

Youth activism in Lebanon: the challenge of domesticating politics?

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After the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri on 14 February 2005, many young people spontaneously took to the streets of Beirut in protest, calling for justice and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in what has been called the 'Independence Intifada'. This culminated a month later on 14 March, with the largest demonstration in the country's history, the effects of which continue to be felt today. But what impact can youth activism really have in shaping Lebanon's future?

Political impact of the Independence Intifada

The 2005 demonstrations succeeded in influencing public opinion to place greater emphasis on Lebanese independence and sovereignty, and established clear political lines of demarcation from the 8 March Alliance that was advocating for a more pro-Syrian strategy in dealing with the country's political turmoil.

The demonstrations therefore helped to segregate Lebanese society into two distinct camps – 8 and 14 March. They consolidated vertical, partisan alliances between certain parts of civil society and their sectarian, political counterparts; and also paved the way to further internationalise Lebanon's domestic scene through the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL).

Since 2005, Lebanese political leaders have exploited existential rhetoric to play on communities' political or sectarian fears, glorifying themselves as the solution and inciting a kind of 'collective hypnosis' or 'communal delusion'. This has played out politically within the parameters of the prevailing 8/14 March divide and has contributed to a Manichaean understanding of politics and democracy.

In the 2005 parliamentary elections, held in the aftermath of the demonstrations, electoral selection was effectively reduced to support for, either the side of the 'victim', ie Rafiq al-Hariri's son Saad, or for the suspected perpetrators. The 2009 elections saw voting in support of either Iranian or Western tutelage over Lebanon. Upcoming 2013 elections are likely to be similarly framed; for example, the 14 March coalition has already begun to label the ballot as 'fateful' and a 'war of elimination' – including, possibly, for themselves.

Despite the intention of the 2005 demonstrations to highlight domestic priorities and sovereignty in Lebanon, they have, in fact, helped to both polarise and externalise Lebanese politics as a choice between Syria and the West.



Civil society demonstrators in Beirut demand full equality between men and women and an end to sectarianism // © Marie-Noelle Abi Yaghi

Youth mobilisation in 2011

Youth mobilisation in 2011 was not as large as in 2005 nor did it raise the same questions. Nevertheless, it still has the potential to revitalise youth political engagement and to bring the political debate 'back home'.

Inspired by other Arab uprisings, a group of young people has initiated a call to 'bring down the sectarian regime', which, along with parallel struggles (eg against rape and the physical abuse of women, for civil marriage, for freedom of expression, for the right to Lebanese nationality, and for lowering the voting age from 21 to 18), has the potential to reclaim public and political questions from their international focus.

To be effective, these movements need to be developed through networks and advocacy campaigns that are structured, organised, grounded, efficient and decentralised, so as to promote horizontal cooperation between youth from diverse confessions and educational backgrounds.

Whilst civil mobilisation is not new to Lebanon and was evident in the 1990s, its re-emergence now is critical to the development of the country's political sphere, especially as public debate has for a long time been trapped between the opposing issues of the STL and Hezbollah's arms.

Can youth activism thrive to help reshuffle the political debate in Lebanon and breach the wall of the sectarian and political establishment? Lebanese youth must strive together for the answer.

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