

Civil mobilisation and peace in Lebanon

Beyond the reach of the 'Arab Spring'?

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Lebanon's civil society is often seen as a collection of communal groups each with its own associations and structures of mobilisation. However, since the final years of the civil war, Lebanese society has also mobilised through trans-sectarian associations devoted to peacebuilding, social reconstruction and welfare, and to ecology and human and political rights. Although they have been plagued by sectarianism and undermined by sectarian elites, workers' unions and other interest groups have sought ways to mobilise to confront socio-economic crisis and to agitate for change.

What scope is there for civil mobilisation as a political agent for change in Lebanon: a weak state with a sectarian political system? What are the socio-political constraints? And what are the implications of the 'Arab Spring' and other social revolutions?

Analysis of the strategies of Lebanon's sectarian ruling elites helps to understand how authorities divide, co-opt and manipulate civil associations and collectives, in order to preserve their control or further their interests.

Civil society in civil war

Lebanon's civil society developed from the *Nahda* movement of cultural and political renaissance that began in the late nineteenth century in the Arabic speaking regions of the Ottoman Empire. Civil society associations performed charitable work mainly directed at the 'family' or 'community' and were an expression of religious, confessional or regional identity. In the twentieth century, civil society grew rapidly with the administrative, economic and social reforms of President Fouad Chehab (1958–64), as development NGOs in particular were considered complementary to the state.

The civil war disrupted civil society's momentum. As state presence declined, civil society was called upon to act primarily as a humanitarian relief mechanism for the displaced, the wounded and the marginalised. It became common for powerful political families to 'own' private associations in order to provide for their clientele and religious community – such as the Hariri Foundation, the Randa Berri Foundation, the Bachir Gemayel Foundation and the René Moawad Foundation.

While providing humanitarian services was not contentious, many civil movements and campaigns also called for the end of the war. An estimated 19 humanitarian associations were established to deal with the consequences of the war, and 114 collective actions of civil resistance to denounce it.

The Campaign for the Kidnapped and Disappeared (*hamlat al mafqûdîn wal-makhtûfîn*) illustrates how civil society began to try to challenge the state during the war. It was created in 1982 in response to an acute increase in the number of disappearances, and more specifically a radio appeal by a woman whose husband had been kidnapped. The Committee of the Parents of the Kidnapped and the Disappeared (*lajnat ahâli al mafqûdîn wal-makhtûfîn*) was joined by hundreds of supporters who began to lobby their political representatives. But reports by numerous commissions of inquiry during the 1980s were ignored because most political leaders were themselves warlords or militia leaders and were directly involved in disappearances. Repeated calls by associations such as SOLIDE (Support of Lebanese in Detention or in Exile) eventually led in 2012 to a proposal for a new law that seeks the creation of an independent body to investigate the fate of the missing and disappeared.

After the war: bridging sectarian divides

After the end of the war, civil society associations had to readjust their objectives and modus operandi to the communal and clientelist logic of the state. New advocacy groups were founded specialising in non-sectarian issues such as human rights, the environment and women's rights. Funding was mainly provided by external donors.

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These advocacy groups were led by volunteers from all religious and confessional backgrounds, bringing together different segments of Lebanese society. Other trans-confessional initiatives were established to address public issues neglected by the political class, such as the Gathering for Municipal Elections, which was launched in the aftermath of the parliament's decision to postpone local elections in April 1997. The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) brought together more than 15 local associations in a national campaign. After four months of mobilising, petitioning and sit-ins, the campaign eventually convinced parliament to vote in favour of holding local elections on time.

This success inspired many other trans-confessional collective actions. A new generation of politically-oriented activists emerged (the 'new left') who participated in the anti-globalisation movement of 2001 (including an anti-WTO meeting in Beirut to oppose the launch of the Doha round of negotiations) and the anti-war movement of 2002–03 opposing the US-led invasion of Iraq ('No war/No dictatorships').

Co-opting civil society

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005 polarised civil society as most NGOs aligned their mission statements with the political agenda of one or other of the new 'March' coalitions.

For example, during the 1990s LADE had been a forerunner in trans-communitarian civil mobilisation and had pressed for democratic reforms such as non-sectarian proportional representation in parliamentary elections. However, in 2005 in the wake of the 'Independence Intifada' and the

withdrawal of Syrian troops, LADE aligned with the 14 March coalition as most of its members and staff were part of the Democratic Left Movement, which was allied to 14 March. The 14 March government then solicited LADE to monitor legislative elections in 2005 and 2009. After 2004–05 LADE began making several concessions and treated the question of political representation and democracy in segments, ie demanding proportional representation without the necessity for representation to be non-sectarian. Democracy activists saw this as a political regression of the electoral reform movement, and a laissez-passer tactic for LADE to avoid clashing with the ruling order.

Workers' unions

Governments have historically tried to manipulate union mobilisation by creating ad hoc syndicates and allotting leadership positions to confessional clientele, thereby contributing to the segmentation of trade unions' demands on a confessional basis.

The General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL) was, in the aftermath of the civil war, one of the rare political and social forces where strong trans-confessional identities prevailed. In May 1992 it was instrumental in bringing about the resignation of the government of Omar Karami through strikes and demonstrations to denounce inflation, high living costs and the socio-economic crisis. The movement continued until 1995, but the confessional leadership ultimately infiltrated the CGTL, neutralising it by manipulating its electoral processes.

Another example is the taxi drivers' union, created in 1969 by a group of leftist taxi drivers with the support of Kamal Jumblatt, Minister of the Interior and leader of the Progressive Socialist Party. It succeeded in negotiating the affiliation of taxi drivers to the National Social Security Fund in 1982. However, it was weakened under the Hariri government when Minister Abdallah al-Amine (1992–95) granted his Amal Movement a licence to create a new union for taxi drivers. The arrival of Trad Hamadeh (close to Hezbollah) in government in 2005 then led to the granting of another licence to create yet another taxi drivers' union – the Loyalty to the Resistance Union (*ittihād al-wafâ' lil-muqâwama*).

Governments have hijacked NGOs and trade unions, infiltrating them and weakening them from the inside. The progressive Minister of Labour, Charbel Nahas, proposed a reform package in autumn 2011 to support low-income workers, which included measures to ensure periodic adjustment of wages and to reinvigorate the role of the unions. However, this was blocked through joint opposition by CGTL leaders and 8 March (Amal and Hezbollah)

ministers in the Mikati government, as well as the March 14 coalition and Lebanon's economic chambers of commerce and industry.

The Arab Spring

Activities in Lebanon associated with the Arab Spring have focused on how to get rid of the sectarian system and its ruling elite. In February 2011 more than 3,000 people joined a march for the overthrow of the sectarian regime (*hamlat isqât al-nidhâm al-tâ'ifi wa rumûzihi*). The demonstration grew (according to the organisers) to 10,000 and then 25,000 people on 6 and 20 March, respectively. Its organisers included leftist and secularist political groups, NGOs, gender and sexual preference collectives, and many independent activists

These demonstrations differed significantly from confessional mobilisations – such as 14 or 8 March demonstrations – as participants organised their own logistics and transportation and funded themselves through individual contributions, rather than being organised and facilitated by their political patrons. But contradictions soon started to surface, and two camps developed: 1) those that believed that accumulated reforms would lead to radical change; and 2) those arguing that a more revolutionary movement was needed to effect reform or bring down the whole system.

Secular political parties such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and *Kifâh al-Talâbbâ'* (close to the Iraqi Baath Party) joined the movement, sharpening the rift between the two camps. The Syrian revolt added a new problem: whether or not to support it? Political parties from both March coalitions have also tried to hijack the movement by publicly – and controversially – backing it at strategic moments.

The movement in 2011 has also sparked the birth of several campaigns and groups removed from the polarisation of 8/14 March and the classical Left. It has acquired new layers of activists around the country, such as the *Haqqî 'alayyi* ('My right') campaign in Beirut, the Tripoli Without Arms campaign (which has focused on local mobilisations in north Lebanon against sectarian violence), the Civil Forum in the Beqaa which managed to bring together secular and leftist activists from the different villages and towns, and the *'Amal mubâshar* (Direct Action), a coalition of independent activists in Beirut, Beqaa and the Chouf.

Conclusion: civil challenges to the sectarian status quo

Neither the Lebanese state nor civil society provides an arena in which citizens can claim their rights or hold sectarian leaders to account. At a time when sectarian ties define citizens' participation in politics, civil society activists have learnt that sectarian leaders will only support or represent agendas that do not challenge their hegemony, or that contribute to consolidating their patronage networks. In this highly fragmented context most civil associations do not act as means for civil interaction, but rather are used as tools to reinforce the clientist and sectarian status quo.

Civil movements face many challenges, not least the strength of political elites bolstered by financial resources and foreign support. Lebanese civil movements that want to challenge elites must tackle external interests and power, manifested domestically as funding or media support. Furthermore, one of the main shortcomings of the NGOs' collective actions has been that they have tended to be short-term and project-oriented rather than strategic, which means that they depend on specific budget lines and the requirements and limitations of donors, who often have their own agendas.

In order to earn trust Lebanese civil interventions have to prove their independence from both the ruling class and foreign and regional powers. The 2011 campaign to challenge the sectarian regime tried to do just that. Its transience and limited impact, despite the considerable popular support it attracted at its peak, underlines the barriers civil society faces and the apparent invulnerability of the ruling elite.

Civil movements attempt to overcome the risk of political and confessional hijacking by recruiting activists only from those already sympathetic to their cause. However, this tactic further widens the gap between specific movements and the broader Lebanese population. In the long-term, however, adopting such independent positions may help convince sympathisers of both 8 and 14 March that the movement is worth joining.

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