

Re-politicizing Civil Society Organizations

In the last decade, the Arab region went through a series of social movements and turbulences, beginning with the Arab spring in 2011 and a sequence of dictatorial reprisals by the ruling classes or their subordinates. Lebanon wasn't isolated from these regional transformations, as it witnessed the "Movement to Overthrow the Sectarian System" in 2011, the garbage crisis uprisings in 2015, and finally the October 2019 uprising which affected all cities in the country. Social activists and political organizers regarded this last movement as unique and different from previous ones, as it was characterized by a more "politicized" tone, a thirst for political organizing and the formation of numerous political parties and groups, as opposed to the more "technocratic", issue-based, somewhat apolitical movements in the past led to a great extent by civil society organizations.

Activists, especially more progressive ones, have emphasized during the last two years the need for an intersectional systematic overthrow of the political system, and have felt a growing disdain for the "apolitical culture" which several civil society organizations (not all) helped propagating. A critical analysis of the functioning of NGOs and other human rights organizations was put forward by several academics, political commentators, and activists, in which they regarded the actions of non-profit organizations to be similar to for-profit ones, in the sense that their actions didn't translate into a confrontational tone against the political class, and didn't offer any systematic, and specifically political, solutions. Consequently, NGOs remained in their personal "bubble", concerned with advocating, researching, and even concocting alternative policy suggestions for specific causes, without integrating that cause into a wider, intersectional political program. The garbage crisis movement of 2015 witnessed a normative reading and approach which suggested that the solutions to the crisis should be technical, in other words: the solution should be manufactured by environmental experts and scholars who will then propose policy suggestions to governmental personnel.

With the lack of any initiative by government personnel to respond to these evidence-based solutions, the October 2019 activist and political groups realized that the entire system needs to be overthrown, and some groups even refused to collaborate with NGOs, as many of them, including some humanitarian aid organizations, serve to reproduce the existing socioeconomic conditions, and don't tackle the real political issues at the basis of the different crises. This critical analysis of civil society work was connotated with a disconnection between CSOs and political groups, particularly progressive ones.

As the parliamentary elections approach, old and newly founded political groups are already forming coalitions, setting the criteria for their candidates, and implementing their electoral programs. It's important to note a crucial mistake which opposition movements fell through in past elections: focusing on initiating a general, nationwide campaign and somewhat ignoring the needs of local communities in the different regions, in which they lacked a critical approach to the specificities, municipal, and syndical demands of each region, and of each social group, and focusing on a macro, critical-less lens of political change, which was accompanied by grand

narratives and general slogans such as “anti-corruption” and lacked the contextually-based, micro lens needed to deal with the different communities.

This is where the role of civil society organizations can be pivotal, and many of them have already began implementing these strategies. As the political parties start formulating their electoral programs in the various regions, door-to-door inquiries into local communities’ demands and the systematic reforms needed to improve the ecological livelihoods need to be supplemented by evidence-based data.

NGOs such as Nahnoo have focused on public spaces for the last two decades and have led numerous campaigns which have put them in direct confrontation with local authorities, including legal issues. The expertise that the organizations can provide to better concoct reform programs for parliamentary and municipal candidates is necessary and can help candidates in each district to adapt their programs to local needs related to public spaces.

KAFA (enough) Violence & Exploitation have even began directly contacting political groups so that they can include a personal status law and reforms related gender justice in their electoral programs.

Many opposition progressive groups have focused on decentralization as a major target for better administrative and socioeconomic management of Lebanese communities, and this is made difficult by the lack of data in official governmental institutions and the offices of classic political parties which have long disregarded areas in the North, in Baalbek El-Hermel and others. The information however is plentifully present in humanitarian NGOs, which have carried out aid programs in most of the marginalized areas but are yet to politicize their information and implement them within a systematic political program.

Grand sectarian and geopolitical discourses have long shaped Lebanese politics and have led to a technically and politically clueless elite to benefit from the system, leaving the most marginalized communities not only void of any of their basic daily needs, but also void of any source of information or tools to make sustainable change.

Politicizing expertise in human rights issues is a necessity to escape the [deterioration-crisis-aid] cycle, and civil society organizations have a crucial part to play in providing political campaigns and groups with the necessary data and tools for a sustainable, just, and rights-based sociopolitical change and politicizing their activities.

Advocacy and a rights-based engagement by political groups coupled with the technical expertise of civil society organizations can be at the forefront of leading a discourse that tackles the different communities’ rights in their specific contexts, whether it be environmental issues and the increasing privatization of public beaches and spaces, sectarian courts and a patriarchal culture that hugely disfavor women and minorities’ prospects for social and political participation, or the socioeconomic structure that further marginalize communities at the periphery.

The battle against the prevailing social structures that are rooted in local, national and regional institutions and civil society organizations must be fought on all fronts, and with all the potentialities that are available at hand.