this front, one youth campaigner, explained, 'On election day, or before, the kind of campaigns that the MPs were doing, whether separately or under the central campaign, were youth-led, so we saw youth on the ground, doing door-to-door activism with the MPs (candidates), talking about the MPs (candidates), leading social media campaigns, training other volunteers. There was a group of trainers that trained the volunteers... the delegates, mobile ones or the fixed ones, they were young people...they weren't old electoral organizers.' Interview with youth organizer. June 2022.

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'The voter turnout, specifically for the change list, I do believe that a big part of how it ended up to be was (because) it was led by the youth...because of the work that they were doing.' Interview with youth organizer. June 2022.

University Elections

In the two focus group discussions with university students that belong to secular clubs or independent groups, there appeared to be consensus that social media was a tool to dispel disinformation, highlight their distinctive identity and platform, and a means to increase voter turnout. Discussants from both focus groups highlighted the particular role of social media, from Instagram to WhatsApp, in circumventing the challenges brought on by the global Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns at the time. The discussants continued to expand on the momentum social media engagement engendered. More posts on social media outlets like Instagram led to more visibility which led to more posts and more engagement. WhatsApp facilitated communication and connection building.

These discussions also introduced an important nuance, corroborated by several interviews with university campaigners: social media allowed these groups to have control over how they represented themselves. This heightened visibility and agency allowed youth campaigners to pushback against mischaracterizations and strengthen their outreach messaging. Interestingly, one discussant who competed in their university elections and won noted that their aim was not limited to the university elections, but also in strengthening youth participation in politics more broadly and elections on a national level.

Discussants largely expressed that they would continue to participate in politics. Additionally, on their reflections of the university elections, most discussants suggested that their participation was instrumental in getting youth to not only vote if they had not previously, but to pull voters away from traditional parties. Given the mixed record of university election outcomes, several discussants expressed that they encountered structural obstacles and varied forms of intimidation. Most notably, traditional parties, they claimed, not only had structural advantages and deep legacies at their respective universities, they also engaged in disinformation and smearing. One discussant revealed that they were personally targeted and their sexuality was weaponized against them. In individual interviews with youth organizers who participated in the university elections, more details emerged corroborating the varied forms of intimidation and violence encountered across campuses in Lebanon. Reflecting in hindsight on the experience, one interviewee contended that:

...for the most part it was kind of scary because this intimidation

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Interview with student organizer, University of Saint Joseph. June 2022.

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Another interview with a university organizer revealed a case of a threat against an organizer's family. 'He was intimidated, his family was intimidated and it didn't stop there.' Interview with lead youth organizer. June 2022.

19

Drawing the links between electoral victories on continued campaigns, one youth campaigner noted that the victory of their campaign on the syndicate level encouraged and drove their decision to campaign in the parliamentary elections. 'That was the main reason, not the main reason, but one of the biggest reasons why we continued with the parliamentary elections. We were within the electoral machine of Beirut 2 and we got 3 candidates that won now in the parliament. So yes, this was a great push and especially because we won. That gave us a kind of a push to continue and we will continue no matter what because we believe in the cause and the goal. That gave me a lot of hope to continue and that's what we did in the parliamentary elections. That's what we are doing now. We did not stop, we are continuing.' Interview with lead youth organizer. June 2022.

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One youth campaigner that participated in university, syndicate of engineers, and parliamentary campaigns noted the importance of such victories, even if incomplete or partial, in sustaining hope. 'Our biggest challenge is hope, because when we lose hope, we will not fight anymore. You know? ...showing that the hard work that gave good result[s] was very motivating for a lot of people to take it to the next level in the parliamentary election, to invest more in university and other syndicate elections. The results were not positive at all times, but I still think this played a huge role in setting the tone for the political and elections work after that.' Interview youth organizer. June 2022.

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Interview with youth organizer. June 2022.

*was organized and it was not an individual effort, it was even led by people from the big family from my hometown to actually try and pressure me to stop what I'm doing. I think all of this experience made me feel that I'm just not doing student elections...that I am doing real political activism on the national scale. Yeah, these are small examples of intimidation.*¹⁷

The testimony captures not only the awareness of student organizers on the larger implications of these elections, but also the attention given to these elections by supporters of traditional parties.¹⁸ These contests, from universities, to syndicates, to the parliament, should not be understood or studied as distinct contests, but rather part of a connected struggle.¹⁹ More specifically, university students were beginning to make visible the defeat of traditional parties, challenging the narrative that they were unmovable.²⁰

In the focus group discussions with university organizers from secular and independent groups, a consensus emerged that youth leaders proved critical in pushing back against the fear such tactics attempted to achieve and demonstrating the possibility of change. As one discussant put it, '...youth leaders were a big support for the students, because some were new and young and they were afraid to participate...'

Illustrating the power of persuasion of youth organizers in dispelling collective despair and invigorating public discourses, one youth organizer specified: 'We had strong hope during the past two years, unlike some of the other older generations. They always tell you that it's not going to work and that Lebanon has always been like that...all the old politicians will never ever go away. But, we actually found that we have a badeel ('alternative' in Arabic).'²¹

Syndicate Elections

Three syndicate election focus groups were conducted covering the Beirut Bar Association, the Order of Engineers, and the Order of Dentists. Although not an exhaustive list, their selection reflects three distinct categories: a syndicate election where traditional parties won (Beirut Bar Association), a syndicate election where an independent coalition won (Order of Engineers), and a syndicate election disrupted by violence and clashes (Order of Dentists).

Beirut Bar Association

The Beirut Bar Association focus group discussion drew attention to one key barrier to youth participation in syndicates that have special requirements that tend to favor older participants. For example, to join the order, certain criteria must be met, that are time-consuming and increase the member's dependency, especially at such an early period in their career. As one discussant explained: 'Once members are in, they are able to participate actively and vote. There is no difference between a new member or an old one, except in the Beirut Bar Association—a new lawyer can't vote until 3 years, after passing the appeal council test, so he/she will have the right to vote, and during this period he/she is immersed with what is happening already. They get influenced in what is happening already with the old generation lawyers, who are mainly part of strong political parties.'

Despite this notable structural barrier that discussants stressed, they also emphasized the role of social media in creating crucial openings for participation across the board. According to one discussant, social media also 'helped to spread the information and support the credibility of our movement.' Indeed, the focus group discussions of the Beirut Bar Association complemented those of the university secular and independent clubs in that discussants expressed that social media was an effective tool to push back against disinformation campaigns and smearing, and particularly empowered them to center their own voices. In turn, the discussants shared that there were lines of support and communication with umbrella independent groups or change-leaning social media pages established during the thawra. It is the combination of these elements, and youth participation in this process, that appeared to solidify the role of youth leadership.

Order of Pharmacists and Dentists

The focus group discussions of the order of pharmacists and dentists echoed similar findings to the Beirut Bar Association in that social media proved to be a critical resource for youth campaigners in connecting with one another, reaching out to broader bases, and pushing back against disinformation. The discussions also pointed to the incidence of threats and other forms of intimidation, and the particular role youth played in helping to foster a sense of security in such an environment. Detailing the persistent intimidation, independent coalitions encountered from established political parties competing

with them, one discussant recalled: ‘They investigated our identities and to which sect we belong, so they can use it for their benefit. For example in the Christian areas, they used campaigns against us by labeling us as communists and leftists. In the Muslim areas, they said that we are raising sensitive religious matters, and that we are atheist, and at some point they got my personal account on Facebook and used old posts that I used...’ When asked on the role youth played in such a critical moment, they noted that youth were instrumental in being intermediaries, offering support, and deescalating the situation.

Elucidating on the particular violence that took place during the elections, another discussant asserted that: ‘During election day, when the results came out, political parties weren’t satisfied by the results, so they started to act violently. They broke the ballot boxes, they canceled the election and postponed it. But also, the second time we won the election, youth were peaceful and diplomatic during the elections.’

Helping connect the links between smearing, disinformation, and intimidation, a campaigner that organized in university, syndicate, and parliamentary elections explained: ‘In the beginning, they tried to portray you as a bad person or as campaigning for Hezbollah or for the March 14 camp, for example. But in the end, there’s a reason. They want to cancel you. But, when they see that the smear campaigns and the propaganda aren’t working, they resort to threats and intimidation if you want to campaign in a certain area.’²²

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Interview with youth organizer.
June 2022.

Order of Engineers

The focus group discussions with campaigners of independent groups in the Order of Engineers indicated less frequency and intensity of violence and threats. Yet, one key challenge they encountered was disinformation. Similar to all focus group discussions, sectarianism appeared to be weaponized in these campaigns to try and delegitimize independent candidates.

As one discussant recounted: ‘They used rumors against the president, they labeled him as belonging to a certain political party, such as Hezbollah, sometimes a Communist. We faced this by replying clearly and directly. We also did a video regarding this matter, explaining that this is not true and what he stands for, and what is his program.’

Expanding on the methods youth organizers used to respond to this challenge, another discussant explained that they organized debates, broadened public outreach, and diversified their social media strategy

to engage different audiences. Underscoring the particular attention to expanding beyond just youth coalitions. A discussant noted: 'We can't use one tool because people have different mentalities, each age has different tools to deal with. For example, youth communicate through social media, while for older people, it's different. They prefer to know the person, talk to them personally, before voting for him or her, so it's not enough for them to see things over social media.'

Still, social media proved to be a key tool for youth organizers in their campaign. One campaigner stressed that their social media was one of their strongest assets:

Naqaba Tantafid was successful, but it was more successful because of its presence on social media and the branding. The graphics that we did, 'in-house,' if you want to call it. Yes, it had a very big impact because it has an identity. The branding was very clear, we shared it on our social handles. Every party, we are 22 parties, and everyone shared it on their social media. We were creating campaigns for every step like '4 days to go' and '2 hours left. Go vote.' We were sharing these and spreading them around. It contributed hugely and a lot of people were replying to our stories asking us when and where and how to vote. People who never had the hope to vote really wanted to vote, again just because of social media.

The five focus group discussions, in conjunction with the semi-structured interviews, offer important insights into several dynamics regarding youth strategies and engagement in the university and syndicate elections, and the subsequent impact on the parliamentary elections and politics more broadly:

First, youth aligned with change or alternative coalitions encountered multiple forms of illiberal practices, like disinformation, violence, harassment, and intimidation. This, however, did not appear to dissuade their participation on an organizational level. Rather, the continued presence of youth in these campaigns helped buoy against the pressures and insecurity they encountered.

Second, social media proved crucial on multiple levels. It offered a space for new groups to introduce themselves, on their terms, and share their positions, agendas, and platforms. It also proved crucial in pushing back against disinformation and facilitating solidarity building in the face of threats and other modes of intimidation. It was also a critical medium that connected youth with one another, with

independent platforms, and with the broader political process.

Third, youth-targeting campaigns worked and certainly benefited from social media, creating a dynamic where more youth-friendly campaigns invited more youth participation, and in turn, encouraged further use of youth-friendly messaging and mediums.

Fourth, youth organizers appeared to have broad objectives and were focused on increasing participation of youth and older voters in politics more broadly. Notably, individual interviews with youth organizers, elucidated the active engagement of outreach to older voters, even in the diaspora. For example, one youth organizer operating in the diaspora, recalled ‘...when we registered people, we registered...a lot of old people, like [aged] 50 plus, even 80. We registered people with these old passports, the red passport written by hand not printed with a printer, the one that’s by hand...’²³

The combination of these variables played an important role on ‘formalized politics’ in Lebanon, which transcends any particular election. As one discussant from the Order of Engineers reflected:

It helped youth to be more integrated in political life, especially because we had the parliamentary election after it. We took the same model that we adopted in the syndicate and applied it in the parliamentary elections. And now the municipal elections are coming and we are adopting these models. For example, in my village, a lot of young people are working with... [us], and those who worked in the electoral machines were between 18 years and 25 years old...and the accumulation of experience helped in changing the political game..., it became available for everyone, and people started to believe that they can make change and they can have an active role politically.

Interviews with youth organizers that participated across the spectrum of elections, including the parliamentary elections, shared similar opinions and expressed a strong conviction that their participation was crucial in pushing back against collective despair and mobilizing voters and organizers since 2019 to compete in formal elections.²⁴ In a period of sustained economic depression and political uncertainty, youth organizers were disrupting despair and hopelessness, and actively fostering critical political discussions and public engagement. They were engaging on multiple levels: demonstrating that they were not just participating in the process, but helping lead in campaigns. Emphasizing the particular complex impact of youth

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Interview with youth organizer in the diaspora. June 2022.

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Interview with youth organizer in university elections. June 2022. Interview youth organizer in the Beirut Bar elections. June, 2022. Interview with youth organizer in the parliamentary elections. June 2022. Interview with youth organizer. June 2022.

throughout the campaign process in the parliamentary elections, a lead youth campaigner explained:

Youth were in almost all the meetings. The ones who are... moderating the discussions..., those who are...distributing flyers, or those who were playing out most of the grassroots work and organizing themselves on databases, were the youth we're talking about. People in their mid-20s, even early 20s, organizing meetings...distributing tasks to other people and carrying out the load and accompanying the candidates and... writing speeches for them, telling them what to say in certain situations, even giving advice to them. So, the youth...they played an essential role and almost all of it. I could confidently say that they were the ones who were leading the campaign itself. And even the bulk of the campaign was youth...²⁵

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Interview with lead youth organizer. June 2022.

V Conclusion

Lebanon's October 17 Revolution fundamentally altered the country's political fabric in a simple but somewhat irreversible way: elections are now open to new actors not aligned with established political parties. The very certainty of political outcomes, is, in a sense, no longer certain. New actors can unseat established parliamentarians, be elected to head syndicates, and dominate in university elections. Yet, these new anti-establishment coalitions and actors are not guaranteed victory, either. The intensity of the crisis and its protracted state appear to be significantly undermining youth confidence in the capacity of political participation to lead to transformative change.

Collectively, youth appear to be vulnerable, alienated, and express minimal to no confidence in the country's leadership, government, or broader political system. Lebanon's crisis looms large, strongly influencing their economic, social, and political priorities. Yet, this study also finds that organized elements among youth played an instrumental and leading role in the campaigns of new alternative groups, consistently since 2019.

Youth organizers used social media to build bridges and coalitions with alternative groups, connect with other youth in university and syndicate elections, and to push back against varied modes of intimidation and anti-democratic practices. Relatedly, youth-targeted messaging on social media helped galvanize more youth engagement, especially by promoting the visibility of youth themselves. In this

sense, youth were able to claim their space and empower others to do the same. Importantly, youth organizers were focused on collective political engagement, and not working exclusively on winning particular contests, like seats in a university or syndicate election. To that end, youth campaigners sought to apply multiple methods of engagement, like open debates and public forums to attract older voters.

Youth in Lebanon are situated in a context of extreme vulnerability and apparent alienation, and yet, organized youth movements employ diverse strategies to foster greater participation and agency in the formal dimensions of the country's political process. Capturing the spirit of this new dynamic, one discussant who campaigned during the Order of Engineers elections concluded: 'I think that we can't stop, especially after the revolution, it showed us hope and a new horizon, so I really stick to my voice, to my way, and that we have to face corruption.'

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