

Student Movements in the Time of the Revolution

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In 2011, Lebanese youth watched as mass uprisings across the Arab World spread to every media outlet in the region. They witnessed hundreds of thousands of youth in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt come together to demand political change. Eight years later, Lebanese youth proved their ability to join efforts in a similar manner. It only takes one look at the protests happening across Lebanon today to recognize that the youth have been a massive engine for social and political transformation, by serving as catalysts for change across major cities in Lebanon. Protestors watched as young activists, many of them school and university students, took to the streets with banners, speeches and chants, despite being traditionally marginalized and left out of the political discourse. So how did the students organize and come together? Lebanon's youth, particularly the post-Civil War generation, have been confronted by manifestations of the sectarian conflict in every aspect of their lives. As a result, the October 17 revolution brought to light groups of young people and students from across public and private universities that powered a fierce and unprecedented national movement, fueled by their rejection of the current status. It is not only the scale of the protests that were unprecedented but also the fact that it was a cultural revolution where no young person living in today's Lebanon can or is able to understand why the system continues to discriminate based on sect, class, age, gender or sexual identity – and it is precisely for this reason that young people were leaving behind ideologies so deeply engrained in their families and societies, and organizing amongst themselves to demand a country that looks more like them. Their involvement played a fundamental, if often uncelebrated role in driving the key successes of this revolution by refusing to pay the price for a crisis they had no role in creating.

Here are three key reasons why youth were at the forefront of the October 17 revolution:

Lack of Political Representation

The Lebanese political system has repeatedly marginalized any groups that do not serve the agenda of the ruling class from participating in public life – youth, women, minorities, among others. On the one hand, the nature of Lebanon's power sharing system helped the same people renew their terms by maintaining a complex and codependent relationship with each other, sidelining groups and individuals who pose any type of threat to their existing power. The electoral law, on the other hand, kept the voting age at 21, discouraging young people from taking up an active and pivotal role. Therefore, Lebanese youth have not, at any point in recent history, enjoyed an enabling environment for their participation in traditional politics. The only space that the youth have been active was either through contact with formal political parties or student elections for university student councils. This exclusion from decision making, combined with limited educational and economic opportunities, leaves out young people from any decisive discussions on practical solutions related to employment, education, gender policies, freedom of speech and others.

The October 17 revolution, being so organically decentralized, allowed young individuals to express ideas openly in a sphere that was not otherwise available to them. Groups of young people working together started voicing progressive political, social and economic ideas that were not being tackled by members of the ruling class: issues like social and economic justice, LGBTQ+ rights, refugee rights, and migrant workers' rights had never been adequately represented the way the younger generation sees them. Dima Ayache, member of the American University of Beirut (AUB) Secular Club, says that these are the main pillars of what the club stands for. "We started tackling issues like feminism, homophobia and racism on the streets and people were asking us why we are speaking up against these issues now," Dima explains. "But we are revolting against an entire political system with all its characteristics and values," she continues. Vocal student groups quickly raised awareness about these progressive values by creating a constructive dialogue on the importance of these matters and their interconnectedness with the political system. Student groups thus have been the driving force behind these ideas as well as behind the rejection of the archaic modes of addressing them that no longer represents the principles of young people. "Students had definitely been preparing and building up for the revolution by consistently calling for progressive political values without negotiation," said Farah Baba, political activist and former AUB Secular Club member. "This dates back to the students' involvement in political movements since 2008, where students were the only groups not represented by the March 14 and March 8 dichotomy, giving them the freedom to express alternative ideas outside the boundaries of sectarian politics," she continued.

Having worked together on multiple movements over the last years including the anti-parliamentary extension campaign, civil marriage campaign, anti-domestic violence campaign as well as the 2015 *You Stink* Movement, student groups had been at the forefront of all these transformative junctures. With the absence of a centralized leadership for the revolution, students and young people used the streets to create a collective identity for themselves, revealing their long-simmering anger against the failure of the ruling class. The streets allowed the youth to create a community that resembles their vision for the country: clean, secular, accountable, inclusive, and democratic.

Space for Expression

As protests swept through the country in a matter of hours, public plazas like Martyr's Square in Beirut and Al Nour Square in Tripoli, as well as spaces like Zaytouna Bay, Ministries and the Central Bank, that are known to be heavily policed urban spaces, turned into sites of dissent. The streets offered a space for youth to be active and to voice their demands without being suppressed. Suppression, prior to October 17, came in many forms, including some universities not permitting student elections on campuses, robbing youth of the chance to practice "small scale" politics and gain firsthand expertise in demand-driven campaigning. Jawad Hamieh, member of the Lebanese University's (LU) "تكتل طلاب الجامعة اللبنانية" which stands for "Education, Freedom and Social Justice", explains that the margin of freedom in their university was very low and that until recently, they had still been discussing issues like the right for students to play

music on campus. When asked about how LU students coordinated efforts, Jawad explains that “Over the summer months, the teachers’ strike at LU sparked a movement. Students across different campuses did not all know or communicate with each other prior to that moment. It created a space to organize and coordinate among like-minded groups.”

“Students started protesting in front of the Ministry of the Education and gradually organized General Assemblies to discuss the issue of the university’s budget and quality of education, among other things” continued Jawad. “Students took up the responsibility of fighting for the role of LU as the only public university. And we used these efforts to organize for the October 17 revolution” noted Jawad.

Alternatively, universities that do have elections on campus, helped students build momentum around policy-based movements in democratic and participatory settings that pushed them to move their activist struggles outside universities. Verena Amil, member of the Universite Saint Joseph (USJ) Secular Club, explains that as a club, they were already in the process of internal organization. “The revolution accelerated our progress. Several independent groups at USJ started reaching out to work together. We organized discussions inside campuses that continued in the tents on the streets. This was then mirrored by the university’s Faculty of Law, where professors were consequently encouraged to organize a series of discussions and debates in the tents following the same manner,” Verena clarified. “This boosted student’s confidence in their ability to influence change” she highlighted.

The revolution moved the role and influence of students outside the walls of schools and universities. Dima Ayache emphasized that “this moment is what we had been waiting for so long. As an independent political group, we had been working towards this change both on and off campuses with campaigns like Beirut Madinati. We started organizing as individual groups, then recognized that working together as a block was very powerful,” said Dima. This was when the national student campaign titled “October 17 Students” was created and invited participation from universities including AUB, Lebanese American University (LAU), USJ, LU, American University for Science and Technology (AUST), Balamand, Notre Dame University (NDU), and Beirut Arab University (BAU).

Nonetheless, independent groups inside universities continued to face political blocks that represent the political elite. The rise of the cross-university independent youth political network, Mada, allowed students to organize, mobilize and plan for demand-driven movements among like-minded groups and individuals. Karim Safieddine, political activist and former President of the AUB Secular Club says “There is a definitely a difference between organizing for elections and organizing for a protest. However the network of Mada as a whole played a very important role in exporting the way student elections are conducted, and exporting the model that is used in many universities including AUB, LAU and USJ – meaning every faculty, major or program will have representatives, similar to the way we organized for the October 17 revolution, in a representative and coordinated manner.” As a network, Mada allowed for the exchange of knowledge and skills among both established independent student clubs and newer movements.

Creation of Alliances

In addition to network among student groups, the revolution created an environment for alliances to organize around common concerns, enabling a united forward-looking vision among several different organizing groups. Coalitions between students and other groups like the alliance of professors, feminist groups, workers and other syndicates was crucial to produce the widespread awareness and momentum that would soon take over. Farah Baba echoed by saying, “there was a chain effect among common interest groups. We recognized the importance of creating alliances with other sectors. This allowed the exchange of skills and experiences not just as a unifying front for mutual demands, but also in support of each group’s direct battles, such as the AUB Secular Club’s battle with the dollarization of the tuition fees.” These alliances served as an intricate method for purposeful political communication and forged bonds of solidarity. The developments of the revolution day after day naturally favored broader popular mobilization in many parts of Lebanon, motivating younger populations to seek remedies for common grievances they had with similar groups. Jawad Hamieh agreed by saying, “there is a need to create these alliances while maintaining the unique identity of student blocks. We have overlapping demands that we mobilized for together.”

These alliances, involving continuous dialogue and communication, generate and dispense a wealth of information that freed groups from relying on mainstream media to communicate their messages. With different groups involved at different stages of the revolution, key political statements were reaching mass audiences across the country and creating a ripple effect. Common demands were being voiced including more funding for the Lebanese University, better job prospects, an end to nepotism and sectarianism in job hiring, pension reform, and proper healthcare. This helped galvanize the protests by providing tools and allowing calls for shared concerns to cut across social classes and attract groups in urban and rural areas alike. Students, like other groups, all had demands, they all had issues to raise – no matter where they came from or who they represented.

Moving Forward

Despite attempts to intimidate and coopt the revolution, students and young people show no sign of abating. The streets have become bastions for struggle as well as for learning. Changing tactics and adapting to the streets mean that students are not remotely satisfied by empty promises for reform or the typical political maneuvering from the same political class that failed to save the country from the current crisis. Students also have a chance to make a substantial contribution to Lebanon’s political environment by making their efforts electorally significant in the upcoming parliamentary elections. It is safe to say that this revolution has not been linear, and students have continued to prove to the rest of the population that Lebanon is worth fighting for. Their burning anger towards the entire political establishment that has not only robbed them of the chance to imagine a future in this country but also wrecked every prospect of their present lives, is enough to keep the revolution moving forward.