University students and Lebanese political society: tracing roles, attitudes and changes

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Summary

Since the advent of mass higher education in Lebanon in the early 1960s, university students have represented an integral component of the Lebanese political society. This centrality reconfirmed itself throghout the Lebanese Uprising of October 2019, whereof university students represented one of the most vibrant and active actors.

As part of the IRHAL project, the following paper aims at analyzing the role that the massive participation of university students to the Lebanese Uprising exerted on their political positionalitis and its implications for the future of Lebanese politics. To this end, it will first provide a historical overview of the changing patterns of student activism in Lebanon, to then present and analyze the results of the four focus groups carried out by IRHAL in July 2021 to assess the impact of the Uprising on students' political attitudes and behaviour.

Introduction

Between October 17, 2019 and late February 2020, an unprecedented popular uprising for geographic scope and popular participation took hold of the Lebanese streets demanding, through a variety of claims, practices and solidarities, a radical redefinition of the national socio-economic and political order on more accountable, inclusive and equal bases (IFI 2020). The uprising – or *thawra*, revolution, as labelled by the array of mobilized actors who embodied it – cross-cut geographic, class, sectarian, gender and generational boundaries, and assumed immediately a steady anti-establishment posture, epitomized in the overarching slogan *Killun ya'ni killun*, (*All of them means all of them*) to express both the attribution of the full responsibility for the socio-economic and governance shortcomings affecting peoples' everyday lives to the entirety of Lebanese sectarian forces, and the quest for the latter's immediate resignation from the parliament. This represented a breakthrough of crucial importance with the transgressive protest cycles of the post-war period, where sectarian logics of engagement and exclusion had represented or a distinctive feature (most notably, the so-called "Independence Intifada" or also "Cedar Revolution" of 2005), either, as of the case of the incremental anti-sectarian protest cycles developed from 2011 onwards, an elephant in the room still too incumbent to be overtly challenged (AbiYaghi, Younes and Catousse 2015). Furthermore, while the uprising consistently built on cumulative and incremental dynamics, much of its propulsive force came from the spontaneous and protracted activation of social groups and geographical areas which had so far widely remained on the margins of anti-sectarian transgressive contention, and whose quiescence had represented a fundamental – albeit passive – pillar for the reproduction of sectarian elites' access to political power.

As effectively summarized by Mona Harb, «the 2019 October uprising toppled the government but did not manage to break the entrenched sectarian political system» (Harb 2021). One of the main reasons for this shortcoming has been identified in the loose horizontal structuring adopted by the squares which, if on the one hand contributed to preserve demonstrators from top-down attempts of cooptation, it simultaneously prevented to canalize the array of atom-

ized grievances and actors who reactively took the streets towards a broad-based constituent process projected on the long term.

The uprising demobilized at the end of February 2020, upon the spread of Covid-19 pandemic, and the consequent enforcement of protracted sanitary lockdowns which forbade public gatherings and were conductive to compulsory dismantlement of the permanent mobilization sites mushroomed in the main squares and crossroads of the country. When, during the summer 2020, the containment measures on public gatherings begun to be lifted, the explosion of more than two thousand tons of ammonium nitrate at the port of Beirut provoked the devastation of a consistent portion of the eastern side of the capital, with a final toll of about 220 deaths, thousands of injured, and the forced displacement of about 300.000 households. Meanwhile, the economic crisis which triggered the outbreak of the uprising underwent a steady acceleration to become, according to World Bank estimates, the third harshest one ever experienced at a global level since the late XIX century (World Bank 2021). The progression of the crisis has been further burdened by thirteen months of institutional paralysis, which hindered the delivery of a variety of international donations and loans to address the debt crisis, implement the reconstruction, improve services and infrastructures, and stabilize the currency. This progressively deprived the majority of Lebanese citizens of the material conditions to return to permanently occupy streets and squares, triggering an outstanding migratory exodus. Furthermore, the peaking of the crisis provided opportunity for sectarian elites to reactivate sustained clientelist rewards mechanisms (cash and food donations, targeted distribution of oil and electricity, clientelist distribution of Covid-19 vaccines, to cite the most important) to retrieve consensus among their target constituencies. However, as attested by the continuative persistence of capillary – albeit molecular and dis-organic – protest actions and their anti-systemic framings (Lebanon Support, Mapping of Collective Actions in Lebanon), this operation does not seem to have produced so far effects large enough to mend the deep fracture in the sectarian social contract unveiled by the uprising. Equally important, the demobilization of the squares ignited ex-post a sustained constituent momentum among a variety of opposition actors and networks emerged during the uprising towards the construction of alternative political parties and coalitions through which challenge establishment parties in the upcoming 2022 elections.

Against this backdrop, the IRHAL project aims at analyzing the role that university students might play in the construction of an alternative power block. To this aim, we organized four focus groups to assess how the uprising and its aftermaths impacted on students' political attitudes and behavior, to then explore the role that the latter can exert in the future of Lebanese politics.

In effect, since the very affirmation university students as established contentious actors on their own right in the national political arena throughout the 1960s, university student activism in Lebanon has been constantly characterized by a sharp dualistic structure. As much as university campuses have never ceased to represent one of the major breeding grounds for the radical contestation of the Lebanese sectarian order, in fact, the same campuses have simultaneously represented also a prominent site of partisan activism and recruitment underpinning from below the reproduction of sectarian loyalties and modes of political subjectification. The forms whereby this dualism expressed itself over time have walked hand in hand with the shifting framings, fault-lines and power-balances defining the national political dynamics, whereof students have represented both a mirror and an integral component. Therefore, understanding the political positionalities of university students across time and space, their stratifications, and modes of articulation provides a privileged observation point to grasp the main political ferments at stake within Lebanese society in a given historical moment. More importantly, being university campuses one of the privileged sites of formation of future voters and political leaders, to understand the forms and trajectories of students' engagement to the political offers a particularly valuable vantage point to anticipate the main outlines of the political confrontation to expect in the upcoming future.

1. University Students and the Lebanese political society: a historical overview

From ideology to partisanship: Lebanese university student activism before and after the Civil War (1975-1990)

Albeit the establishment of the first universities in Lebanon dates back to the late XIX century, university students emerged as prominent contentious actors on their own right in the national political arena on the eve of the 1960s. This emergence was significantly prompted by the educational polices promoted by the president Fouad Chehab (1958-1964) which, by consistently enlarging the scope and the activities of the public Lebanese University,[1] played a pivotal role to democratize and massify the access to higher education, and to disrupt the monopoly hold until then by private and elitist university institutions (Barakat 1977). At the center of students' mobilizations stood educational, domestic, and regional questions alike, within the framework of a broader process of rapid politicization and radicalization of the youth population both within and outside educational institutions (Traboulsi 2012, 163–70)

Until the outbreak of the Civil War (1975-1990), the dominant political fault-line dividing the students' political affiliations pitted a right-wing, predominantly Maronite minority of student groups framing their defense of the existing Lebanese sectarian order according to different understandings of the Lebanese Nationalism, against an expanding majority of predominantly Muslim, ideologically heterogeneous leftist groups struggling instead for a radical redefinition of the Lebanese civil order on secular and more equal bases (Farsoun 1973). This division largely reflected the process of political polarization and radicalization that the country was experiencing and which, against the backdrop of an unprecedented socio-economic and political crisis and the propeller of the bulky presence of the Palestinian "resistance", ultimately stemmed in a fully-fledged armed confrontation. Also, the pattern of student politicization reflected the deep crisis that the dominant political structures based on civil leadership were undergoing, and foreshadowed the dominant ideological fault-lines which shaped the political confrontation "by other means" in the first biennium of the Civil War (Barakat 1977; Nasr and Palmer 1977).

Starting from the end of the 1970s, the Lebanese Civil War underwent a steady "sectarianization". This process walked hand-in-hand with the progressive "cantonization"[2] of the national territory into homogeneous sectarian enclaves under the control of sectarian militias, which also took over the management of the administrative, infrastructural and public services, as well as the key economic activities and resources in the respective areas of influence (Picard 2005). This triggered a profound reconfiguration of the university political spectrum in a sectarian sense, according to patterns of adhesion and confrontation mirroring the political-sectarian balances at stake in a given locality. A crucial role in this process was played by the decentralization of university campuses, and particularly of the Lebanese University, which eased the latter's incorporation in the militia recruitment and hegemonic infrastructures through the means of armed protection and provision of scholarships, the imposition of the campuses' directive bodies and teaching staff, the tailoring of academic curricula and admission criteria, and the clientelist distribution of educational benefits to partisans (Bashshur 1988).

On October 22, 1989, the signature of the so-called "Ta'if Agreements" set up the conditions for the end of the Lebanese Civil War. The Agreements established as core initiative for the re-institution of peace a constitutional restoration of political sectarianism readjusted in its power-sharing formula in favor of a greater Muslim representation, by revising the Christian/

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[1] The Lebanese University was formally established in 1951, and reached full operationality only by 1959, thanks to the efforts of President Chehab. Up to today, it represents the only Lebanese public university.

[2] The term "cantonization" is used here to indicate the process of division of the Lebanese territory into self-governed, contiguous and bordered territorial units under the control of a distinguished militia or coalition of militias which occurred during the Lebanese Civil War.

Muslim allocation of the parliamentary seats from a 6:5 to a 50%-50% ratio, and by transferring part of the executive and legislative prerogatives of the President of the Republic (Maronite) in favor of the executive (Sunni) and the Parliament speaker (Shi'i). Equally important, the Agreements put Lebanon under a strict Syrian tutelage, which turned soon into an occupation *manu militari* holding almost complete control over the domestic and foreign affairs.

As stressed by Nagle and Clancy (Nagle and Clancy 2019), the Agreements largely reflected the "no victor and no vanquished" outcome of the conflict, and *de facto* formalized the sectarian structures emerged during the war by providing the new sectarian elites produced by the hostilities with the enabling institutional infrastructure to capture political power and reproduce in both state and society the path-dependent mechanisms of sectarian governance set up throughout the conflict. These elites included, among the most important, a tiny but powerful Sunna oligarchy of "contractor bourgeoises" epitomized in the figure of Rafiq Hariri who took the leadership of the community (Baumann 2012), and, above all, former militias and warlords which, thanks to the general amnesty of 1991, were able to easily reconvert themselves into political parties and recapitalize in and through the state the political and economic power acquired by weapons. The means whereby this recapitalization occurred consisted first and foremost in the structural transformation of the state apparatuses (ministries, state-owned enterprises, public agencies and institutions, etc.) into instruments of self-serving economic appropriation and political patronage through the clientelist or personalistic distribution of procurements, workplaces, and resources according to distribution criteria superseded by the politics of allotment of the spoils of office bequeathed by the Ta'if Agreements (Baumann 2019). This transformation was compounded by the strategic maintenance of a minimal state provision of basic and welfare services, which left the field open to politically-connected or controlled sectarian institutions to fill the void (Cammett 2014; Cammett 2011) religious parties such as Hezbollah play a critical role in providing health care, food, poverty relief, and other social welfare services alongside or in the absence of government efforts. Some parties distribute goods and services broadly, even to members of other parties or other faiths, while others allocate services more narrowly to their own base. In Compassionate Communalism (Cammett 2014), Melani Cammett analyzes the political logics of sectarianism through the lens of social welfare. On the basis of years of research into the varying welfare distribution strategies of Christian, Shia Muslim, and Sunni Muslim political parties in Lebanon, Cammett shows how and why sectarian groups deploy welfare benefits for such varied goals as attracting marginal voters, solidifying intraconfessional support, mobilizing mass support, and supporting militia fighters. Cammett then extends her arguments with novel evidence from the Sadrist movement in post-Saddam Iraq and the Bharatiya Janata Party in contemporary India, other places where religious and ethnic organizations provide welfare as part of their efforts to build political support. Nonstate welfare performs a critical function in the absence of capable state institutions, Cammett finds, but it comes at a price: creating or deepening social divisions, sustaining rival visions of the polity, or introducing new levels of social inequality. Compassionate Communalism is informed by Cammett's use of many methods of data collection and analysis, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS, and hence to penetrate and regulate every 'nook and cranny' of the life of Lebanese citizens.

This war-inherited patterns of persistence and reproduction did not left immune university campuses which, along with remaining prominent sites of sectarian incorporation from above, saw student clubs and associations progressively affirming themselves as prominent sites of sectarian partisan activism and recruitment (Harik and Meho 1996). Also, the reproduction of sectarian loyalties among youth was significantly underpinned by the state-sponsored postwar "politics of amnesia" which, by preventing from above the elaboration of a collective memory of the conflict first and foremost by hindering the integration of Lebanese post-independence history in the official school programs, bounded youth's historical knowledge and *mise-en-sense* of the country's recent past to the sole familial memories and communal narratives (Haugbolle 2010; Barak 2007).

The result was to cement and structuralize the political-sectarian fault-lines, loyalties, and modes of political subjectification emerged in the terminal phase of the conflict, which remained henceforth the basic blueprint of the post-war national socio-political fabric.

From the "Independence Intifada" to the October 17 Uprising: patterns and trajectories of university student activism in post-war Lebanon

The consolidation of sectarian loyalties notwithstanding, during the period of the so-called "Pax Syriana", students and youth remained generally absent from the national political arena. One of the main reasons for this absence was strictly related to the tight repressive control exercised by Syrian authorities over Lebanese political and civil life, which stretched from the ban over demonstrations and opposition political parties, to the enforcement of press censorship and electoral frauds, up to the extensive penetration of the structures of civil society and the murderer of political dissidents. The second one was the widespread feeling of distress, disillusionment and alienation which caught the silent majority of the student population, resulting in a general disenfranchisement from active student politics (Harik and Meho 1996). This did not prevent anyway underground anti-Syrian student networks to emerge and operate. The earliest and most combative front was represented by the student groups affiliated to the banned Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)[3] and Lebanese Forces (LF)[4] which, despite the close monitoring of the Syrian intelligence, managed to use the safer space of private universities as prominent alternative sites of organization and mobilization in absence of – and autonomously from – the respective party leaders (Bray-Collins 2016, 154-164). This front came to progressively incorporate also the student groups of the PSP[5] (Druze) and the young partisans of Prime Minister Hariri[6] which, especially after the withdrawal of the Israeli occupation troops from South of Lebanon in 2000, felt increasingly free to publicly express their looming anti-Syrian stances.

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[3] The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) emerged in the first half of the 1990s as an underground anti-Syrian organization aiming at pushing forward the political project of the exiled leader General Michel Aoun. Its social base accounted predominantly Christian middle classes, and combined overt anti-Syrian stances with a loose Lebanese nationalist ideology. After the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005 and the consequent return of Aoun to the homeland, the movement turned into a formal political party. In defiance of its sharp anti-Syrian history, in 2006 Michel Aoun signed a memorandum of understanding with Hezbollah whereby the FPM became the major Christian force within the pro-Syrian March 8 coalition (Helou 2020).
Currently, the FPM represents the largest Lebanese Christian party present in the Parliament. In 2016, Michel Aoun has been elected President of the Republic.
[4] The Lebanese Forces (LF) were established in 1976 as an informal coalition of Christian right-wing militias under the leadership of the Kataeb Party. The two organizations definitely split in 1985, to become after the war two distinct political parties. Following the strong opposition to the Syrian control over Lebanon, in 1994 the party was compulsory dissolved and its leader Samir Geagea put under arrest for war crimes. After the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005, Geagea was released and the party was legally reconstituted (el-Husseini 2012, 49-58). Currently, the LF represent the second major Christian force of the country, and the leading Christian party of the March 14 coalition.
[5] The Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) was established in 1949 by the charismatic Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt. From the short Lebanese civil war of 1958 until the Jumblatt's assassination in 1977, the party affirmed itself as the leading force of the Lebanese left, taking the head of the Lebanese National Movement, i.e. the umbrella organization coalescing the heterogeneous array of leftist groups who took the weapons in the first phase of the Civil War. After Kamal Jumblatt's assassination, the leadership of the party was taken by his son Walid who, while managing to keep the party's military hegemony, progressively shifted its ideological discourse towards sectarian positions. During the Pax Syriana, the party was fully integrated in the Syarian-backed ruling apparatus, to progressively shift towards overt anti-Syrian positions after the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000 (el-Husseini 2012, 58-64). Currently, the party represents the main Druze force of the country and is part of the March 14 coalition.
[6] After the initial marriage of convenience, from 1998 the relations between Hariri and Syria begun to rapidly deteriorate. The definitive breakout occurred in September 2004, as a reaction to the Syrian sponsored imposition of a constitutional reform to extend the mandate of the outgoing president Emile Lahoud. It is widely considered that his spectacular assassination was backed by the Syrian regime (International Crisis Group 2010)

Besides this majoritarian partisan stream stood a minoritarian, but not least important, array of independent secular and leftist collectives pairing the firm opposition to the Syrian occupation with an equally firm rejection of the post-war sectarian and neoliberal order (Gambill 2003). These groups matured in the shadow of the wave of civil activism and leftist revival developed throughout the 1990s as oppositional counter-reaction to the implementation of the Ta'if Agreements, and partially built on the leftist experiences and the anti-war civil society networks of the 1980s (Hagbolle 2016; AbiYaghi and Yammine 2019). As much as their sectarian counterparts, they represented a prominent incubator for a new generation of political and social activists, and actively participated to a variety of mobilizations and campaigns dealing with both domestic (municipal elections, civil marriage, post-war neoliberal reconstruction) and regional questions (e.g., 2003 US invasion of Iraq).

Starting from late 2000, partisan and independent anti-Syrian student networks begun to increasingly cooperate both within and outside of the campus in the common struggle against Damascus hegemony. The cooperation further accelerated from the end of 2004, as the Syrian-sponsored amendment of the constitutional chart to extend the presidential mandate of Emile Lahoud sparked widespread outrage all over the country. This played an important role to lie the grassroots foundations for the broad-brand coalition which, after the tremendous assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005, took the streets and prompted the definitive withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon (Bray-Collins 2016, 164-167).

The so-called "Independence Intifada" represented a fundamental moment of participation and politicization for the post-war student generation, and marked a crucial turning point in the development of post-war student politics. From the point of view of partisan activism, the major outcome was to foster and consolidate the full integration of student groups in the militant structures of the respective parties. The integration walked in parallel with the sharp polarization of the national political spectrum into two rival coalitions defined by the respective regional alignment: on the one hand, the Saudi and Western-aligned March 14 coalition, leaded by Hariri's Mustaqbal movement[7], the Lebanese Forces, and Jumblatt's PSP; on the other, the Syro-Iranian-aligned March 8 coalition, leaded instead by Amal,[8] Hezbollah,[9] and Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement who, after his return from exile, shifted his political orientation from anti-Syrian to pro-Syrian positions.

The first consequence of this integration was to shift the main focus of university partisan activism from student issues to the expansion of the respective militant bases and the parties' in-campus presence. This double work was carried out primarily by capillary penetrating the student socializing structures, most notably the student clubs, which became henceforth powerful platforms of recruitment and mobilization thanks to the numerous academic and social benefits associated to the affiliation (Lefort 2013). Second, several independent groups and first-timers which had participated to the Intifada got absorbed in the sphere of influence

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[7] The Mustaqbal movement was borned throughout the 1990s as a political current revolving around the personality of Rafic Hariri. After his assassination, his political legacy was continued by the son Saad who, in 2007, structured the current into a formal party. Currently, Mustaqbal represents the most important Sunna political force and the leading group of the March 14 coalition.

[8] The AMAL movement was established in 1974 by the Imam Musa al-Sadr, from the pre-existing Movement of the Dispossessed. The movement aimed at empowering the living conditions and the political weight of the Shia community in Lebanon, and participated to the civil war. After the mysterious disappearance of al-Sadr in 1979, the leadership of the party was taken by the current secretary Nabih Berri, and became one of the most influential militias of the Civil War (Norton 1987). Thanks to its longstanding close alliance with Syria, in the post-war period it was able to retain and further consolidate the prominent position acquired by weapons. Currently the party represents the second most important Shia formation in Lebanon and is part of the March 8 coalition.

[9] Hezbollah was officialy born in 1985 from a splinter of the AMAL movement. During the Civil War, it played a prominent role in resisting the Israeli invasion of the South of Lebanon, and rapidly expanded its presence and operations among the Shia community. Thanks to the post-war re-alignment with Syria and the protraction of the Israeli occupation of the South of Lebanon, the party represented the sole post-war militia allowed to retain its military arsenal. Since its very foundation, the party has been organically linked to the Iranian regime, whereof it still represents one of the major regional allies (Norton 2007)

of March 8 or March 14, at the expenses of the consolidation of independent networks. Last but not least, university student elections turned into increasingly relevant and competitive testing grounds for the measurement of the political weight of the two coalitions on a national scale. This relevance peaked particularly after 2012, as the postponement of the parliamentary elections for five consecutive years made university ballots the sole terrain of national electoral confrontation. Furthermore, security accidents among partisan student groups on the election days became increasingly recurrent (Gatten 2013).

Against this sharp sectarian re-entrenchment of university politics, starting from 2009 the explosion of a succession of contentious cycles challenging at different levels Lebanese sectarian neoliberal order gave new impetus to the rise of independent student groups. The most important ones included: a) the Laique Pride Movement[10] of 2009-2010, advocating for the secularization of the state; b) the Anti-Sectarian Movement of 2011,[11] which enlarged the scope of the quest for overthrowing the sectarian system to the endemic corruption and the rejection of neoliberal policies; c) the mobilization against the postponement of the Parliamentary elections of 2012-2013, where the quest for political accountability was also consistently present; d) the You Stink movement of 2015,[12] whose early environmental trigger quickly escalated into an overarching contestation of the political and economic status quo.

Reflecting the socio-geographical scope of the aforementioned mobilizations, these networks took root particularly in the major private universities of the capital, such as the American University of Beirut (AUB),[13] the Lebanese American University (LAU),[14] and the Saint Joseph University (USJ)[15] where, especially from 2016 onwards, independent student organizations experienced a consistent expansion. The important growth notwithstanding, however, on the eve of the October 17 Uprising, the established sectarian hegemony within campuses was still far from being consistently scratched. In the 2017 AUB elections, for instance, albeit the independent list guided by the Secular Club earned the historical record of six seats, these seats represented anyway only one third of the overall council (Parreira, Tavana, and Harb 2019). Furthermore, outside of the aforementioned socio-geographical cluster, the growth of independent groups remained marginal and scarcely visible. This anticipated to a greater extent the results of the 2018 parliamentary elections which, against the historical performance scored by the independent lists stemmed from the aforementioned anti-systemic contentious cycles, saw independents earning only one seat in the East Beirut constituency (el-Kak 2019).

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[10] The Laique Pride movement was born between 2009 and 2010 from social media talks among activists to promote secular change in Lebanon. The first demonstration took place on April 2010, and included among its main claims the secularization of the personal status law. The movement was predominantly composed by collectives, organizations and NGOs advocating for the secularization of Lebanon, including AUB's Secular Club.

[11] The Anti-Sectarian Movement was launched by a coalition of Leftist collectives in the vein of the first wave of Arab Uprisings. The movement touched its zenith between February and March, with a succession of participated demonstrations taking place in the major Lebanese cities. The movement quickly faded upon internal divisions concerning its political agenda and the positioning of its components towards the Syrian uprising.

[12] The You Stink movement unfolded throughout the spring and summer 2015, against the backdrop of a severe trash crisis which caught Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The crisis was ignited by the saturation of the main landfill serving the capital and the parallel expiring of the contract of the society charged of waste collection, to whom the government failed to find a prompt solution. The movement debuted as a NIMBY mobilization, to quickly escalate into a mass contestation advocating for systemic change (Abu Rish 2015).

[13] The American University of Beirut was established in 1866 under the name of Syrian Protestant College per initiative of American protestant missionaries. Since its very foundation, it has represented one of the most prominent and prestigious academic institutions of the Arab Levant, attracting students from all over the region. Since the 1940s, it has constantly represented a major node of radical student activism.

[14] The Lebanese American University was established in 1992 under the original name of Beirut University College (BUC). Its earliest nucleus was set up in 1833 as a female Women's College per initiative of American Evangelical missionaries. Currently, LAU represents the second most prominent anglophone Lebanese university after AUB, and attracts students from all over the region.
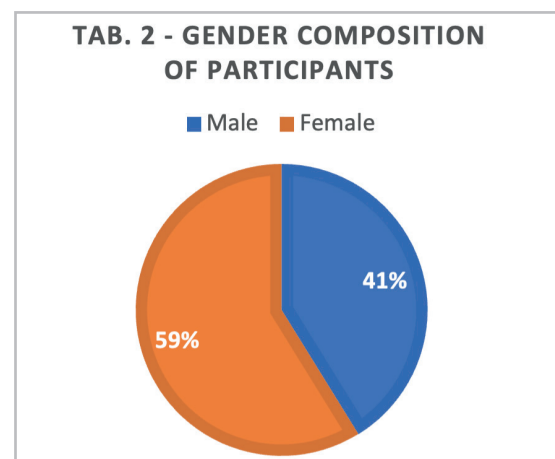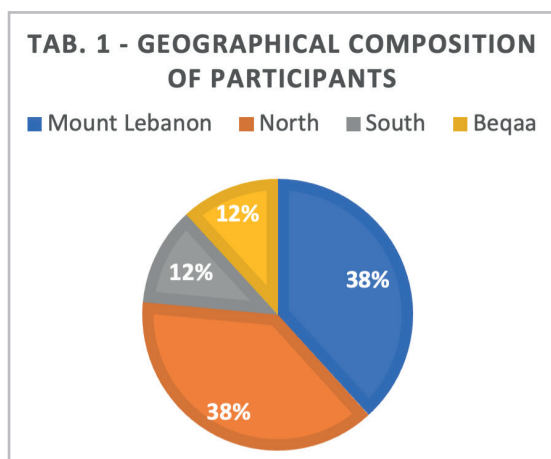
[15] The USJ was established by French Jesuite missionaries in 1874. Currently, it represents the second most prominent Lebanese university institution and the main francophone one. Historically, it has represented the main site of formation of the Maronite ruling elites.

2. Towards a generational breakthrough? Assessing the impact of the Uprising on the political positionalities of the Lebanese youth

As stressed by a several observers, university students played a central role in the making of the October 17 Uprising as both organized collective actors and individual participants. This centrality has been particularly evident in Beirut, where university students and collectives represented the most vibrant animators of the debates, the mobilizations, and the multitude of innovative cultural, social, political and citizenship practices which inhabited Martyr's Square. The uprising played also a pivotal role to boost the expansion, the institutionalization and the networking of independent student organizations all over the national territory.

The most important incubator in this sense is the MADA network.[16] MADA network was established in 2017 per initiative of the Secular Clubs of the AUB and the USJ, with the double aim of enhancing the rootedness of independent groups within the campuses, and integrating university youth in the national social, political, and economic arena. On the onset of the Uprising, it played a central role to help the capillary organization of new secular clubs in the major universities of the country, and to coordinate and enlarge the scope of their political action towards (Chehayeb and Majzoub, 2021). As of September 2021, MADA-linked secular clubs were present in ten out of forty accredited Lebanese university institutions. These universities include AUB, USJ, LAU, Université Saint Esprit de Kaslik (USEK), Notre Dame University (NDU), Sagesse University, Antonine University, the Beirut Arab University (BAU), the Lebanese International University (LIU), and the Lebanese University. Last but not least, in the Autumn 2020, independent student organizations reported a series of sweeping victories in the university elections of AUB, USJ, NDU and the Rafic Hariri University.

Both the results of 2020 student elections and the steady expansion of independent student networks undoubtedly represent an important breakthrough with the past. On the other hand, they are not alone self-sufficient to give back a picture representative and thorough enough of the overarching political impact that the Uprising exerted on the ensemble of the student population and its future implications. The IRHAL focus groups aim at filling this gap, by providing a first comprehensive qualitative investigation of students' engagement to the political before, during and after the Uprising and its potential impact. To this end, the project selected a sample of thirty-four students from the three local partner universities, designed to mirror as much as possible the overall socio-geographical composition of the Lebanese youth population.

TAB. 1 - GEOGRAPHICAL COMPOSITION OF PARTICIPANTS
Mount Lebanon — North — South — Beqaa
12% — 12% — 38% — 38%

TAB. 2 - GENDER COMPOSITION OF PARTICIPANTS
Male — Female
41% — 59%

To result consistent with the turnout of 2018 parliamentary elections and enable future projections, the sample privileged the inclusion of participants who had not actively engaged politics before October 2019.

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[16] https://www.facebook.com/MadaNetwork/

TAB. 3 - ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT TO THE POLITICAL OF PARTICIPANTS BEFORE OCTOBER 17, 2019

■ None ■ Some

32%

68%
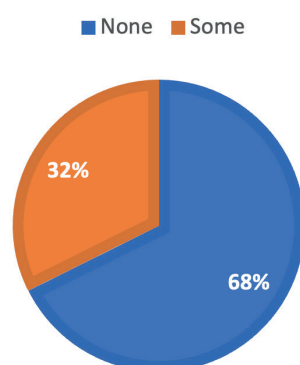
The focus groups have been organized according to four clusters based on the students' Alma Mater, and were carried out online during the second half of July 2021 as follows:

Groups and Clusters	Date	Nr. of Participants	Moderator
LIU – Beqaa and South Campuses	July 16, 2021	8	Dr. Assaad Sadaka
LIU – Beirut and Tripoli Campuses	July 16, 2021	10	Dr. Walid Raad
Lebanese University – Tripoli Campus	July 22, 2021	8	Dr. Noma Ziadeh-Mikati
USEK – Kaslik Campus	July 23, 2021	8	Dr. Francisco Barroso Cortes

The decision to hold the focus groups online was strictly related to the Covid-19 restrictions and the severe fuel shortages that Lebanon begun to experience since the beginning of the month, compromising the possibility for the majority of students to move from a locality to another. Furthermore, the coeval sharp degradation of telecommunication services hindered at the last minute the participation of a total of four students out of the 38 originally identified.

The focus groups revolved around twelve main common questions elaborated by UNIMED, the University of Cagliari and the local partners during three virtual preparatory meetings, and were designed and organized according to three macro-thematic areas of investigation:

1. *Triggers, forms and trajectories of students' participation to the Uprising (3 questions)*

2. *Attitudes and perceptions towards the Lebanese political system before and after the Uprising (6 questions)*

3. *Post-uprising Youth and the future of Lebanese politics (3 questions)*

So, to put at ease students and facilitate the discussion and interaction, the focus groups were moderated by the local partners, who also took charge of selecting the participants for the respective clusters according to the established sampling criteria. The role of observer was filled instead by myself on behalf of the University of Cagliari, who took record of the modes of interaction and the non-verbal communication of participants for all the four clusters. Exception made for the USEK focus group which was held in English, all the focus groups were
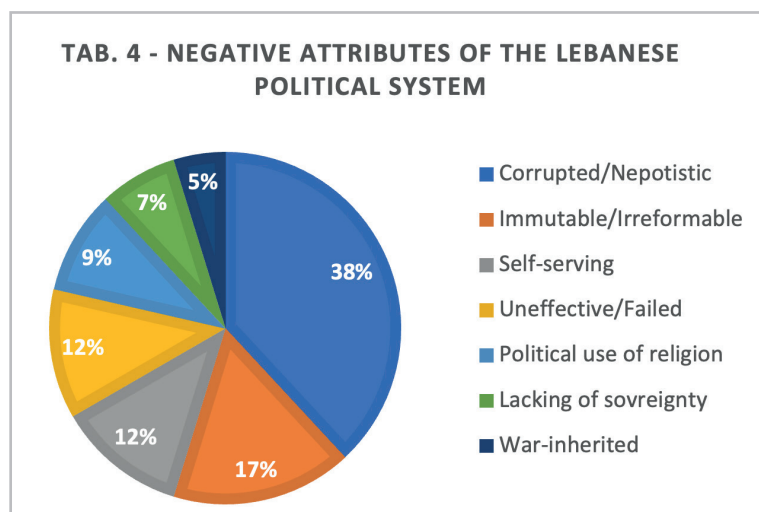
held in Arabic. In both cases, the choice of the language was oriented to address at best the communication exigencies of all the involved participants. Finally, before, during, and after their unfolding, the focus groups respected the strictest ethical criteria.
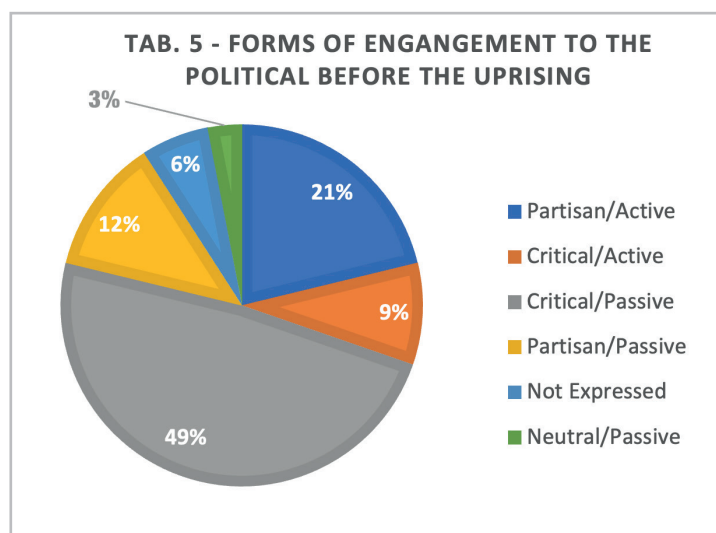
The coding and data analysis have been elaborated following the method of constant comparison (CC) (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009). The CC method consists in a three-phased analysis where data, after having being chunked into small units according to their content under thematic labels (open coding), are grouped into categories (axial coding), to enable the development by the researcher of one or more themes expressed (elective coding). Moving from these findings, it will draw the conclusions vis-à-vis our main research questions: how and to what extent has the Uprising impacted on the political positionalities of educated youth? Against this impact, can university students represent a site for the emergence or the consolidation of a counter-hegemonic power block?

Before the Uprising: students and the Lebanese political system

Independently from the initial political positioning of the sample, all the participants to the focus groups shared a deeply negative perception of the existing Lebanese political system. The negative attributes the most recurrently used were related for the most part to the rampant corruption and nepotism permeating state institutions and the state-society relations alike, the self-serving use of power by the ruling elites, and the lack of elite-change. These findings resonate with the trends detected by the Arab Barometer survey on the eve of the Lebanese Uprising (Arab Barometer 2019), which registered a general perception of political institutions as corrupted or highly corrupted by about 90%, and a distrust in the government institutions by about 80%. It should be noted that for the majority of our participants the notion of Lebanese political system (*nizam siyasi lubnani*) is strongly identified with the system of allotment of the spoils of office among ruling elites (the so-called *dawlat al-muhasasa*) bequeathed by sectarian power-sharing.

Within the framework of this dominant understanding, the major discriminant subsisting between partisan and non-partisan students lies in the different degree of responsibility attributed to each party in the making of Lebanese governance and institutional shortcomings. In particular, while for non-partisan students this responsibility is attributed to the entirety of Lebanese ruling parties with no distinctions, the partisan ones tend to absolve their party of reference, which is generally portrayed as the only one really caring about the destiny of the country against all odds. This self-absolutory attitude is usually compounded by the otherization of the main root of state corruption to the rival coalition. During the realization of focus groups, these conflicting opinions represented a major source of debate.

TAB. 4 - NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTES OF THE LEBANESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

- Corrupted/Nepotistic — 38%
- Immutable/Irreformable — 17%
- Self-serving — 12%
- Uneffective/Failed — 12%
- Political use of religion — 9%
- Lacking of sovreignty — 7%
- War-inherited — 5%

TAB. 5 - FORMS OF ENGANGEMENT TO THE POLITICAL BEFORE THE UPRISING

Partisan/Active — 21%
Critical/Active — 9%
Critical/Passive — 49%
Partisan/Passive — 12%
Not Expressed — 6%
Neutral/Passive — 3%

EXCERPT SERIES 1 – FRAMING THE LEBANESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

«The Lebanese state is a failing state with a big decay in democracy. […]

We are a nation with regular electoral frauds, with a lot of corruption infiltrated in every inch of the government and in every infrastructure. […] We don't have free and fair elections when electing new political leaders. We always have the same elites because they are paying for these votes. […]

Plus, the judiciary system lacks of credibility» NS (18, f)

«I've always perceived our political system as an ineffective one and a sectarian one where we have a lot of inequalities. Based on that, I've always perceived the system as a bad one. Regarding all the political parties that are operating under this corrupted system, most of them aren't inclined for change» GS (20, m)

«We thought that everything in the state institutions was wrong, the public management and the management of public institutions and I thought that we should change things […] There was no political plan for the future no strategy and everything was about "muhasasa" and corruption so there was no way for change» IM (22, m)

EXCERPT SERIES 2.I – DEBATING PARTY RESPONSIBILITES

• **Discussion 1**

- G., FPM supporter: *«I blame Thawra people that when political parties' supporters were on the streets they should've accepted them and they should've worked to reach a common ground together. A revolution without political parties is useless. They may be traditional political parties but they are subject for a change. Thus, Thawra people should accept their presence and should accept the fact that political parties' supporters have their own opinions and beliefs. […] Therefore, this is a big stepping stone that Thawra didn't take in hand»*

- N., Independent: *«I'd like to comment on what G said. Everyone was on the streets protesting against those traditional political parties because we're fed up from them. They had a lot of time to work and make a change. They had about 15 to 20 years to make some progress and to make the situation better. However, they weren't inclined for change. People were fed up from them and they were protesting against them to overthrow them so the minimum was that they will reject any form of cooperation. No negotiations between Thawra people and political parties' supporters' was going to happen. All political parties with no exceptions had several years to make a change but they didn't. We can clearly see right now where we're heading and all of it is because of them».*

- G.: *«N., I really do understand your point of view and where it's coming from. However, what I am trying to say is that those political parties in our conservative society where it's really hard to implement change throughout new ways without those traditional political parties in order to raise the effectivity rate of Thawra, political parties' supporters should've been included. A change from the inside should have been made, from the heart of these political parties. Everyone in this country is facing the same daily struggles, even political parties' supporters. They are living the crisis and they are jobless like Thawra people. Therefore they should've been involved in the process and negotiations should've been made between both parties»*

- R., LF supporter: *«Not all political parties had the chance to be in power and to implement change. In reply for some comments, I will say that Thawra is for everyone, and everyone could participate. However, you can't be part of the process and at the same time you're part of the system, part of the corrupted establishment and friends with Hezbollah who destroyed the country. If you really want to help the Thawra, you should start the change from the inside»*

- J.S., Independent: *«I highly disagree that anyone can join. R. gave the example of Hezbollah but it could be applied on the Lebanese Forces as well, his political party. You can't join the revolution when it's against you».*

EXCERPT SERIES 2.II – DEBATING PARTY RESPONSIBILITES

• Discussion 2

- J.I., Independent: «*From the beginning, I did not have a political affiliation, and thank God, I also do not belong to any of them* [the ruling political parties, n.b.A.]. *I always support the national discourse and act on the basis that we are one people. The revolution did not change much in my convictions, although I pondered a little on its beginnings on the level of our future, and now it does not exist at all*»

- Z.A., Hezbollah supporter: «*Frankly, I have increased my confidence in my political line because I see with my own eyes that the party to which I belong is making great efforts and providing many services in order to alleviate the suffering of the people. But I admit that the existence of a strong state is better than relying on limited party services. I see that my party works for the developed country but the state does nothing*»

- I., Independent: «*I would like to ask my colleague Z. about the nature of the services provided by her party? We are practically deprived of all kinds of services.*

- Z.A.: *I see how the party provides food or medicine to the needy. As for finding jobs, they are more than the party's capacity because it is not the state, but rather secures what it can according to its capabilities*

- H., Independent: «*If I was a Shiite pro-Hezbollah, I might have supported it because it has weapons, protects me, and benefits from aid to distribute it to its audience. But I do not want a sectarian party to which I belong. I want to belong to a homeland. Look what is happening around us in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and the economic conditions they are going through*»

- Z.D., former Hezbollah supporter: «*I support what my colleague H. said. Yes, I belonged to the Hezbollah party before, and I want to make it clear that some people think that Hezbollah helps all Shiites, and this is not true. I had a personal experience that prompted me to abandon belonging to this party. The party serves the interests of some beneficiaries, close associates and affiliates only*»

- Y., Mustaqbal supporter: «*It must be recognized that all the existing parties are components of the state and at the same time contribute to weakening the state, and we know who is the controlling party in this country* [referred to Hezbollah, n.b.A.]»

- H.: «*As Y. said, the parties are the state, and I see that they all participated in corruption, and an example of this is Hezbollah, which protected the corruption of the Free Patriotic Movement in exchange for silence on its weapons. Therefore, it can be said that everyone contributed to bringing down the state and bringing us to what we have reached today, and this is all the result of cumulative years*»

The students and the uprisings: triggers, perceptions, participation, and assessment of the outcomes

Attitudes and participation

Due to the widespread dissatisfaction with the existing status quo, when the uprising broke out, most of the focus groups participants opted for taking the streets. The participation to street protests involved also most of the students with partisan sympathies who, along with sharing the overarching claims and grievances expressed by the squares, felt encouraged to take the streets by the cross-cutting composition of the occupiers.

Another major trigger for the participation of both groups was related to the effects of the incipient socio-economic crisis on their average living conditions, most notably on the growing difficulty to find employment, especially outside from politically connected networks.

Independently from the political positioning and the active participation to the mobilizations, the dominant attitude pervading students when the Uprising broke out was that of a widespread hopefulness.

This positive attitude was predominantly propelled by the outstanding and non-partisan scope of the popular participation, and the resonance of the claims and grievances with their own desire for a systemic change. Other sources of encouragement for joining street protests came from the festive atmosphere of the early days and the extensive mediatic coverage.

At the center of students' expectations stood the hope of an overarching systemic change, starting from the uprooting of systemic corruption and the unseating of sectarian elites from power.

The dominant forms of participation combined altogether street protests and media activism. Due to the diffused geographic scope of the protests, the choice of the squares answered predominantly to criteria of geographical proximity. Also, several students participated to more than one square. Media activism alone was adopted instead predominantly by the sample participants who, at the moment of the outbreaking, were not in Lebanon, or were prevented from joining. On the other hand, one of the sample participants quit the job to be able to physically participate to the mobilizations. Against the outstanding initial participative upsurge, within the space of a few weeks the overwhelming majority of participants stepped back from street protests.

The refraining from squares involved for the most part the first-timers of direct participation to contentious politics, which stepped back in consistent proportions.
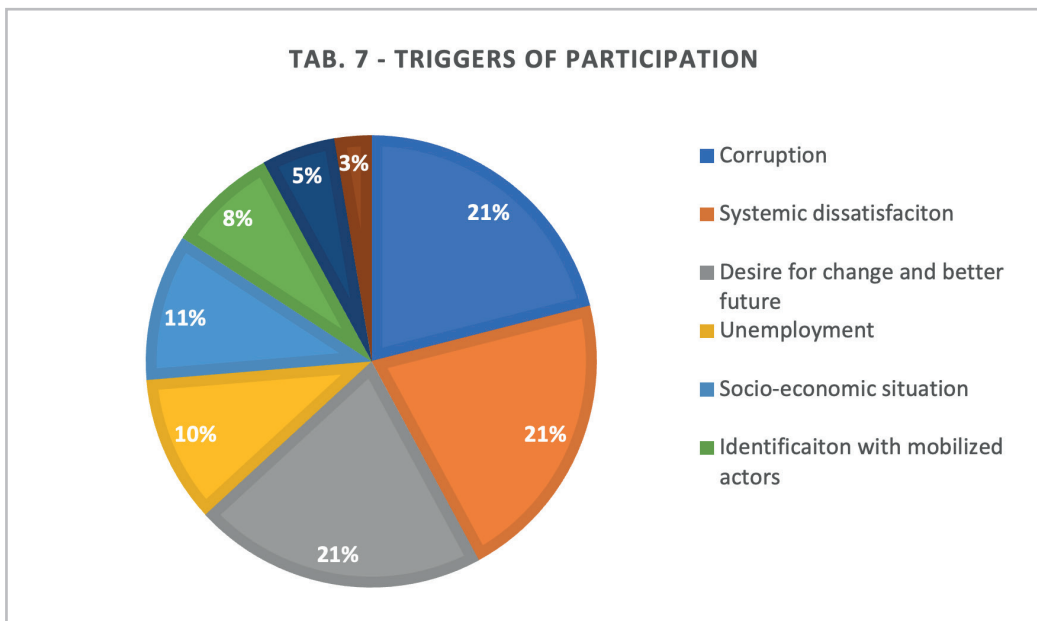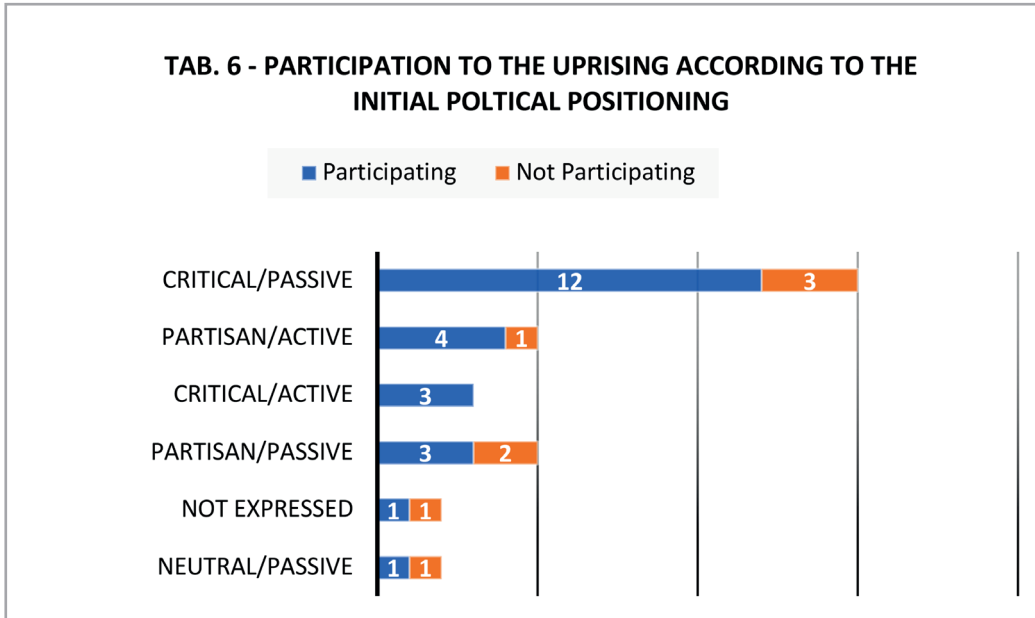
In the case of non-partisan students, the two main reasons expressed by participants were related to the inconsistency of the modes of mobilization, including the lack of genuine commitment of many mobilized actors, and the perceived large infiltration of political parties among the demonstrators. Violence and the state coercion also played a role. To push partisan students back was instead predominantly the hostile attitude adopted by the squares towards partisan participants and the respective political leaders, judged in turn as divisive.

The massive stepping back demotivated over time also part of the minority who remained in the streets, which likewise diminished their everyday participation compared to the initial phase. On the other hand, it should be noted that out of the entirety of participants abandoning the squares, only one declared having changed his attitude and commitment towards the uprising, while most of them continued to mobilize through social media or other forms of activism.
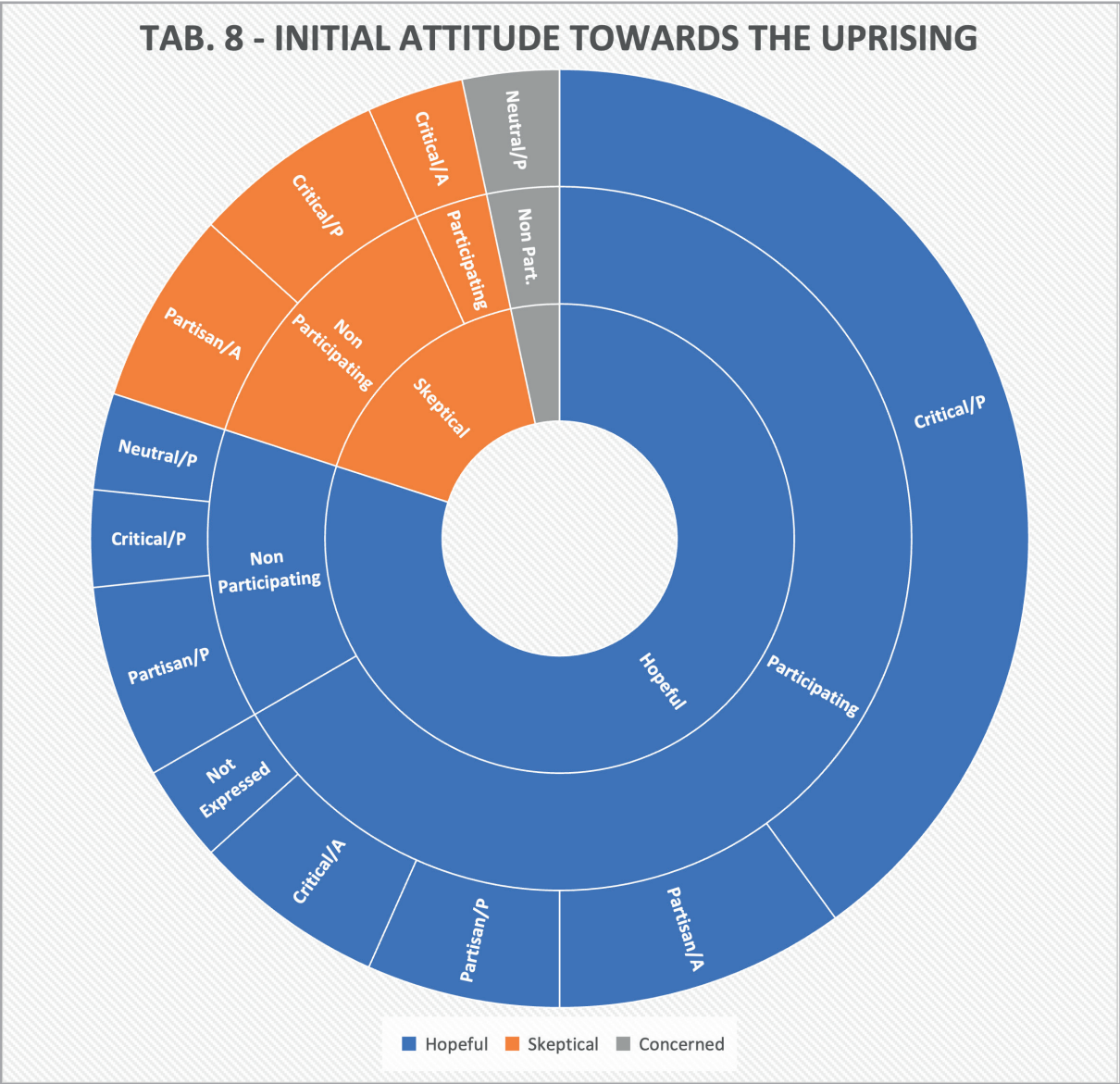
The last element worth of being underlined is the large coincidence between the reasons expressed by students for stepping back from street protests, and the ones expressed by the students having welcomed the outbreak of the Uprising with skepticism or having opted for non-participation.
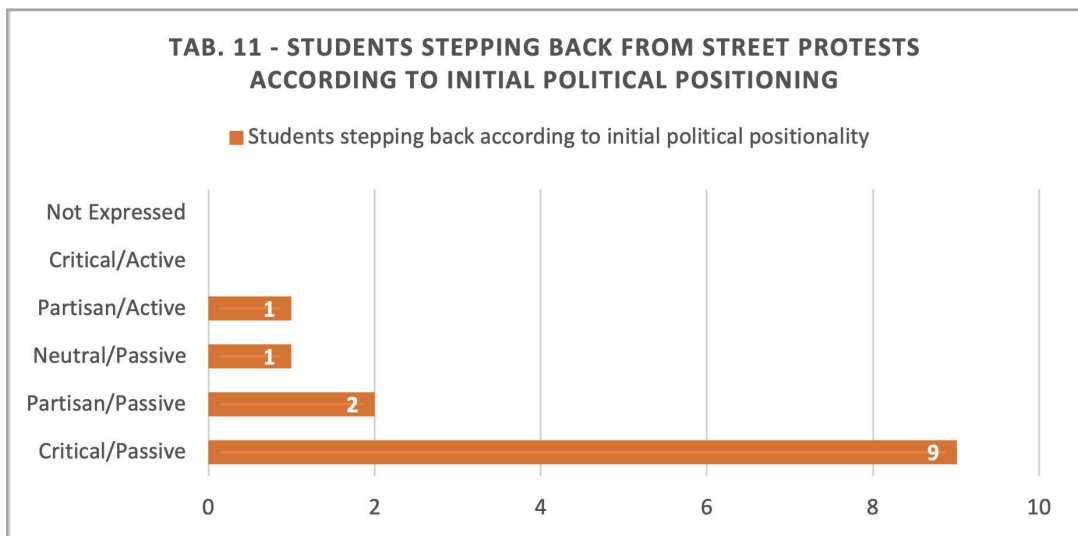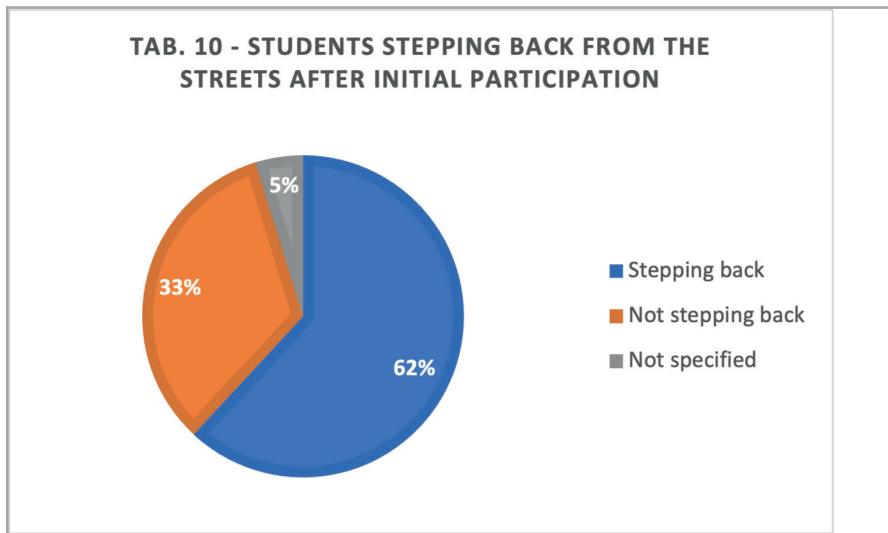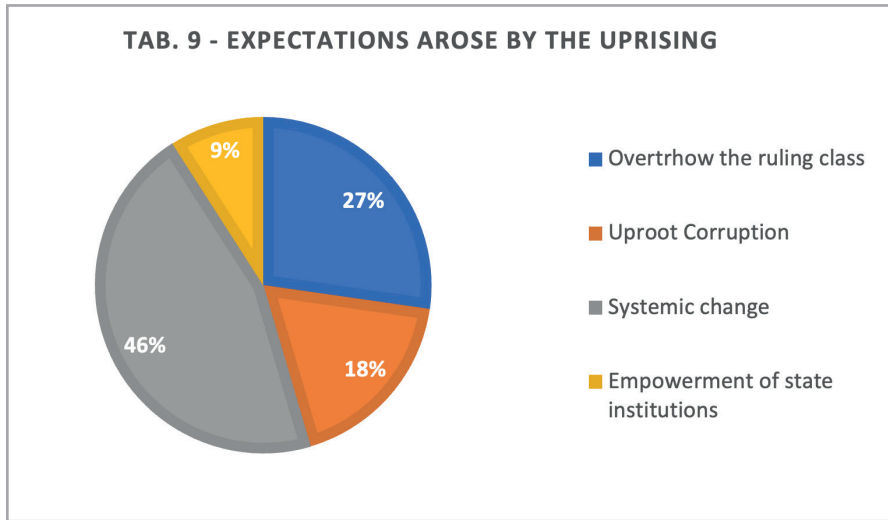
This coincidence pertains the accusation of "divisiveness" risen by partisan students against the hostile attitude adopted by the squares towards the participation of partisan elements, and the specular accusation of "infiltration" arose by non-partisans against partisan participation. This corroborates both the assumption identifying in the lack of structuring, programming

and leadership one of the main reasons for the failure of the Uprising, and the deep divisiveness sparked by the question of the entitlement of partisan elements to participate to the mobilization attested in the Excerpt Series 2.II.

TAB. 6 - PARTICIPATION TO THE UPRISING ACCORDING TO THE INITIAL POLTICAL POSITIONING

- Participating
- Not Participating

	Participating	Not Participating
CRITICAL/PASSIVE	12	3
PARTISAN/ACTIVE	4	1
CRITICAL/ACTIVE	3	
PARTISAN/PASSIVE	3	2
NOT EXPRESSED	1	1
NEUTRAL/PASSIVE	1	1

TAB. 7 - TRIGGERS OF PARTICIPATION

- Corruption — 21%
- Systemic dissatisfaciton — 21%
- Desire for change and better future — 21%
- Unemployment — 10%
- Socio-economic situation — 11%
- Identificaiton with mobilized actors — 8%
- (5%)
- (3%)

TAB. 8 - INITIAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE UPRISING

TAB. 9 - EXPECTATIONS AROSE BY THE UPRISING

- Overtrhow the ruling class
- Uproot Corruption
- Systemic change
- Empowerment of state institutions

27%
18%
46%
9%

TAB. 10 - STUDENTS STEPPING BACK FROM THE STREETS AFTER INITIAL PARTICIPATION

- Stepping back
- Not stepping back
- Not specified

62%
33%
5%

TAB. 11 - STUDENTS STEPPING BACK FROM STREET PROTESTS ACCORDING TO INITIAL POLITICAL POSITIONING

- Students stepping back according to initial political positionality

Category	Value
Not Expressed	
Critical/Active	
Partisan/Active	1
Neutral/Passive	1
Partisan/Passive	2
Critical/Passive	9

0   2   4   6   8   10

TAB. 12 - REASONS FOR STEPPING BACK

- Infiltration of Political Parties
- Inconsistency of the mobilization
- Violence/State repression
- Divisiveness

40%
46%
7%
7%

TAB. 13 - TRIGGERS OF NON PARTICIPATION

- Inconsisentcy of the mobilization
- Infiltration of political parties
- Modes of mobilizarion
- Divisiveness
- Other

29%
22%
21%
21%
7%

EXCERPT SERIES 3 – FRAMINGS OF THE PARTICIPATION

«I found that the people in the Thawra are normal people, not mobilized people by political parties, so that's what made us feel that the Thawra represents us. That's why I went down to the streets and I participated every day in it. I saw that a lot of people that where down were thinking like me, they wanted the same things as I wanted so I found it the right place to make a change»

(R, 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

«I was with the revolution from the beginning, and I was among the first to take to the streets, thinking that all those who took to the streets were aiming for change»

(C, 21, Female, Critical/Passive)

«I support what both C. and I. said, that I supported the revolution in its beginnings and was optimistic after seeing these huge numbers of demonstrators»

(Z, 19, Female, Partisan/Passive)

«When the revolution broke down, I went to the streets like everyone. We were enthusiastic and full of hope. We wanted to get rid of all the political parties. […] Basically, we went down because we were fed up from the system»

(N., 22, Male, Critical/Passive)

«I support what my colleagues said. I used to live in a sectarian-diverse area, and they all protested at first against corruption, and this matter encouraged me to participate and take to the streets»

(A, 26, Male, Partisan/Passive)

«I participated from the second day because I did not think it had anything to do with the 6$ fee. This fee awakened us. What made me participate is to change the situation and the political class that has been in power for 30 years»

(H., 26, Female, Critical/Active)

«At the beginning we were attracted by the ambiance, how everyone joined and our friends. At the beginning I didn't understand the revolution deeply and I wasn't aware of the main reasons for it, but after the beginning of the revolution I begin to read and to understand its reasons»

(A., 23, Female, Critical/Passive)

«At the beginning we were watching the TV all the time, and a lot of people on TV were talking about their problems, their poverty about how the situation is. [...] I mean, we didn't have the motivation to mobilize but when the problem was more obvious and when the media has played a role, so we really had to participate in such a revolution!»

(C., 23, Female, Neutral/Passive)

EXCERPT SERIES 4 – CHANGING ATTITUDES AND MODES OF MOBILIZATION

«I didn't use the social media, so I joined street for a period of time but when I noticed that political parties infiltrated the streets and these parties in Lebanon with thirty years of experience they know how to change things for their own interest, so, when I noticed that these things are not representing me anymore I retrieved from streets, but this doesn't mean that I am not with the revolution anymore, in fact I tried to meet with people who are affiliated to political parties and I tried to convince them and to discuss with them and convince them that you are following a wrong path and we, as Lebanese people, are all having the same problems so what I tried to do is talking with these people affiliated to political parties to convince them the leave these parties and to join the revolution that represent us without the infiltration and the violence»

(W., 26, Female, Critical/Passive)

«Yes, in the beginning I was very active and enthusiastic for the revolution but after a while my participation and my passion decreased [...]. Then, when we noticed that there is infiltration from political parties I retrieved from the streets and I participated through social media and through TV shows but I didn't join the street mobilization after that. I only re-joined streets to participate in the cultural debate and talks that were organized there»

(I., 22, Male, Critical/Passive)

«My participation decreased over time. When the revolution started I used to go on a daily basis then I stopped. However, when they started doing a violent revolution I was excited a little bit to rejoin. In sum, I stopped participating because I found that the people that were there, they weren't down to fight for a cause. They were there to have fun and to enjoy their free time and to skip school or work. Plus, I was really disgusted from political parties that were protesting beside us on the streets. They were riding the wave of the revolution so all of our efforts and hard-work was useless»

(J., 22, Male, Critical/Active)

«After I stopped going down the streets, I continued my Thawra on social media and from my own political party. I never stopped protesting. I am always active on social media especially on Clubhouse where I hold brief conferences and I talk about the revolution. Thawra isn't only about protesting but it's a full mindset and a lifestyle»

(R., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

«I was surprised by the transformations that occurred in the following days, as I noticed that many people came to serve the agenda of the parties to which they belong. From there, my position on them changed and I no longer support what is happening on the ground, because change must start from within each individual first»

(C., 21, Female, Critical/Active)

«After a few days I began to feel that the divisions among the revolutionaries became clear and they no longer joined hands in their struggles, and this is what turned my position to be against this revolution, which no longer represents me»

(A., 26, Male, Partisan/Passive)

EXCERPT SERIES 5 – REASONS FOR STEPPING BACK

«*Unfortunately, I stopped going down the streets because, at some point, I felt it was leading to nowhere and it was like a play.* […] *I realized after going down many times to the streets that not everyone is really inclined for change. Most of the people that were down and mainly young people, they were only there to have fun, to hop on the trend and to skip classes and not go to school. On the other hand, we had also, some people on the streets protesting that where politically affiliated to those traditional political parties that are poisoning our system which was irritating, because we were going down the streets to protest against those same traditional political parties and to eradicate them since they are leading us to nowhere*»

(N., 18, Female, Critical / Passive)

«*I participated in the Thawra the first few days but then I realized as N. said that it was a play so I stopped. I noticed that people were getting on the streets to hop on the trend and have fun. What was a revolution turned into a party. People were getting there to party and enjoy the music played by DJs. It was a useless revolution so I stopped taking part in the protest*»

(C., 20, Female, Critical / Passive)

«*I know that usually revolutions are chaotic but here in Lebanon it was a clear organized chaos. It was clearly manipulated so I stopped going down. I saw politically affiliated people on the streets protesting with us, chanting beside us that they want to get rid of the political parties however, ironically they were part of those parties so I was lost I didn't quite understand what was happening. Plus, I didn't like the shape of the Thawra and where it was heading. At first it was chaotic and then it turned into a concert venue. People were getting down to have fun. It was useless*»

(N., 22, Male, Critical / Passive)

«*However, we discovered with the passage of time that everything that happened was not true, but rather intangible slogans, and the evidence for that is the place we have now reached in terms of difficult political and economic conditions*»

(I., 28, Neutral / Passive)

«*With time, I began to notice how they started uploading pictures of their leaders and heads of their parties, which proved to me that all their slogans were false, until today we hope that the situation will return to before the revolution, when the situation was much better than it is today*»

(Z., 19, Female, Partisan / Passive)

EXCERPT SERIES 6 – MODES OF PARTICIPATION

«*Mainly Martyrs Square and Riad Solh* [in Beirut city center, n.b.A], *also Zouk, Jal el-Dib and Tripoli. I participated on the street and social media. I met people and we created groups not for sabotage purposes, but to hold meetings and plan ahead*»

(H., 28, Female, Beirut resident)

«*I participated by taking to the squares in my town of Koura where there were actions and protests in many places. Also, on twitter and Facebook*»

(D., 20, Male, Kura resident)

«*I joined the street at "al Noor Square"* [in Tripoli, n.b.A] *where people were gathering*»

(I., 22, Male, Deir Ammar resident)

«*I am among the people who didn't join the revolution directly, first I was a little in shock I was working and I begin to watch and follow what is happening, I decided to leave my job because in my work I was forbidden to participate in any kind of mobilization, so I decided to resign and I joined the revolution*»

(W., 23, Female, Tripoli resident)

«*Honestly, I couldn't take to the streets for certain reasons. I participated on social media and especially twitter*»

(J., 21, Female, North Lebanon resident)

EXCERPT SERIES 7 – FRAMING SKEPTICISM AND NON-PARTICIPATION

«*Frankly, I did not participate in the revolution, but from day one I was in favor of people taking to the streets and in favor of raising the voice against the prevailing conditions. But day after day, I began to notice that the course of the revolution began to shift towards other matters, including blocking the roads. I felt that the demonstrators had begun to divide against each other and that their goal was no longer directed against the corrupted in the state. Everyone is defending their leader, and this is what made me feel that what is happening on the ground is just wrong and untrue*»

(Z.,22, Female, Partisan/Active)

«*The original reason, i.e. the 6$ fee on WhatsApp, was not a good enough reason for me to participate in the revolution. This caused the eruption of the revolution, which was politicized. This is why I did not participate, but I wanted to hear what the people had to say. At first they all had the same cries, and later, each started defending his own leader*»

(N., 24, Female, Partisan/Passive)

«*I didn't participate in the revolution because maybe the first 5 days in the squares it was a true revolution but when the revolution begun to cut streets in my village preventing me from going to my university, from joining classes in order to get my degree and contribute positively in my country, what revolution is that? A revolution that prevents people from joining their work in order to enhance the country specifically for businesses that bring dollars to the country, the revolution in Lebanon is responsible of making the crisis worse*»

(M., 20, Male, Critical/Passive)

«*I noticed that what was going on was different from what was going on before. I hesitated a little, fearing that we would go to what the Syrians had reached in their revolution, and I did not like the idea of cutting off roads. In short, I was in favor of the revolution, but I was afraid of going to a different place far from the goals of the revolution*»

(Y., 19, Female, Partisan/Active)

Role of youth in the Uprising

All the participants to the focus groups agreed in considering educated youth the main engine of the mobilization.

According to the participants, the main value-added provided by educated youth consisted in their greater awareness and capacity of critical thinking compared to the so-called War generation, which played a pivotal role to both unveil the real nature of the Lebanese regime and ignite a virtuous snowball effect boosting participation, awareness and hope in a better future.

Several participants stressed also the importance of the everyday work of persuasion engaged by educated youth with their partisan proxies, including parents, despite the conflicts that this engendered, testifying both the creation of a profound generational fracture between their engagement to the political and that of their parents (see Infra), and a commitment to change involving also the participants' private sphere.

TAB. 14 - MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS OF YOUTH TO THE UPRISING
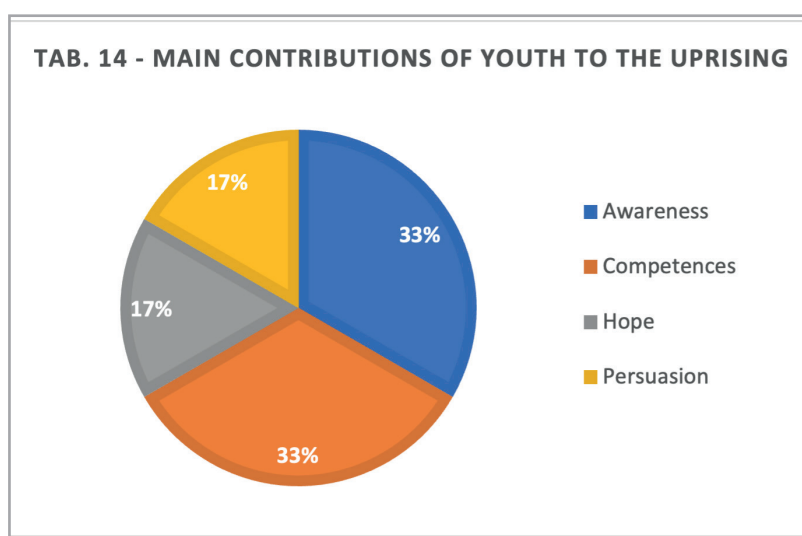
Students' evaluation of the outcomes and shortcomings of the Uprising

When arrived to the evaluation of the outcomes of the Uprising, all the respondents agreed in identifying as main achievements the greater political awareness of citizens about the problems affecting the country, the breaking of sectarian legacies and of the wall of fear inhibiting rebellion against political leaders, and, above all, the unveiling of the real the self-serving nature of the Lebanese regime, including the structural corruption.

Equally important, the majority of the respondents attested the fundamental role played by the Uprising in changing the political positionalities and forms of engagement to the political of their generation in a more conscious, active, and anti-systemic sense. In this respect, it is worth underlining that several participants with partisan sympathies before the Uprising have openly declared to have changed their political orientation.

Two further generational implications strongly emphasized by respondents included the emancipation from the familial political legacies, and the education to say "no".

For these reasons, while the overwhelming majority of respondents recognized the blatant failure of the Uprising in effectively pursuing the political goals that it had set at the moment of its outbreak, the overall assessment of its political impact remains – albeit with different shades of pessimism, optimism, and pragmatism from one respondent to another – more positive than negative.

EXCERPT SERIES 8 – FRAMING THE ROLE OF YOUTH

"Honestly I think that the youth and students are the cornerstone of the revolution. They have higher education and cultural levels. Participation of youth was better and can induce change because we are the most harmed because of our education, work, future. They are all at risk if there is no change. This will force us to leave the country. Revolution was made for the youth as someone else said. Our parents are still traumatized from the war and fear for us. […]. The revolution will continue with the youth".

(D., 20, Male, Critical/Passive)

"I think the revolution was made for our generation. Our parent's generation lived in divide for 30 years between the parties. To our generation, the parties are corrupt and taking without giving. And we want change so that the future generation can lead a better life and does not have to worry about the things we worry about today. We will proceed with the revolution, maybe not me, maybe others"

(N., 24, Female, Partisan/Passive)

"I think the youth had a huge impact on the revolution because we were all united and full of hope and ambition and seeking a better future and getting rid of the corrupt gov. but we were paying for a mistake that was not our making. I would like to call it a cultural revolution against segregation of sect, gender, economic background."
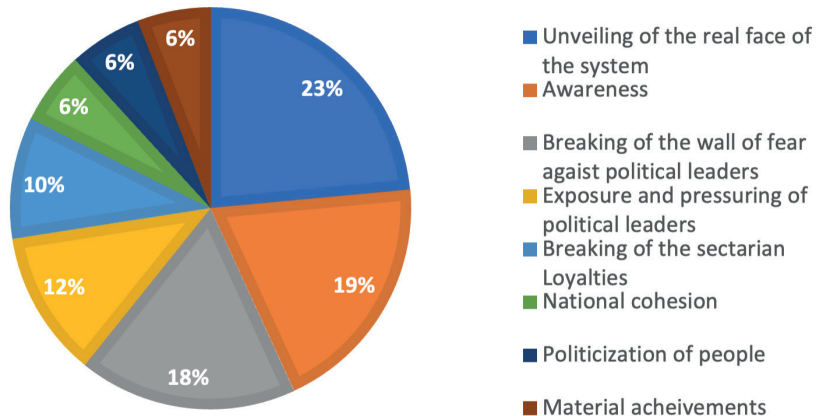
(N., 22, Female, Critical/Passive)

"Youth generation were a main pillar of the revolution because the most of older generation were really affiliated to the traditional regime and few of them really thought about the need to change; because we begin to influence our family our entourage our relatives and as a result they were also encouraged to participate and join the revolution"
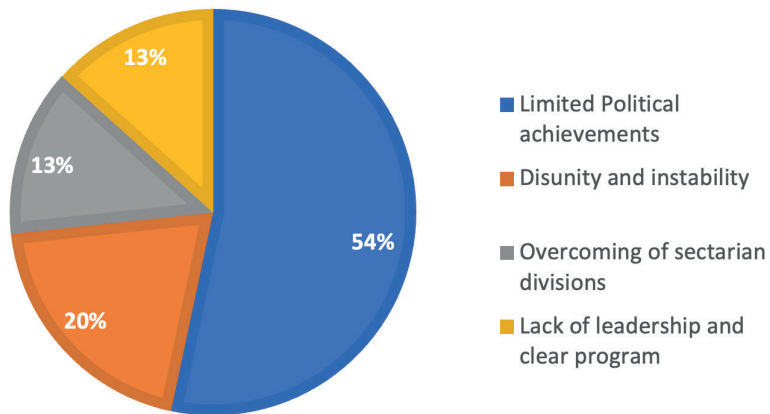
(I., 22, Male, Critical/Passive)

"On role of students in the revolution: I highly appreciate when cultivated people participate to raise awareness and induce change and make demands, and I was hoping they would be the front of the revolution and stay in the revolution"
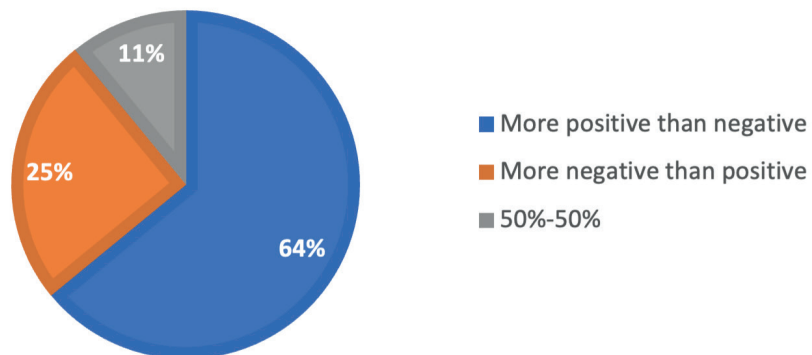
(M., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

TAB. 15 - MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE UPRISING

- Unveiling of the real face of the system — 23%
- Awareness — 19%
- Breaking of the wall of fear agaist political leaders — 18%
- Exposure and pressuring of political leaders — 12%
- Breaking of the sectarian Loyalties — 10%
- National cohesion — 6%
- Politicization of people — 6%
- Material acheivements — 6%

TAB. 16 - FAILURES OF THE UPRISING

- Limited Political achievements — 54%
- Disunity and instability — 20%
- Overcoming of sectarian divisions — 13%
- Lack of leadership and clear program — 13%

TAB. 17 - OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE OUTCOMES OF THE UPRISING

- More positive than negative — 64%
- More negative than positive — 25%
- 50%-50% — 11%

EXCERPT SERIES 9 – IDENTIFYING THE GENERAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE UPRISING

"Revolution broke the barrier of fear with dominating parties on the political or security level. Now people are attacking, even if on social media. It also awakened some people about what is right and what is wrong"

(D., 20, Male, Critical/Passive)

"I think the main thing the revolution did was raise awareness. It stopped people from following their corrupt political system blindly"

(N., 22, Female, Critical/Passive)

"In my opinion, the only great achievement is that it presented awareness within our society. In fact, it shows the people how bad our situation is, it gave hope and awareness to the young adults and guiding them in order not to follow their parents' old parties. In addition to this, it made our voice heard to the international civil society and represented the true situation transparently"

(J., 18, Female, Critical/Passive)

"It [the Uprising, n.b.A] *only affected the mentality. People were now more courageous they were able to criticize their own political parties on their own. People started to think critically. People became more engaged and interested in politics"*

(G., 20, Male, Partisan/Active)

"The most important achievement is that a lot of people who used to be affiliated to specific political parties left these affiliations and they begin to think more objectively! So not because we are taking patronage resources from a specific politician that we should follow him: no! We must think logically and independently from any representative and from any political party"

(N., 23, Female, Partisan/Passive)

"Politicians take into consideration much more now than before the repercussion of their discourse on people, they will think twice before taking decisions they are really afraid from peoples' reactions and they are no more able to pass their own projects: everything is more controlled by the people. […] The revolution also strengthened and gave more confidence to those who expose the files of corruption of the authority, now they have more confidence because of the public support and because of the revolution"

(A., 23, Female, Critical/Passive)

"In short, the positive thing is the quality of the people who want change. They will no longer remain silent about theft or corruption. Maybe they can't hold them accountable, but they no longer remain silent or submissive. The results cannot be judged before the elections"

(M., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

"Achievements: The revolution allowed us to yell that we have demands though we are partisans".

(N., 24, Female, Partisan/Passive)

EXCERPT SERIES 10 – ASSESSING THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE UPRISING

"I found a lot of failures in the revolution. The whole point of the revolution was to overthrow everyone in power but after it we still have them in the system. It's like a game. We didn't have a concrete solution to everything"

(C., 20, Female, Critical/Passive)

"I will talk a little bit about the failures. We saw the creation of new political organizations and new political parties from the revolution. However, most of them were created by the traditional political parties. So traditional political parties are trying to infiltrate the revolution by creating new political parties so they can have a longer lifespan. Another failure for me that emerged from the Revolution was the radicalism that is found in the new political parties. Radicalism leads us to nowhere. You can't generalize that everyone is bad. You can't say that we have to eradicate every political party. We should accept them"

(R., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

"In reality we still have a lot of political cleavages that divide the Lebanese people into many political interests which results into many political conflicts. Even though we saw a united front, but deep down we are divided into many sects. At the end of the day we will have most of the people that will act for the interest of their confessional group. We can clearly see a lot of people that are still till this day applying the agendas of those confessional groups. We are still shifting our loyalties to those confessional groups instead of destroying them. That is mainly destroying Lebanon. It created a hole in the system. I don't think there is a big achievement that was made. If you dig deep in the situation and analyze it there isn't an effective change"

(N., 18, Female, Critical/Passive)

"To be pragmatic and realistic at the same time, the revolution didn't achieve much on a governmental and political level. […] However, achievements should be also made on a political level. We have to wait for the next elections to see some improvements and to find out if the revolution really achieved something"

(G., 20, Male, Partisan/Active)

"The Thawra failures are related to its instability, disunity, and the lack of awareness. In fact, the Thawra was unstable for a while, with each event we hear nowadays that the Thawra is back but actually nothing is truly happening. In addition to this, there is a lack of awareness and some ignorance without a clear planification, that's why PM Saad Hariri for instance was designated all over again, seems like the Thawra did not change anything. Also, the Thawra failed to pick a leader, each person wanted something regarding their needs. Some wanted coup d'état, others wanted the government's resignation, etc…"

(J., 18, Critical/Passive)

"There were many failures and the revolution did not achieve anything. But we still have the idea that many took to the streets. If only they stayed and were truthful. The circumstances in the last 1.5 years revealed we are hypocrites and we hate each other. Prices rose with the dollar, we don't love each other, we monopolize medicine, we are criminals like the rulers we have chosen. 90% will choose the same people again"

(H., 28, Female, Critical/Active)

EXCERPT SERIES 11 – ASSESSING THE GENERATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE UP-RISING

"Revolution permitted us to increase our political awareness and enhanced our capacity to analyze the situation. Before the revolution our parents used to think that youth generation doesn't have any political culture and that youth doesn't really understand politics. After the revolution we are much more capable of discussing these matters and convince others so it changed our culture and permitted us to express ourselves in a better way"

(I., 22, Male, Critical/Passive)

"There is no doubt that this revolution has created a kind of awareness among the youth, and this will appear in the upcoming elections, and each of us will remember this while voting in the upcoming elections. Perhaps the revolution was the necessary thing for change and to create awareness among the people. Of course, the revolution played a major role in changing the convictions of young people"

(A., 26, Male, Partisan/Passive)

"The most important achievement is that it gave hope in a better future among Lebanon's youth regardless of my religion, sect, faith. I am a believer but this should not affect how the state is run"

(A., 21, Male, Partisan/Active)

"To me, it affected me by not accepting corruption and seeing something wrong. If my children, ask me why I did not change I can tell them we tried at least. It did not change much on the ground, but at least the students' actions are taken into account now, and many are interfering in the student elections because they constitute the future of the parties. Many students were arrested because of their activities"

(M., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

"Its effect is positive in terms of giving us a dose of hope towards change. I am well aware that change will start with us, the youth, and without the youth, no change will happen. I hold foreign citizenship and I can leave this country whenever I want, but I will never do that because I believe in my right to live in this country"

[…]

"There is no doubt that our political convictions have changed after the revolution, and we know that every political component in this country bears a primary responsibility for what we have achieved. This only increases our determination to work for change, especially after we discovered their corruption and affair. We no longer have this blind dependence towards any of them, and we have become convinced that any of these parties is innocent and different from the others"

(I., 28, Male, Neutral/Passive)

"I am not sure about the degree of awareness that the revolution brought about among other young people, but there is no doubt that it left something behind, especially after the recent developments and the explosion of the port of Beirut and all the calamities that we have experienced. But certainly there is a group of people who are still in their place in terms of their political alignment"

(C., 21, Female, Critical/Passive)

"Because of the revolution we learned to say "No". It encouraged us to express ourselves using the "NO" word. Many among us maybe not the majority but many among us were very influenced by their parent's opinion and affiliations. So, the revolution was a new platform where we were able to say no we have our own ideas and our parents do not represent us they do not think in the same way, we are a different generation! so to learn how to say No is very important specially with this government, we should always say no for this government, they tried to teach us to say Yes like our parents but we learned during the revolution that we should say No for everything that is corrupted and doesn't represent us"

(W., 26, Female, Critical/Passive)

"In my opinion, the only great achievement is that it presented awareness within our society. In fact, it shows the people how bad our situation is, it gave hope and awareness to the young adults and guiding them in order not to follow their parents' old parties"

(J., 18, Female, Critical/Passive)

"We see now much more than before the new freedom that people have! A new mindset away from sectarianism that used to prevail Lebanese mindset. Also, maybe we are still young to run for election, but of course we have a different mindset

in comparison with those who used to vote during the last thirty years.

[…] we won't vote anymore for those from our sectarian communities that our parents used to vote for, instead we will vote for people whose ideas reflect our own ones"

(C., 23, Female, Neutral/Passive)

"Now they [sectarian elites, n.b.A.] are not even able to control us, so you will still maybe see some people who have affiliation to specific parties among this generation but of course this will be inexistent for the future generations […] Our generation and future generations won't be as conformist as our parents' generation. Given the civil war context, maybe they were in a situation where they were obliged to follow a specific sectarian party, but we are a new generation. We saw that political/sectarian parties brought damage for the country, so I don't think that youngest generation will have this affiliation to political parties as their parents do"

(A., 23, Female, Critical/Passive)

"We were all politicized at home. Shortly before the revolution, I decided there should be no partisan divide at home. After the revolution, I became ashamed to say I supported this or that party"

(N., 24, Female, Partisan/Passive)

EXCERPT SERIES 12 – DRAWING THE FINAL ASSESSMENT OF THE UPRISING

"Although we have a little bit of achievements, the failures are way more than the achievements. It has been the biggest disappointment to the youth. A lot could have been achieved and could be achieved but the revolution isn't going in the right path. It should be a lot more organized. A lot of actions should be taken to take a step forward. It failed to talk about solutions for current problems and it failed to attract the youth that are politically affiliated to it"

(G., 20, Male, Partisan/Active)

"The revolution did not fail because its positive points were more than its negative points. But the stay of the corrupt politicians in parliament is a setback. But this needs time…. After two rounds, the youth might elect different people"

(A., 21, Male, Partisan/Active)

"I see that there have been changes, among the most important of these changes is the cancelation of the Bisri Valley dam, the revolution was able to put pressure and resulted in cancelling this project knowing that the regime was very supporting for this project so despite the fact that the project was a pure corruption it represent a great waste of money and with bad environmental impact but at the end the revolution succeeded and leaded to the project cancelation and this was possible through the pressure so I think that now it is possible by going back to street we can put pressure on the interior minister to lift immunity for officials, besides the election of Melhem Khalaf, an independent person, as president of the lawyers' syndicate so we were able in some way to make changes. Of course, this change is not as big as the amount of corruption but we are all able to change if we believe and work for it but how much are we able to be perseverant. This relies on the people"

(W., 26, Female, Critical/Passive)

"First of all, I do not like to use the term failure. The revolution did not fail despite the reservations. We cannot blame the people because the political system is controlling everything, from the smallest institution. All are held by the parties. In addition, securing medicine has become a priority for example. A positive point is that no one is afraid to talk, and the engineers' elections achieved a great result. I did not go to media school at Lebanese University because it is controlled by a certain side, while today, they have a secularist club. This is very important. People have also learned their rights. No one can offer you a service. You know this is your right. In 30 years, the militias have learned how to control everything. The fact that the revolution erupted is an accomplishment in itself"

(A., 23, Male, Partisan/Active)

"We didn't see any kind of change, and this is why many Armenian people went back to Armenia. Lebanon was our main land and Armenia came second. But because of this, more than 20,000 Armenians came to Armenia from Lebanon"

(P., 19, Female, Critical/Passive, Armenian)

"True the people took to the streets to demand their rights, but the revolution did not achieve anything"
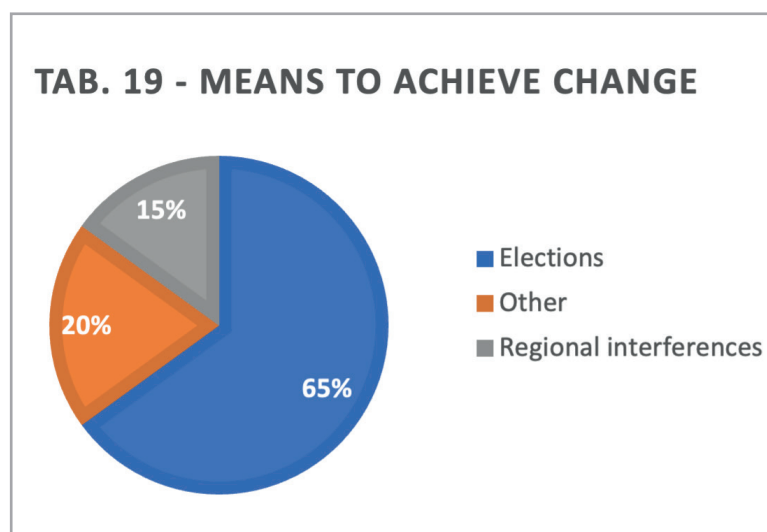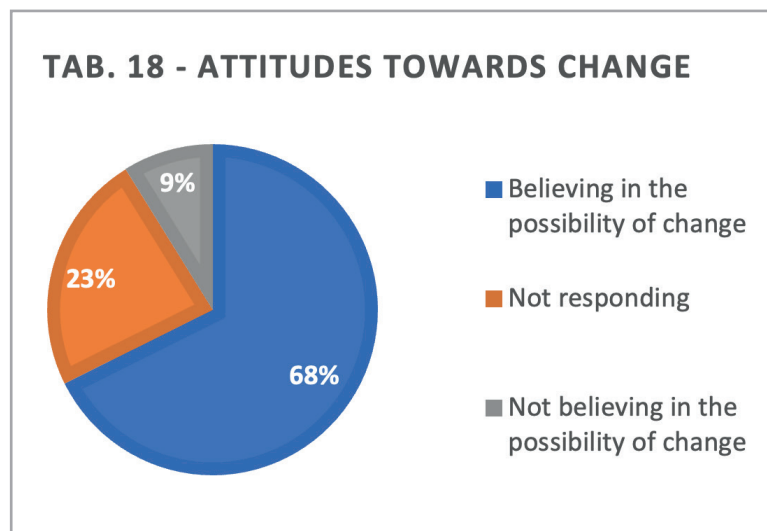
(T., 24, F., Critical/Passive)

Students after the Uprising: current attitudes towards politics and political change
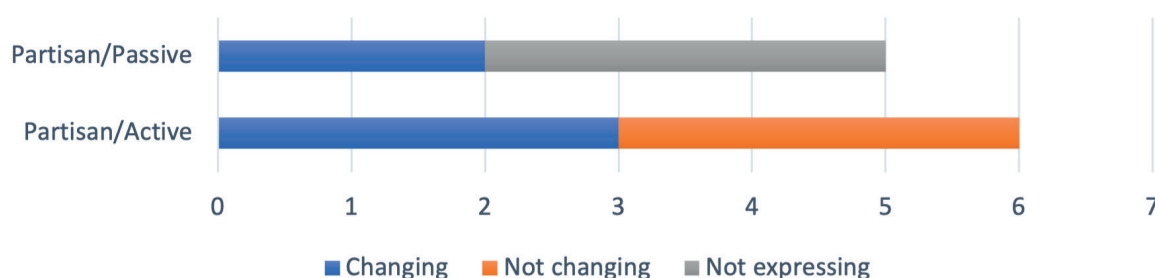
Two years ahead from the Uprising, the net majority of the focus groups, respondents still believe in the possibility of change and the prominent role that youth can play in it, despite the numerous political and economic shortcomings that the country has been experiencing. The main variation pertains rather the way in which the road for change is now predominantly conceived, with a clear shift from the initial revolutionary utopias to a more pragmatic and long-term-projected electoral gradualism.

Both phenomena have been encouraged by the successful performances scored by independent candidates and coalitions in the elections of several professional union bodies, the last one unfolding concurrently with realization of the focus groups. The victory of independent candidates in the 2020 university elections also boosted optimism, despite none of the three partner institutions held its own ones.

It should also be noted that throughout this period the anti-systemic positions of a consistent portion of the sample have further radicalized. To trigger the radicalization was the enduring persistence of the governance and socio-economic criticalities which had ignited students' transgressive activation and, above all, the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020, which was seen by most of the respondents as the latest, murderous outcome of the system's corruption. Last but not least, the necessity of a change in pace in terms of policies and ruling class was remarked also by partisan students who remained firm in their political positioning.

TAB. 18 - ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHANGE

- 68% — Believing in the possibility of change
- 23% — Not responding
- 9% — Not believing in the possibility of change

TAB. 19 - MEANS TO ACHIEVE CHANGE

- 65% — Elections
- 20% — Other
- 15% — Regional interferences

TAB. 20 - CHANGING POSITIONING OF PARTISAN STUDENTS

EXCERPT SERIES 13 – FRAMING THE ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHANGE

"Although I did not participate in the revolution, I am very hopeful there will be change in the elections because we cannot go backward or continue living in the current situation: no medicines, no electricity, no water. From all the demands we made during the revolution, now we are hoping for four hours of electricity. By the next elections, we will be the ones voting, regardless of what our parents think. We want to get our voices across and demand our rights"

(N., 24, Female, Partisan/Passive)

"I don't think there is room for change. The people that are making the decisions do not want change, for now at least. I hope there will be change and that people who are worthy will rise. Impact: all of us are seeking immigration right now and none of us is thinking about a future in Lebanon is they want to be successful"

(N., 22, Female, Critical/Passive)

"If in these difficult times we cannot induce change, when will we?"

(D., 20, Male, Critical/Passive)

"I see that change is very difficult in Lebanon through the revolution to change the reality of which we caused a large part. We have to work on creating awareness for the coming years so that we can bring about gradual change through parliamentary elections and other things by bringing some secular candidates to their knowledge to make some change"

(H., 27, Male, Critical/Passive)

"Change needs time, it's not in one or two or five years that we can implement changes. It has been only two years since the outbreak of the revolution so we cannot expect the change to be on the spot we need to implement some reforms in order to get changes in the future. This system exists since thirty years and leaded to the current crisis"

(M., 20, Male, Critical/Passive)

"I believe that change is process, a long process that may not be soon. However, this change is not impossible, maybe not during these elections since some people are still following their leaders and old traditional political parties, without neglecting the people who gave up on them. Hope is here, change is possible but not anytime soon"

(J., 18, Female, Critical/Passive)

"There will be change, but for better or worse? No one can answer that until before the elections. We adapt to our crises. Today the dollar is 23,000 and we are fine. Had the elections been held after august 4, not one bloc would have remained in parliament. If they give us little things, by then, people will reelect them"

(M., 26, Male, Partisan/Active)

EXCERPT SERIES 14 – ENHANCING HOPES FOR CHANGE

"I still have hope, even small hope, and the proof is the change that is happening in the election at the union level, lawyers, engineers, doctors syndicate, so I think that there is hope of change in that matter"

(M., 23, Female, Not expressed)

"The engineers' elections achieved a great result. I did not go to media school at Lebanese University because it is controlled by a certain side, while today, they have a secularist club. This is very important"

(A., 23, Male, Partisan / Active)

"There is no hope in seeing change. But I don't know why I regained hope during the last few days, through the families of the August 4 martyrs with our help. In the elections, we must wait to see if those who took to the streets and in light of the humiliation we are living, if people will become more aware"

(H., 28, Female, Critical / Active)

EXCERPT SERIES 15 – FRAMING THE ROAD TO ACHIEVE CHANGE

"In regard to the elections, we might infiltrate the council through non-partisan figures with 10-15 figures who have a program, not just in civil society by name"

(D., 20, Male, Critical / Passive)

"I consider that regardless of all the bad things we are living. The situation will not remain as it is today. Settlements and changes are affecting regional powers and Lebanon is naturally impacted. These new alliances and powers will have positive repercussions on Lebanon because its collapse is in no one's interest. In regard of the elections, we will see how the people will act then"

(J., 21, Female, Critical / Passive)

"I see that change is very difficult in Lebanon through the revolution to change the reality of which we caused a large part. We have to work on creating awareness for the coming years so that we can bring about gradual change through parliamentary elections and other things by bringing some secular candidates to their knowledge to make some change"

(H., 27, Male, Critical / Active)

"There is no room for change in the elections. First, we need to see if the election will be held at the first place! Most probably the regime will try to postpone it. And I already mentioned that it is more the foreign forces and not local forces that may influence for change in Lebanon. I don't see that the elections will bring other people than those from the current regime"

(T., 23, Male, Not expressed)

"I think that there may be changes in the deputies during the next elections, but most importantly what we should try to change is those in the state positions in judiciary because they have a state inside the state and it is those people who have the most important influence over the state"

(I., 22, Critical / Passive)

"We discovered that change need work, persistence and perseverance and we need to stick to these demands of change because if we do not have this will we won't be able to make big difference"

(W., 26, Female, Critical / Passive)

EXCERPT SERIES 16 – FRAMING RADICALIZATION

"I always opposed them all [sectarian ruling elites, n.b.A] *because the political system did not represent or serve me. After August 4, this turned into hatred on the street and on social media. I am also talking about all those who stood against us, i.e. the security forces, the army, the parliament guard. They were supposed to protect us"*

(H., 28, Female, Critical / Active)

"After the revolution, I started perceiving it [sectarian ruling elites, n.b.A.] *in an even worse way, based on the way they dealt with the demonstrators, how they detonated Lebanon. I felt less respect for them and became spiteful because they killed us"*

(A., 23, Male, Partisan / Active)

"After the revolution and August 4, I became more disgusted, because not only were they [sectarian ruling elites, n.b.A] *collecting money and stripping us of our most basic rights, but they were also killing us. The officials are persecuting their people and starving them"*

(D., 20, Male, Critical / Passive)

EXCERPT SERIES 17 – FRAMING THE CHANGING POLITICAL POSITIONS

"Of course, my political convictions changed after this revolution. We have seen many painful scenes of poor and old people searching for their livelihood and their medicine. At the youth level, they are unable to find jobs or realize their dreams of building a family. It all leads me to give up all parties and everyone should do it. On a personal level, I had a political affiliation before the revolution and I gave it up"

(Z., 19, Female, Partisan / Passive)

"Frankly, I have increased my confidence in my political line because I see with my own eyes that the party to which I belong is making great efforts and providing many services in order to alleviate the suffering of the people. But I admit that the existence of a strong state is better than relying on limited party services. I see that my party works for the development of the country but the state does nothing"

(Z., 22, Female, Partisan / Active)

"Of course, the revolution played a major role in changing the convictions of young people. Yes, I changed my way of thinking and the issue of my affiliation, which should be to my state and not to any party. I am no longer that partisan of his party, and I am no longer provoked by criticism of Hezbollah, as I used to be. There is no doubt that the revolution gave us a dose of hope, and the new generation began to change and change. We are really tired and it is time for a change"

(A., 26, Male, Partisan / Passive)

"Before the revolution I wasn't completely belonging to a specific party but I was following a specific party, but after joining the revolution we begin to discuss, to read and to open up to other political parties, to see what they accomplished, so of course I have dramatically moved away from politics in many ways but at the same time, politics has become much closer to me the revolution permitted me to hear to read to understand more I also understand much more about economics of course"

(N., 23, Female, Partisan / Passive)

Conclusions and concluding remarks

According to the findings emerged from our focus groups, despite the limited immediate political achievements, the October 17 Uprising has marked a crucial breakthrough in the political attitudes and the modes of engagement to the political of the post-war generation. In particular, against the backdrop of a pre-existing widespread dissatisfaction for the status quo molding unexpressed and unsocialized, the Uprising acted as a detonator and a major forge to exit passive quiescence and propel cross-fertilizing dynamics enhancing political awareness, maturity, and a large-scale reassessment of their political orientations towards active, anti-systemic positions. This double shift has walked hand in hand with a broader transgressive dislocation from the discursive and symbolic legacies whereby sectarian elites had built up a consistent part of their hegemony, most notably in their parents' generation. Both trends have been further enhanced by the post-Uprising return to power of sectarian elites and their incumbents, the dramatic peaking of the economic crisis and, above all, the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020 which, for the majority of students who had taken the streets, played a prominent radicalizing (or re-radicalizing) role. Last but not least, the disenchantment towards the early revolutionary utopias left room to a more pragmatic, electoralist and long-term approach to political change, alimented by the positive results scored by opposition groups in the renewal of the directive bodies of several professional associations (El-Kak 2021).

The combination of these findings with the results of the latest round of student elections offer altogether enough elements to assert that, while the revolutionary ambitions of the October momentum revealed ephemeral, the revolution has propelled among educated youth a process of dislocation from the dominant political structures based on sectarian patronage endowed with the potential to make them a prominent site of transformative counter-hegemony.

In this respect, the upcoming 2022 elections will represent altogether a moment of truth and a crossroad of crucial importance. A central role in this sense will be played by the capacity of the emerging opposition parties to exploit the window of opportunity of the electoral campaign to activate virtuous constituent and participatory practices able to canalize the widespread, yet still atomized dissent against the political status quo towards a concrete and viable alternative agenda. In particular, before than the scope of the bailout victories *per se,* the bulk of the game for the long-term capitalization of educated youth's propension to change will revolve around the capacity of opposition groups to define a counter-hegemonic political project perceived as solid and realistic enough to generate hope and commitment beyond the electoral moment. As a result of the awareness and pragmatic shift triggered by the Uprising, in fact, students are well aware of the structural, political and material constraints hindering the affirmation of opposition forces. At the same time, while for most of them a "return to sectarianism" does not represent an option, the lower predisposition to blindly follow alternative political projects lacking of concrete and clear goals might realistically run the risk to be conductive to a widespread return to disillusioned quietism in case opposition forces fail to present candidates, projects and imaginaries resonating with their expectations.

The second and most important variable is represented by the short and mid-term evolution of the economic crisis. Currently, Lebanon is caught in a dramatic brain drain, within the broader framework of a sustained emigratory wave triggered by the harshening of the crisis. Although detailed statistics are lacking, a glimpse of the extent of the phenomenon can be deduced by a number of collateral disaggregated data on migration published in the past year. Again in 2020, for instance, about 70% of Lebanese youth expressed the intention to emigrate abroad in search for better economic and living conditions, with a turnout higher Libya and Yemen and the highest in the region (ASDAA - BCW 2020). Since the sole spring 2021, the daily average number of passports issued or renovated by the General Security has reached quota 6000 (Antonios 2021), and about 40% of specialized doctors has left the country (WHO 2021). These data are particularly alarming, for the depth of the crisis and its durability drastically reduces the margins of return for young and skilled adults finding abroad a stable professional

position. Equally important, the rapid pauperization of the middle classes increases the vulnerability of educated youth against nepotistic or clientelistic practices. Therefore, loose the window of opportunity of the 2022 elections might concretely trigger a hardly recuperable seatback against the advancements scored by the Uprising.

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