

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY IMAGINARIES:
NEOLIBERAL CO-OPTATION IN LEBANON'S NEW
OPPOSITION

by
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ABSTRACT
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Despite its scale, revolutionary fervor, and temporarily creating new fields of possibilities, Lebanon's 2019 uprising did not manage to overthrow its neoliberal-sectarian regime due to a range of counterrevolutionary mechanisms. Primary interviews conducted with key members of anti-establishment groups reveal that counterrevolutionary elements could even be found within Lebanon's new opposition. By examining the policy stances, strategies, and ideologies of new groups that took part in the 2022 general elections, the thesis argues that, over time, reformists who do not seek to fundamentally reimagine the political system took over the oppositionist sphere and, through a range of strategic choices, deradicalized the revolutionary movement, steering it towards a trajectory of co-optation by traditional opposition actors in the March 14 political camp. More specifically, a narrowing down of fields of possibilities and a lowering of political expectations occurred under the guise of a pragmatism informed by neoliberal ideology. This ideology, the thesis argues, is part of a highly effective and growing toolbox of counterrevolutionary instruments that limits political imaginaries, dilutes leftist aims, and subtly reproduces the capitalist status-quo around the world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
ABSTRACT.....	2
ILLUSTRATIONS.....	5
TABLES.....	6
INTRODUCTION	7
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	20
HISTORICAL CONTEXT	28
A. Origins of the Financial Collapse	29
B. Tracing the New Opposition.....	34
DEMYSTIFYING THE NEW OPPOSITION	38
A. Imposed Unity: How to Co-opt a Movement	38
B. Lacking a Progressive Agenda: How the Shadow Economic Plan Persists	44
C. Centrist Discourses: How Class Struggle Gets Sidelined.....	50
COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY IMAGINARIES	57
A. The Reformist Blueprint: How Pragmatism Facilitates Elite Capture.....	57
B. Limited Possibilities: How Neoliberalism Restricts Imagination.....	67
C. Ideology in a Post-Ideological Age: How to Dilute the Left	70

CONCLUSION: PROJECTING INTO THE FUTURE.....	76
APPENDIX.....	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	81

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure

1. Stances of new opposition groups on the distribution of financial sector losses, data from The Policy Initiative. 48
2. Stances of new opposition groups on universal social protection, data from The Policy Initiative 51
3. Screenshot of the Twitter exchange between MP Ibrahim Mneimneh and MP Mark Daou on 18 October 2022. 65

TABLES

Table

1. Background information on new opposition groups based on survey data from The Policy Initiative..... 39
2. Composition of the Lebanese Opposition Front and the April 13 Alliance prior to the 2022 general election. 43

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The revolutionary situations triggered by the first and second waves of Arab uprisings caught the world by surprise. Due to the robustness of Arab authoritarian regimes, public and scholarly debates tend to ignore people's agency, treating societies as powerless victims of structures and systems they are incapable of influencing in meaningful ways. Many western scholars, analysts, and politicians qualify societies of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as being bound to tribal, religious, or other sub-national identities, that prevent the transition to secular and democratic nation-states.¹ These primordial and culturalist arguments, which have dominated the public sphere since the early colonial period, were debunked by a range of critical scholars who highlighted the role of imperialist actors in politicizing and instrumentalizing ascriptive identities in the region.² Such scholarship also recognized the role of authoritarian regimes in repressing and quelling dissent, leading to a consolidation of power that ultimately produced long-lasting dictatorial regimes.

While the emergence of revolutionary movements in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain in the early 2010s shook this premise, it quickly resurfaced as

¹ Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2006: 82; Landis, Joshua. "The Great Sorting Out: Ethnicity and the Future of the Levant." Qifa Nabki, December 18, 2013; Patai, Raphael. *The Arab Mind*. New York: Scribner, 1983; Fisk, Robert. "Lebanon is a sectarian nation yet it has avoided civil war while the Middle East burns – here's why," *The Independent*, October 20, 2016; See "Statement by the President on Syria" and "Remarks of President Barack Obama – State of the Union Address" on www.whitehouse.gov.

² Makdisi, Ussama. *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*. University of California Press, 2000; Weiss, Max. *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi'ism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon*. Harvard University Press, 2010; Haddad, Fanar. *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*. Columbia University Press, 2011; Nucho, Joanne Randa. *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016: 6.

most of these struggles fell victim to counterrevolutionary campaigns that maintained the old regime (Bahrain), reproduced it under a different form (Egypt), or led to civil wars that erased hopes for democratization and socioeconomic justice (Libya, Syria, Yemen). Many western analysts attributed the failure of these movements to the backward nature of their societies and did not recognize them as revolutionary events.³ Meanwhile, notable scholars of the region, like Asef Bayat and Fawwaz Traboulsi, called them “revolutions without revolutionaries” due to their neoliberal and reformist nature, the lack of revolutionary ideologies, and the absence of revolutionary organizations.⁴ The second wave of uprisings in Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq had a similarly disappointing fate, while Sudan’s post-revolutionary transition has been thwarted by a military coup at the time of writing.

Jamie Allinson challenges such accounts that define revolutions based on their Skocpolian outcomes.⁵ Focusing on the first wave of Arab revolutionary uprisings, Allinson argues that these decentralized and class-based movements successfully “shattered existing state structures or forced their re-composition” while also having profound consequences on the region and its people.⁶ In his view, if these events cannot be considered revolutions, then historical turning points like the Spanish revolution of 1936-1938 or the Chinese Revolution of 1926 would also have to be excluded, making the study of revolutionary events a “very circumscribed sphere of knowledge.”⁷ Allinson

³ Asa-El, Amotz. “Was the Arab Spring a revolution?” The Jerusalem Post, December 22, 2020.

⁴ Bayat, Assef. *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford University Press, 2017; Also see the Arabic book of the same name by Fawwaz Traboulsi, published by [Riad El-Rayyes Books](#) (2014).

⁵ Allinson, Jamie. *The Age of Counter-Revolution: States and Revolutions in the Middle East*. Cambridge University Press, 2022; Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Cambridge University Press, 1979.

⁶ Allinson, Jamie. *The Age of Counter-Revolution: States and Revolutions in the Middle East*. Cambridge University Press, 2022, p.15.

⁷ *Ibid.*

thus views the inability to effect political transformations as starting points of inquiry rather than endpoints. The strength of Allinson's argument rests precisely in the nuanced tracing of the trajectories that different revolutions and counter-revolutions can take.

This thesis seeks to contribute to these debates on revolutionary situations, forms of counterrevolution, political imaginaries, and neoliberal co-optation by examining the trajectory of Lebanon's new opposition movement. It investigates how key actors in this opposition movement reacted to the different political opportunities and critical junctures that the country experienced since October 2019. The overarching research question is the following: **How have new alternative political organizations responded to the situation triggered by the October 17 uprising and financial collapse, and what does their approach to the 2022 parliamentary elections reveal about the trajectory of the new opposition movement?**

In order to address this question, the nexus of my research concentrates on the tensions and contradictions between revolutions and elections as arenas to effect political change. I focus specifically on new political organizations that formed between 2016 and 2021 and that participated, in some form or another, in the 2022 elections. I explore these organizations in relation to the ideologies and visions of change that shaped their stances and strategies during the 2019 revolution and across other arenas of contestation with the regime, such as syndical and parliamentary elections.

I limit my analysis to organizations that emerged after 2015 because I consider that year to constitute a critical juncture in the emergence of groups that would constitute Lebanon's oppositionist landscape during and after the uprising. Lebanon's post-war oppositionist arena had been quelled since the global decline of the Left in the 1980s and

the repression and co-optation of Lebanese trade unions in the 1990s.⁸ As the waste management crisis became untenable in 2015 with garbage piling up in the streets of Beirut and Mount Lebanon, several attempts at launching a movement against the sectarian regime had been tried unsuccessfully, during the protests of 2011, and the public sector workers' strikes of 2012-2014.⁹ The "YouStink!" movement of 2015 mobilized tens of thousands, but was eventually co-opted and fell victim to disinformation campaigns that painted some working-class protesters as politically-affiliated thugs.¹⁰ However, in the aftermath of the 2015 movement, newly formed anti-establishment groups began recognizing the importance of having more sustainable organizational structures.

Two of the main groups that emerged less than a year after "YouStink" were Beirut Madinati (now Madinati – Arabic for "My City") and *Muwatinun wa Muwatinat fi Dawla* (MMFD), which stands for "Citizens in a State." Both of them participated in the municipal elections of 2016 and had respectable performances: Beirut Madinati failed to win a seat in Beirut's municipality due to the majoritarian nature of the electoral law, but managed to obtain more than a third of the votes, while MMFD won seats in the municipalities of Saghbine and Kfardebian.¹¹ The student movement was also reemerging as the "Mada" coalition of secular student clubs emerged in 2017 and gained

⁸ Baroudi, Sami. "Economic Conflict in Postwar Lebanon: State-Labor Relations between 1992 and 1999." *Middle East Journal*, 52(4), 1998: 531-550; Badran, Ibrahim & Zbib, Mohammad, "Al-ittihad al-'am fi lubnan: man yumathil man?" Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2001.

⁹ Abi Yaghi, Marie-Noelle & Catusse, Myriam. "Non à l'Etat holding, oui à l'Etat providence" Logiques et contraintes des mobilisations sociales dans le Liban de l'après-guerre", *Revue Tiers Monde*, 206, 2011; Bou Khater, Lea. "Public Sector Mobilization Despite a Dormant Workers' Movement," *Confluences Méditerranée* 92, 2015, pp. 125-42.

¹⁰ Abi Yaghi, Marie-Noelle; Catusse, Myriam & Younes, Miriam. "From isqat an-nizam at-ta'ifi to the garbage crisis movement: political identities in practice through the lens of anti-sectarian movements." In: Rosita Di Peri and Daniel Meier, Ed. *Lebanon Facing the Arab Uprising: Constraints and Adaptation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹¹ Khneisser, Mona. "The Specter of 'Politics' and Ghosts of 'Alternatives' Past: Lebanese 'Civil Society' and the Antinomies of Contemporary Politics." *Critical Sociology*, 46(3), 2019: 359-377.

representation in the student councils of major private universities soon after.¹² This momentum carried over to the 2018 parliamentary elections, as a number of small new groups came together under the “Kulluna Watani” coalition banner which fielded 65 candidates across 9 of Lebanon’s 15 districts. The results were disappointing as the coalition only secured 1 seat (won by former Sabaa member and current Tahalof Watani member, media celebrity, Paula Yaacoubian), leading to the dissolution of many of the groups that had participated in the vote.¹³ However, some of the more organized electoral campaigns developed their internal structures and became integral players in the oppositionist arena. These include groups like LiHaqqi, Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi, and Tahalof Watani who were present in the 2019 revolutionary squares since its early days. They would be followed by newly formed groups, like Aamiyet 17 Teshrin, Taqaddom, Minteshreen, and Khat Ahmar.

The revolutionary uprising of October 17 caught everyone off guard due to its rapid spread, massive turnout, and cross-regional dimension. It presented a unique and unforeseen opportunity for Lebanon’s nascent political alternatives to garner public support and visibility. However, as I will show, due to the scale of the uprising and new opposition groups’ political inexperience, they failed to form a coalition that might have granted them the legitimacy of structures like the Sudanese Forces for Freedom and Change, and thus could not claim to represent the uprising. The oppositionist arena included dozens of smaller and looser grassroots groups that were also emerging and muddling through the mobilizations. The thesis will also discuss how, ultimately, organizational and strategic shortcomings, in combination with regime violence and

¹² Chehayeb, Karim and Majzoub, Tala. “Lebanon’s Student Movement: A New Political Player?” Arab Reform Initiative, 2021

¹³ El Kak, Nadim. “A Path for Political Change in Lebanon? Lessons and Narratives from the 2018 Elections,” Arab Reform Initiative, 2019

repression, led to a lack of direction and leadership void that snapped the movement's hopes and momentum. Indeed, while people and the media perceived these "revolutionary" groups as a homogenous entity, they actually differed from one another in their conceptions of the regime, their diagnosis of the system's ills, and their understanding of what October 17 ought to represent and thrive for.

Less than two months into the uprising, most people had returned to their jobs or homes, while protests had transitioned from joyous yet naïve mass celebrations into smaller, disorganized violent actions against the banking sector and Parliament. Slowly but surely, amidst deteriorating living conditions, the state's repressive apparatus, aided by sectarian party thugs, succeeded in quelling the movement until its eventual burial through COVID lockdowns.¹⁴ Since then, demoralization set in and sporadic protests failed to reignite the street movement, partially due to brutal repression by security forces, especially on August 8, 2020 – four days after the nuclear-like Beirut port explosion.¹⁵

Despite these strategic shortcomings, the lack of effective organization, and eventual co-optation and repression, I contend that the early stages of the October uprising constituted a revolutionary situation. As Jeffery Paige argues, "the awesome power of revolutions...lies in these waves of energy and enthusiasm and the utopian visions that inspired them."¹⁶ In other words, what makes revolutions "revolutionary" is not solely their outcomes nor their important class character, it is the imaginaries that undergird them – this sudden ability to believe in and, more importantly, envision a radically

¹⁴ Harb, M., Gharbieh, A., Fawaz, M., & Dayekh, L. "Mapping Covid-19 Governance in Lebanon: Territories of Sectarianism and Solidarity," *Middle East Law and Governance*, 14(1), 2021: 81-100.

¹⁵ "They Killed Us from the Inside' An Investigation into the August 4 Beirut Blast," Human Rights Watch, August 31, 2021.

¹⁶ Paige, Jeffery. "Finding the Revolutionary in the Revolution: Social Science Concepts and the Future of Revolution." in *The Future of Revolutions: Rethinking Radical Change in the Age of Globalization*, Ed. John Foran, Zed Books, 2003, p.22.

different reality. Building on Paige's imaginary-focused definition of revolutions, I argue that Lebanon's October movement created new fields of possibilities that had not existed throughout the post-civil war period.

As several scholars observed, the class-based and decentralized nature of the uprising, at least in its early stages, successfully shattered a range of stereotypes regarding Lebanese society and broke a number of taboos.¹⁷ First, mass protests and riots in what was perceived as strongholds of sectarian parties broke the hegemonic perceptions of those territories, paving the way for new forms of contestation. Second, cross-regional and class-based solidarity shook the sectarian narratives that the regime feeds on to reproduce itself, making it clear that socioeconomic grievances, particularly amongst youth, are the country's core issue rather than identitarian divisions. Third, many revolutionary squares and streets turned into spaces for previously marginalized and/or silenced segments of the population to be seen and heard, resulting in public calls for transnational solidarities, queer feminist demands, anti-capitalist chants, and other radical discourses.

What I want to underscore is that, despite the fact that these 'revolutionary' features may not have been widespread, nor did they last for more than a couple of weeks, they temporarily created new political imaginaries. These imaginaries were not solely defined by the ability to imagine drastically different realities, but also by the belief that, despite the odds, they are within reach. Based on interviews with members of the opposition movement and my personal experience as a participant in the uprising, and as articulated by jailed Egyptian revolutionary Alaa Abdel Fattah, there was an admittedly naïve but genuine belief that "another world was possible." Such a positioning is echoed

¹⁷ Karam, Jeffrey G. and Majed, Rima Majed (eds.) *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution*, I.B. Tauris and Bloomsbury, 2022.

by Gilbert Achcar who contends that one can reconcile the incompleteness of these movements with their revolutionary nature by viewing them as protracted, ongoing processes, bound to reemerge as long as political and socioeconomic transformation is not reached.¹⁸

Although I make the argument that Lebanon did experience a ‘revolutionary’ situation, my thesis will focus on the less studied dimension of its ‘non-revolutionary’ elements, organizations, and stances, which substantially affected the trajectory of the October movement. Indeed, after the failure to topple the regime through the streets, most opposition groups contended that, despite the quasi-authoritarian nature of the Lebanese political system, tangible change will only be achieved gradually through state channels. Many political organizations hence shifted their attention towards the 2022 general elections. As I shall argue, a narrowing down of fields of possibilities and a lowering of political expectations, under the guise of pragmatism, took over the October revolution. Over time, neoliberal ideology and counterrevolutionary tools triumphed over the radical hope, progressive objectives, and class struggle that galvanized the early stages of the uprising. This temporality is integral in understanding the trajectory of the revolutionary movement. Indeed, most protesters and groups with a working-class background were eventually forced to return to their jobs and/or sectarian parties for financial support. By 2022, the most active and resourceful opposition groups were the ones who had access to western and diasporic funding, were led by full-time political organizers, and had a liberal or conservative background.

As I will unpack later, the new opposition is divided between many clusters: one made of center-right and center-left groups who disagree on core issues but chose to ally

¹⁸ Achcar, Gilber. *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. University of California Press, 2013, p.120.

in electoral lists, winning 13 seats out of 128, and are now represented in Parliament—albeit disunited;¹⁹ another formed of social democrats like MMFD, which did not win any seat in the 2022 election as it struggled to form alliances, and like LiHaqqi, which withdrew most of its candidates due to programmatic differences with potential allies; and one centered on a smaller and disorganized radical Left that did not run for elections and includes Marxist book clubs, fringe political organizations close to the Lebanese Communist Party, as well as other smaller groups that fell outside the scope of this research.

To address my research question and unpack the nuances within this diverse landscape of opposition actors, I privilege an interpretivist approach, which is more akin to capture the dynamic political moment, and which recognizes the agency of interlocutors.²⁰ The data I rely on to ground my arguments originates from four main sources. First, original qualitative interviews conducted with ten members of new opposition groups that sought to participate in the 2022 elections. Second, existing survey data on sixteen new opposition groups which originates from a study I designed and led at The Policy Initiative (TPI) – a Lebanese think tank where I am employed. Third, primary data in the form of media statements and appearances by political figures. Fourth, secondary literature that is both empirical and theoretical, which informed my interview protocol and guided my data analysis.²¹

I conducted semi-structured interviews during May and June 2022. Each lasted around 1h to 1h30min. I selected my interlocutors based on their affiliation to registered

¹⁹ Following a constitutional appeal by Faisal Karami – a notable sectarian figure in Tripoli – one of the 13 “change” MPs, Ramy Finge, lost his parliamentary seat in November 2022, bringing the total number of MPs who claim to represent the October 17 uprising down to 12.

²⁰ Macionis, John J.; Gerber, Linda M. *Sociology* (7th ed.). Pearson Canada. p.32.

²¹ I draw particularly on the theoretical work of Wendy Brown and Mark Fisher, as well as the empirical research of Asef Bayat and Jamie Allinson.

or non-registered political groups that are most prominent in the oppositionist arena and that meet the following three criteria: clear internal organizational structures, well-defined stances on different key policy issues, chose to participate in the 2022 legislative elections in some form or another. Thirteen groups met the criteria and were invited to take part in the interviews. Some of the groups were contacted through email and others by phone. Members of nine of the thirteen groups responded to the calls and agreed to participate: MMFD, Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi, LiHaqqi, Taqaddom, Madinati, Khat Ahmar, Sabaa, Mada, and Minteshreen.²² A former member of the Lebanese Professionals' Association (LPA) was also interviewed in order to include their perspective on the role of alternative groups within the labor movement. More information about the background of interviewees and the date and location of interviews is in the appendix of this thesis.

The interview protocol was divided into two sections. The first covered the groups' stances on a range of key policy debates including the distribution of financial sector losses, how to deal with Hezbollah's weapons, the types of social protection schemes needed, the return of Syrian refugees, and the adoption of a civil personal status code. The second section pertained to strategic matters, including their vision of how political change ought to unfold, the role of the labor movement within that process, and whether alliances with traditional "opposition" parties are worthy compromises. Through these guiding questions, other themes and questions emerged and shifted the conversation away from the interview protocol. This led to organic discussions surrounding themes like post-ideology, prefigurative politics, class consciousness, and the crisis of the Left, which then became part of my research.

²² Minteshreen is no longer an active political organization as it called for its members to join the National Bloc – a traditional opposition party that has allied with the Kataeb: https://twitter.com/nationalbloc_lb/status/1577732819937378327

Ethically, there were no risks involved as participants were made aware of the purpose of this study and assured that their identities would remain anonymous. They were also asked to sign a consent form which reiterated the purpose of the study and informed them of all their rights as participants. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and then deleted, leaving no identifiers that could compromise the anonymity of participants.

The two main limitations of my methodology are a result of time constraints and the lack of financial resources. First, the scope of my study and the criteria I set for the selection of participants led to the exclusion of the few radical leftist groups mentioned earlier. The perspective of small communist and anarchist groups is thus lacking and deserves scholarly inquiry in future works. The second limitation pertains to the small sample size: If more time and resources were available, I would have interviewed multiple members of the same group and I could have followed up more thoroughly with the groups that did not respond to the interview invitation. Nonetheless, the ten interviews I did conduct yielded sufficient data, a good portion of which became repetitive, indicating that I was reaching saturation.

Lastly, it is important to reflect on my own positionality as a researcher who was involved in the October 17 revolutionary uprising as a member of LiHaqqi. I joined LiHaqqi in the spring of 2019 because I aligned with their decentralized and grassroots-based approach to political organizing as well as their overall socialist leanings. During the uprising, I took part in LiHaqqi's marches and protests, attended different internal meetings, and translated into English dozens of statements that were issued by LiHaqqi's Political Orientation Council to reach the non-Arabic speaking diaspora. My involvement with the organization decreased significantly after January 2020, as I became

disappointed by the loss of revolutionary momentum and as I began my postgraduate studies at AUB, while being employed at The Policy Initiative.²³

Considering that I have been away from organizing circles for more than two years, I am quite removed from the inter- and intra-group dynamics that may influence my analysis as a researcher. While three of my participants ended up being prior acquaintances, I approached all the interviews in the same scholarly and professional manner. Furthermore, the findings from my research are not meant as judgments of any particular organization, but are rather accounts that serve to document the perspectives of these groups in order to examine the trajectory of the opposition movement as a whole. While some of my findings do question decisions that were made by some groups and reveal contradictions between discourses and actions, they are all based on collected evidence and data.

The thesis is structured in four sections, beginning with a brief literature review that discusses key concepts deployed in my analysis. It is then followed by a section that addresses Lebanon's postwar historical context, covering the integration of militias into state institutions, the foundations and evolution of Lebanon's neoliberal economy that led to the ongoing financial collapse, the emergence of the March 14 and March 8 blocs after the Syrian regime's exit in 2005, and a deeper dive into the postwar oppositionist landscape prior to 2019. Sections three and four present my main arguments, interview findings, and analyses: The third one studies the composition and background of new

²³ Following October 17, LiHaqqi grew as an organization and attracted a breadth of new members, positioning itself as a political movement that welcomes a range of views and perspectives. I was opposed to this approach, feeling that this lack of ideological and strategic clarity made decision-making very difficult within the organization and prevented the consolidation of a clear and coherent leftist program that all group members could adopt. For these personal and political reasons, I stopped taking part in LiHaqqi's activities for the better part of two years and I officially resigned in early 2022 as the group dealt with internal power struggles and differences regarding who to ally with in the general elections.

opposition groups by examining their pragmatic alliances and policy stances, particularly in relation to the economic crisis. It also reflects on the sociological background and previous organizing experiences of activists. Findings reveal an absence of progressive class politics, which are not centered in the activities and discourses of most opposition groups. Instead, the opposition's efforts are focused on forming short-lasting electoral alliances with candidates at different ends of the political spectrum. The fourth section complements the previous by investigating opposition groups' understandings of ideology and of the Left, revealing how they diagnose Lebanon's political-sectarian regime and envision alternatives to it. Building on Bayat's argument in *Revolutions without Revolutionaries*, my findings show that, over time, reformists who do not seek to fundamentally reimagine the political system took over the oppositionist sphere and, through a range of strategic choices, deradicalized the revolutionary movement, steering it towards a trajectory of co-optation by traditional opposition actors in the March 14 camp. The thesis ends with a conclusion that summarizes key findings and ponders on the future strategies of new opposition MPs. It closes with reflections on possibilities for carving out a different path of political transformation – one that is more equipped to defy the counterrevolutionary power of neoliberal ideology.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Skocpol, social revolutions are defined as “rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures” and they are a direct result of a crisis within the ruling regime.²⁴ Skocpol presents a state-structuralist perspective on revolutions which focuses on outcomes and emphasizes the role of collapsing state structures within that process. For Skocpol, citizens have limited agency because they are unable to bring about political transformation “from below” without structural cracks “from above”. Collective action theorists like David Samuels oppose this understanding of revolutions and argue that regimes do not collapse on their own but are rather defeated by effective organizing, strategizing, and direct action.²⁵ Although this bottom-up, agential approach differs from top-down, structuralist understandings of processes of political transformation, they both ascribe to an outcomes-based definition of revolutions which has dominated the literature.

While scholars of the Arab uprisings like Achcar would agree with Skocpol in that revolts from below were triggered by structural conditions emanating from the erosion of unsustainable social contracts between regimes and their societies, he ascribes to the more recent perspective that shifts the locus away from binary accounts of success and failure towards a process-focused conceptualization of revolutionary situations.²⁶ Amongst those championing this perspective is El Ghobashy who deploys Tilly’s concept

²⁴ Skocpol, Theda. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Cambridge University Press, 1979, p.4.

²⁵ Samuels, David. “Collective Action” in *Comparative Politics*, Pearson, 2012: 230-235.

²⁶ Achcar, Gilbert. “Introduction: Uprisings and Revolutions”, in *The people want: a radical exploration of the Arab uprising*. University of California Press, 2013, pp.1-6.

of “revolutionary situations” in order to reconcile the real threat posed to the regime by radical street mobilizations with the ultimate success of the counter-revolution.²⁷ Indeed, Ghobashy’s contribution pushes for a more nuanced study of revolutions that is focused on actors, processes, and the collusions of revolutionary politics. This approach has also been furthered by Allinson who highlights a literary gap in the study of counter-revolutions, which he conceives as multimodal and multiagent processes that ought to be studied as major factors in determining why some movements manage to take over state power while others not. Through an in-depth study of the first wave of Arab uprisings, he argues:

“Successful counter-revolutionaries manage to unite a policy of repression, or military conquest, with a political movement that reaches beyond a ruling clique. Through both symbolic and material means, they unify counter-revolution ‘from below’ and ‘above’ to build a counter-revolutionary collective subject, creating alliances ‘from without’ between both states and movements that recompose previously existing regional and international orders.”²⁸

This counter-revolutionary collective subject deploys different symbolic, discursive, and material forms that affect the trajectories of mobilizations and oppositionist organizations. Bayat argued that the Arab uprisings did not lead to political transformations because they were “revolutions without revolutionaries” in the sense that they lacked revolutionary organizations, clear programmatic aims, and a leadership to guide the movement towards its objectives.²⁹ Instead, they were “refolutions” because they asked the system to reform itself rather than formulating more radical demands that

²⁷ Ghobashy El, Mona. *Bread and Freedom: Egypt’s Revolutionary Situation*, Stanford University Press, 2021.

²⁸ Allinson, Jamie. *The Age of Counter-Revolution: States and Revolutions in the Middle East*. Cambridge University Press, 2022, p.19.

²⁹ Bayat, Assef. *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford University Press, 2017: 43-57.

rejected and reimagined the system as a whole. For Bayat, these ‘non-revolutionary’ elements are the cause of the movements’ vulnerability to counter-revolutions.

Allinson agrees with Bayat regarding the vulnerability of these movements, but he claims that the strength of counter-revolutions should be accounted for as well. For him, counter-revolutions are historically specific processes bound to their respective contexts: In Egypt, the counter-revolution took place through the traditional military coup, “followed by a vigorous campaigns of arrest, torture and massacre” while the “counter-revolution from without operated mainly through financial and diplomatic support” pitting the Saudi-GCC axis against the Qatari-Turkish-Muslim Brotherhood axis.³⁰ In Bahrain, and even more so Syria, it was about isolating and crushing the uprising either through all-out war or military occupation of revolutionary enclaves. In both cases, the tensions surrounding sect and sectarianism were weaponized in favor of the regime and the counter-revolution from without. In Syria, this resulted in a Russian-Iranian-Hezbollah victory against the Saudi-Qatari-Turkish camp following the decline of US hegemony in the region, whereas in Bahrain it was a more clear-cut GCC intervention that ended the uprising.

In Lebanon’s case, the counter-revolution was also one from ‘below’, ‘above’ and ‘without’: On the ground, violent repression against protesters was carried out from both state and non-state actors, who were often working in tandem.³¹ From the top, pro-Hezbollah segments of the regime painted the movement as a western-zionist conspiracy while pro-GCC parties sought to co-opt the movement by claiming to be part of them and

³⁰ Allinson, Jamie. *The Age of Counter-Revolution: States and Revolutions in the Middle East*. Cambridge University Press, 2022, p.22.

³¹ Haidar, Nour. “A Popular Uprising Met With Violence and Torture: Crimes Against Protesters During Lebanon’s Uprising,” *The Legal Agenda*, February 18, 2021.

directing their ire mainly upon Hezbollah and its allies.³² International actors also contributed to the counter-revolution with French president Macron nominally supporting the movement while simultaneously co-opting it by making it about IMF reforms that the regime itself ought to implement.³³ Ibrahim Halawi further nuances this analysis by arguing that, in the Lebanese and Iraqi cases, the consociational system is itself counterrevolutionary.³⁴ This means that counter-revolutions are not simply momentary reactions but can actually be embedded in systemic processes that precede mass uprisings.

The counter-revolution in Lebanon, though, was also one ‘from within’. Indeed, many self-proclaimed revolutionary groups were bound to a neoliberal rationality that has taken over all aspects of political life around the world, largely determining counter-revolutionary dynamics, as Bayat explains when presenting his argument:

“These revolutions were reformist in the sense that the protagonists who spearheaded masterful mobilization were unable to imagine forms of organization and governance that departed from those against which they were rebelling; they were unable, unwilling, or uninterested in directing the process of change within state institutions; they conceptually separated the economy from those aspects of the political order that they sought to topple; and they hardly offered any exploration of how state power worked or how to transform it.”³⁵

Wendy Brown’s concept of ‘neoliberal rationality’ is of important relevance here and is echoed in Bayat’s work.³⁶ Indeed, neoliberalism is a highly contentious and polarizing concept despite being “one of the most widely used terms across many social

³² Karam, Jeffrey G., “The Shadow Guardians of the Status Quo: The Lebanon Uprising of 2019 and the International Politics of Counterrevolution” in Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed (eds.) *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris and Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 89.

³³ “France’s Macron returns to Lebanon to press for reforms”, Al Jazeera, 31 August 2020.

³⁴ Halawi, Ibrahim. “Consociational Power-Sharing in the Arab World as Counter-Revolution.” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 20(2), 2020: 128-136.

³⁵ Bayat, Assef. *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford University Press, 2017, p.18.

³⁶ Ibid: 32-33.

science disciplines.”³⁷ Some argue that it is a “waning analytical category devoid of conceptual rigor” while others consider it the defining characteristic of the dominant world order and its political economy.³⁸ At a basic level, one can think of neoliberalism as a set of concrete policies aiming at entrenching the rule of corporate and financial elites over the economy, such as deregulation, financialization, privatization, and wage repression policies, or other rent-creating mechanisms.³⁹ Much has been written about their application, from violent imperialist interference, to coercive market forces imposed by the WTO, World Bank, and IMF.⁴⁰

Quinn Slobodian argues that neoliberalism is often inaccurately thought of as the retreat of the state when, at its very core, it seeks to redeploy states and global institutions to protect capitalist interests from demands for social justice and political change.⁴¹ Through an examination of the intellectual history of neoliberal thought, he shows how a transnational class of capitalist elites built international institutions to expand and sustain their material power. While that was happening, he notes how the traditional Left was also being repressed through de-unionization mechanisms and coercive market forces, particularly during the latter decades of the 20th century. He also argues that what is rather unique about neoliberalism is that its most staunch supporters, from politicians to corporations and intellectuals, all vehemently refrain from asserting a collective identity or recognizing the term altogether. Critical scholars have even argued that this is a strategy in and of itself – that the “mystification” of neoliberalism is one of its most

³⁷ Chouhy, Gabriel. “Rethinking neoliberalism, rethinking social movements,” *Social Movement Studies*, 19(4), 2020, p.426.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Baumann, Hannes. *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon’s Neo-Liberal Reconstruction*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁴⁰ Klein, Naomi. *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Harvey, David. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁴¹ Slobodian, Quinn. *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

powerful tools, as it allows those who benefit from it to continue reproducing neoliberal policies while keeping the masses relatively unaware of their implications.⁴²

Brown takes these analyses further, claiming that neoliberalism's effects are even more profound, as they not only shape economic policies but also seep into various aspects of our daily social lives, and thus our subjectivities.⁴³ She thus argues that neoliberalism is a form of 'political rationality' that operates in insidious and pervasive ways, aiming at reconfiguring all aspects of human existence into economic relations. Through a range of empirical examples and theories, Brown unravels how neoliberalism fosters widespread acceptance of the concept of "human capital" and how the economization of subjectivities undermines "democratic imaginaries" – or one's ability to conceive of humane and socially just alternatives of organizing the state, the economy, and society. The quote below captures this argument well:

"The normative reign of homo economicus in every sphere means that there are no motivations, drives, or aspirations apart from economic ones, that there is nothing to being human apart from "mere life." Neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity — not only with its machinery of compulsory commodification and profit-driven expansion, but by its form of valuation. As the spread of this form evacuates the content from liberal democracy and transforms the meaning of democracy tout court, it subdues democratic desires and imperils democratic dreams."⁴⁴

In other words, the soft power of neoliberalism has far-reaching implications. Beyond undermining democratic imaginaries, it also eliminates class consciousness: When human beings are conceived of in terms of capital, the human character of labor disappears as a category, and so does "its collective form, class, [thus] taking with it the

⁴² Maisuria, Alpesh. "Neoliberal Development and Struggle Against It: The Importance of Social Class, Mystification and Feasibility." *Aula Abierta*, 47(4), 2018: 433-440.

⁴³ Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books, 2015, p.44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

analytical basis for alienation, exploitation, and association among laborers.”⁴⁵ Bringing the conversation back to the MENA, Bayat argues that since the 1990s, “significant elements of neoliberalism have spread among the Arab elites, professional groups, and the political class, influencing their thinking about activism, change, and the image of a good society.”⁴⁶ Overlapping with the global decline of the Left after the fall of the Berlin wall, the material and ideological triumph of neoliberalism resulted in the erasure of radical visions of change, particularly when it comes to the economy. Discussions surrounding wealth redistribution, social protection, property relations, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism were hence instinctively discarded. Instead, demands by revolutionaries centered around broad and tamable demands for human rights, accountability, anti-corruption, and reforms, which would only pay “lip service to the genuine concerns of the masses for social justice and distribution.”⁴⁷

A corollary from Bayat and Brown’s argument is the rise in anti-establishment movements and groups that claim to be “post-ideological” in their rejection of solid organization, programmatic clarity, and leadership. The post-ideological turn prides itself on its pragmatic flexibility, diplomacy, and professed ability to transcend the left-right binary.⁴⁸ In practice, though, it has resulted in typically pro-market and conservative socioeconomic stances that not only fail to address the growing cracks in the global financial system, but also protect elite interests in times of crisis at the expense of oppressed and marginalized segments of the population.⁴⁹ In Lebanon, such phenomena can be observed in some opposition groups’ relationship with segments of the regime, or

⁴⁵ Ibid, 38.

⁴⁶ Bayat, Assef. *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford University Press, 2017, p.25.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁴⁸ Decker, James M. “The ‘Post-Ideological’ Era?” in *Ideology*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 161-168.

⁴⁹ Askezany, Philippe. “The Contradictions of Macronism,” *Dissent Magazine*, Winter 2018.

their stances on the distribution of financial sector losses, the type of social protection schemes needed, and the rights of refugees and migrants, as I will be discussing further below. But before delving deeper into those groups' differing stances on a range of ideological questions, I present a brief historical overview that covers the critical junctures that Lebanon went through since the end of its civil war in 1990, focusing particularly on the economic crisis and the evolution of the oppositionist sphere over the past thirty years.

CHAPTER III HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In October 2019, as deteriorating economic conditions were getting worse, mass protests erupted against Lebanon's ruling class and demanded political and economic change. The revolutionary uprising distinguished itself through its decentralized character, cross-sectarian makeup, and class-based nature. It mobilized hundreds of thousands at its peak and made people believe in the possibility of imagining a radically different world, even if for an ephemeral moment. Through numerous acts of solidarity and resistance, hope was reignited, and communal bonds formed across Lebanon's squares.⁵⁰ With time, however, organizational and strategic weaknesses within the movement became more glaring and could not overcome the range of counterrevolutionary mechanisms it struggled with. Indeed, the regime and its allies deployed a range of tools to defeat the uprising. These included violent repression from state and non-state actors,⁵¹ co-optation by regime-affiliated groups and figures,⁵² and campaigns to undermine the credibility of the movement.⁵³ While this counterrevolutionary effort was certainly effective, it was also aided by a descent into one of modern history's worst financial and socio-economic collapse.⁵⁴ Each ruling party quickly absolved itself of any responsibility in producing the breakdown, blaming instead

⁵⁰ Nassif, Rawane. "Roadblocking, Mass Strike, and the Qantari Collective" in Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed (eds.) *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris and Bloomsbury, 2022).

⁵¹ Haidar, Nour. "A Popular Uprising Met With Violence and Torture: Crimes Against Protesters During Lebanon's Uprising," *The Legal Agenda*, February 18, 2021.

⁵² Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea co-opting the October 17 uprising in a tweet: "From March 14 to October 17... the revolution continues" <https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2020/03/14/samir-geagea-1097/>

⁵³ Atallah, Nada M. "How internet has become a battleground in the Lebanese revolution," *Le Commerce du Levant*, December 26, 2019.

⁵⁴ Mroue, Bassem. "World Bank: Lebanon's crisis among world's worst since 1850s," *AP News*, June 1, 2021.

others for corruption and mismanagement,⁵⁵ or attributing the crisis to external factors such as the influx of Syrian refugees,⁵⁶ or international sanctions on Hezbollah.⁵⁷

In fact, as many analysts attested, Lebanon's crisis is a result of its political and economic systems, which can only be understood by reexamining the foundations and trajectory of the postwar regime. Lebanon's civil war officially ended with the signing of the Taif Agreement in October 1989. At the surface, the Agreement ended the war by adjusting the balance of power between Christians and Muslims from a 6:5 ratio in Parliament in favor of Christians, to an even split. It even envisaged the establishment of a council to abolish the sectarian system, which was never implemented. In truth, however, the war ended by promising militias they would be granted amnesty, guaranteed regional autonomy in their sectarian strongholds, and integrated into state institutions, which they could exploit and reap the spoils.⁵⁸ One of the architects of this pact was billionaire Rafic Hariri who had the financial backing of the Saudi Arabian regime and would serve as Prime Minister from 1992 to 1998, and again from 2000 to 2004.⁵⁹

A. Origins of the Financial Collapse

Hariri's approach to the economy was neoliberal par excellence: He prioritized the financial and service sectors over the productive economy, favored capital and rent-appropriation mechanisms over labor and welfare claims, and accumulated state debt to finance the corrupt clientelistic practices of parties in power.⁶⁰ In fact, during Hariri's

⁵⁵ Dagher, Ramez. "Psychological Warfare in Times of Revolution," *The Public Source*, April 2, 2020.

⁵⁶ Hodzic, Refik. "Plight of Syrian refugees in Lebanon must not be ignored," *Al Jazeera*, January 26, 2021.

⁵⁷ Daoud, David. "Hezbollah Blames Lebanon's Economic Collapse on the United States," Atlantic Council, August 2021.

⁵⁸ Salloukh, Bassel. "Taif and the Lebanese State: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25 (1), 2019: 43–60.

⁵⁹ Leenders, Reinoud. *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-building in Postwar Lebanon*. Cornell University Press, 2012.

⁶⁰ Baumann, Hannes. *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction*. Hurst Publishers, 2016.

first premiership, the public debt rose from \$1.5 billion in 1992 to \$18 billion in 1998. Throughout the 1990s, average citizens dealt with rising inflation, local currency depreciation, lack of safety nets, and regressive taxes. This angered workers and triggered a backlash from the labor movement, spearheaded by the General Labor Confederation, which organized strikes and protests between 1992 and 1997 to oppose the government's neoliberal policies and the lack of a welfare state.⁶¹ Despite valiant efforts, during the 1997 elections of the General Labor Confederation's leadership, the labor movement was co-opted by the regime through violent repression and intimidation, as well as electoral fraud.⁶²

Although it had purged and co-opted the opposition by the end of the century, the regime still had substantial economic problems to deal with. In order to contain a currency crisis that was threatening the system as a whole, the government decided in 1997 to peg the Lebanese Lira to the U.S. Dollar.⁶³ This decision would come at massive future costs, for sustaining the peg required constant foreign currency borrowing. To maintain this model and extend the life of the faltering regime, Hariri's second premiership was defined by austerity measures and the Paris 1 and Paris 2 conferences, which granted the Lebanese government more than \$4.5 billion in aid between 2001 and 2002.⁶⁴ These loans did not serve to reform the public or financial sectors, nor did they finance the public investments the government was supposed to undertake. Instead, they mostly served as rent for elite capture and helped expand clientelistic networks through more public sector hiring and

⁶¹ Baroudi, Sami. "Economic Conflict in Postwar Lebanon: State-Labor Relations between 1992 and 1999." *Middle East Journal*, 52(4), 1998: 531-550

⁶² Badran, Ibrahim & Zbib, Mohammad, "Al-ittihad al-'am fi lubnan: man yumathil man?" Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2001.

⁶³ Boswall, Jacob and Halabi, Sami. "Extend and Pretend: Lebanon's Financial House of Cards," Think Triangle, November 2019.

⁶⁴ See UN OCHA ReliefWeb: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/international-conference-lebanons-reconstruction-international-communitys-economic>

corrupt dealings.⁶⁵ Once these funds dried up, the state continued borrowing foreign currency from commercial banks at high-interest rates, hugely increasing the profits of the financial elites allied with the political establishment.⁶⁶ By 2006, the public debt had surpassed \$40 billion for the first time,⁶⁷ and the debt-to-GDP ratio had exceeded 180%.⁶⁸

Fortunately for the regime, the 2008 global financial crisis and increase in oil prices rescued Lebanon's financial system as it attracted foreign depositors, particularly from the GCC, who were moving their money away from high-risk western markets.⁶⁹ Ultimately, this brought in over \$50 billion into Lebanese banks between 2008 and 2012.⁷⁰ However, this period of financial stability was short-lived, as foreign currency deposits that had entered the country began to exit Lebanese banks once the global economy started recovering. By 2016, the Central Bank was running out of the foreign currency reserves it needed to maintain the dollar peg and cover its exorbitant trade deficit. This was when Central Bank governor Riad Salameh began implementing his notorious "financial engineering" Ponzi scheme, which provided commercial banks that lent dollars to the state with interest rates as high as 32%.⁷¹ This scheme was financed by accumulating more debt and resulted in the four largest Lebanese banks collecting astronomical profits over the years, reaching \$1.39 billion in 2018 alone.⁷²

⁶⁵ Salloukh, Bassel F. "Taif and the Lebanese State: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 25:1, 2019: 43-60; Cammett, Melani. *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*. Cornell University Press, 2014.

⁶⁶ Haidar, Jamal and Malik, Adeel. "More money is not the answer to Lebanon's troubles," Al Jazeera, July 15, 2020.

⁶⁷ See: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/lebanon/national-government-debt>

⁶⁸ See: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/lebanon/government-debt--of-nominal-gdp>

⁶⁹ See Jad Ghosn's documentary "The Untold History": <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/episodes/1658/the-untold-history/en>

⁷⁰ Collard, Rebecca. "Lebanon's borrowing habits reveal a cultural shift." *Financial Times*, November 21, 2017.

⁷¹ Boswall, Jacob and Halabi, Sami. "Extend and Pretend: Lebanon's Financial House of Cards," *Think Triangle*, November 2019.

⁷² See: <https://www.blombank.com/english/news-and-publications/news/financial-results-four-largest-lebanese-banks-2018>

While banks were making record profits, the situation reached a tipping point in 2018. The debt-to-GDP ratio had exceeded 150% yet again,⁷³ foreign currency reserves were being depleted by the cost of imports, the peg could not be effectively maintained, the economy was in recession, and the unemployment rate had exceeded 25%.⁷⁴ Promises that foreign loans would save the day yet again did not come to fruition as the government failed to meet the conditionalities set by the 2018 Paris 4 (CEDRE) conference, and Lebanon did not have a productive local economy to fall back on. Signs that a crisis was approaching became more and more apparent since the start of 2019 as socioeconomic conditions continued to deteriorate. By summer 2019, financial analysts were already sounding the alarms regarding looming currency devaluation as the exchange rate of the Lebanese Lira to the U.S. dollar surpassed the 1514.5 upper limit of the peg,⁷⁵ while banks began practicing arbitrary capital controls on U.S. dollar deposits.⁷⁶

With signs of a looming collapse already emerging, people took to the streets on the night of October 17, 2019 and started the revolutionary uprising. Commercial banks, which had been running out of foreign currency, shut their doors for two weeks then tightened arbitrary capital controls, essentially seizing depositors' savings. Since the dollar peg could no longer be maintained, a parallel black market emerged to exchange currencies as the Lebanese Lira eventually lost more than 95% of its value. In March 2020, the situation worsened as government defaulted on maturing Eurobonds payments it owed foreign creditors.⁷⁷ A major credit rating agency, Moody's, also downgraded

⁷³ See: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/lebanon/government-debt--of-nominal-gdp>

⁷⁴ Kadi, Samar. "Lebanon's youth bearing the brunt of unemployment, regional instability." *The Arab Weekly*, August 6, 2017.

⁷⁵ See: Azzi, Dan. "The devaluation of the Lebanese Dollar", *Annahar English*, July 21, 2019.

⁷⁶ See: Azzi, Dan. "Where's my damn money", *Annahar English*, July 14, 2019.

⁷⁷ See this interactive timeline of Lebanon's financial crisis: <https://financialcrisis.thepolicyinitiative.org/>

Lebanon's credit score from Ca to C – its lowest level.⁷⁸ The central bank, quickly running out of foreign currency, progressively stopped subsidizing most essential goods such as fuel and medicine, leading to frequent shortages, record inflation rates,⁷⁹ and the complete collapse of the long-neglected electricity sector.⁸⁰ In fact, by March 2021, the United Nations estimated that 78% of Lebanon's population was living in poverty, while 36% lived in extreme poverty.⁸¹ In order to obtain an IMF rescue package, the government needs to implement long-needed structural reforms, but failed to do so because these same reforms undermine the interests of traditional parties and their financial partners. The World Bank hence labeled the government's response to the crisis as a “deliberate depression” resulting in the “disintegration” of Lebanon's political economy in order to avoid accountability.⁸²

In light of Lebanon's financial and economic woes, which were only compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic throughout the first half of 2022 and the Beirut port explosion in August 2020, the 2022 parliamentary elections represented a critical juncture for the nation and its people. Back in 2018, an electoral coalition of anti-establishment actors by the name of Kulluna Watani fielded 65 candidates across 9 of 15 districts to run against traditional sectarian parties. The results were underwhelming for the coalition, which only won one seat and failed to convince voters to move away from the regime. Much had changed in the following four years, however, raising the possibility that the 2022

⁷⁸ Shahine, Alaa. “Lebanon Is Now Rated as Low as Venezuela After Moody's Cut,” Bloomberg, July 27, 2020.

⁷⁹ Mahfouz, Abbas. “Record year-on-year inflation registered in December 2021,” *L'Orient Today*, January 21, 2022.

⁸⁰ Hubbard, Ben. “As Lebanon's Crisis Deepens, Lines for Fuel Grow, and Food and Medicine Are Scarce,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 2021.

⁸¹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. “Lebanon Emergency Response Plan 2021-2022,” August 2021. See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-emergency-response-plan-2021-2022-august-2021-enar>

⁸² World Bank, “Lebanon Economic Monitor Fall 2021: The Great Denial,” Fall 2021. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36862>

elections could bring about significant political changes if anti-establishment groups mobilized effectively.

B. Tracing the New Opposition

Lebanon's current landscape of anti-establishment actors finds its roots in the 2011 movement to overthrow the sectarian regime. Although the movement was short-lived, mostly based in the capital, and unable to attract the critical mass needed to effect any tangible changes, it did reinvigorate the oppositionist political arena and set the stage for numerous anti-establishment initiatives to emerge in following years.⁸³ Another movement, known as “Take Back Parliament”, sought to organize around legislative elections that were supposed to take place in 2013 but its momentum also died out once the vote was indefinitely postponed due to the war in Syria. The summer of 2015 would mark another critical juncture as more than 100,000 protesters revolted against the government for its inability to resolve a reemerging waste-management crisis.⁸⁴ New activist networks emerged from this movement, setting the stage for confrontations with the regime in the 2016 municipal elections. The most notable municipal campaign was spearheaded by Beirut Madinati (Beirut is my City), which brought together university professors, students, public intellectuals, activists, and other civil society actors. It ran against a coalition comprised of the Future Movement, the Amal Movement, the Free Patriotic Movement, the Lebanese Forces, the Kataeb, and the Tashnag. Despite rival parties coming together to challenge a group of political outsiders, Beirut Madinati still

⁸³ Abi Yaghi, M., Catusse, M. and Younes, M. “From isqat an-nizam at-ta’ifi to the garbage crisis movement: political identities in practice through the lens of anti-sectarian movements.” In: Rosita Di Peri and Daniel Meier, Ed. *Lebanon Facing the Arab Uprising: Constraints and Adaptation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

⁸⁴ Kassir, Alexandra. ““We are here!”: a new wave of anti-sectarian mobilizations in Lebanon.” *OpenDemocracy*, October 12, 2015.

managed to obtain nearly 40% of total votes.⁸⁵ Due to the majoritarian nature of the electoral system, however, the campaign failed to win a seat, though many found hope in the 30,000 votes it did obtain. Yet, some criticized Beirut Madinati's campaign for focusing too much on the urban and intellectual middle and upper classes, while shying away from real political mobilization and confrontation with the regime.⁸⁶ Indeed, the campaign had a developmental and localized agenda, avoiding engagement in more contentious national politics.

As a result of Beirut Madinati's hopeful performance, expectations were elevated heading into the 2018 general elections. However, traditional parties invested far more resources into their legislative campaigns and relied on all the instruments in their counterrevolutionary toolbox to secure their victory. Indeed, anti-establishment candidates were intimidated, voters and their families were bribed and threatened, and accounts of fraudulent practices inside polling centers were widespread.⁸⁷ Despite the disappointing results, Lebanon's oppositionist movement gained experience and visibility. While some of the groups that came together for the 2018 elections fell apart, others consolidated their internal structures and transitioned from campaigns to formal political organizations. When the 2019 uprising came about, groups like MMFD, LiHaqqi, Mada, Beirut Madinati and Tahalof Watani took the lead in organizing protests, marches, and public discussions in Beirut while endorsing organic mobilizations across the country. The revolutionary fervor was palpable in the streets of the uprising, raising hope that change was coming. Although opposition groups widely agreed that ruling

⁸⁵ For a detailed breakdown of the results, see: <https://www.monthlymagazine.com/article-desc.php?id=3925>

⁸⁶ Khneisser, Mona. "The Specter of 'Politics' and Ghosts of 'Alternatives' Past: Lebanese 'Civil Society' and the Antinomies of Contemporary Politics," *Critical Sociology*, 46(3), 2020: 359–377.

⁸⁷ El Kak, Nadim. "A Path for Political Change in Lebanon? Lessons and Narratives from the 2018 Elections." Arab Reform Initiative, July 25, 2019.

parties needed to be replaced, disagreement emerged over the best strategy to effect political change.⁸⁸ Some argued that change should come from the streets and be imposed by force, while others preferred constitutional approaches to change. Some decried the neoliberal-sectarian system as a whole while others believed the issue lied in corrupt individuals and lack of reforms. Ultimately, most groups adopted the demand for a politically independent transitional government with legislative authorities, which would manage the economic crisis, implement reforms, and organize elections.

Unsurprisingly, the regime dismissed this demand and held firm in its counterrevolutionary effort, accurately betting that the movement would eventually lose steam and die out. Following the resignation of Saad Hariri and the formation of Hassan Diab's technocratic government in January 2020, and with the help of the COVID-19 pandemic, the regime buried what was left of the uprising by taking down tents in revolutionary squares and violently repressing any dissent. There were attempts to reignite the movement following the Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, but protests were met with massive cruelty and eliminated remaining hopes for change through the streets.

Attention shifted towards the 2022 Parliamentary elections, in the hope that public outrage at the regime would translate into the ballot box. However, after the election, and despite alternative candidates winning 13 seats, the opposition became even more fractured.⁸⁹ Indeed, electoral campaigns and the process of forming alliances revealed profound divisions, differences in strategies, and contrasting political ideologies amongst

⁸⁸ El Kak, Nadim. "Lebanon's Global Conundrum: Which Strategy for Political Change?" The Public Source, September 30, 2021.

⁸⁹ Following a constitutional appeal by Faisal Karami – a notable sectarian figure in Tripoli – one of the 13 "change" MPs, Ramy Finge, lost his parliamentary seat in November 2022, bringing the total number of MPs who claim to represent the October 17 uprising down to 12.

groups. The opposition lists that came out victorious were the ones willing to sacrifice programmatic alignment in exchange for pragmatic alliances. While this strategy was effective in the ballot box, it set a shaky foundation upon which to enter Parliament, as the 13 alternative MPs did not have a common policy agenda to advance, yet announced the formation of a united “change bloc”. After five months in office, the bloc began falling apart as multiple MPs left the alliance, raising question marks over their cohesion and performance as self-described representatives of the October uprising.

CHAPTER IV

DEMYSTIFYING THE NEW OPPOSITION

A. Imposed Unity: How to Co-opt a Movement

“We were basically told that the opposition is heading towards unity, whether we like it or not” (Interview 7, Mada & Beirut Tuqawem, 03/06/2022)

The October revolution resulted in the emergence of new groups with differing sizes, internal structures, and political views and backgrounds. Many of these groups ultimately became inactive as they could not survive the demoralization and challenges brought about by the counter-revolution and financial crisis. Others like Aamiyet 17 Teshrin, Khat Ahmar, Lana and Taqaddom were more organized and resourceful, allowing them to become active players in the oppositionist sphere by the time the 2022 Parliamentary elections arrived, joining the likes of MMFD, LiHaqqi, Madinati, Tahalof Watani, and Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi which had formed between 2016 and 2018.⁹⁰

In the run-up to the 2022 elections, the main dividing factor between these groups became their stance towards establishment parties that claim to belong to the opposition. Indeed, groups like Khat Ahmar, Taqaddom, Aamiyet 17 Teshrin and Liqaa Teshreen had joined the Lebanese Opposition Front (LOF) in early 2021 – a political coalition that includes the Kataeb party, one of the main actors in Lebanon’s civil war, the Independence Movement of Michel Mouawad, former ally of the FPM and son of assassinated President René Mouawad, and Neemat Frem, a former FPM ally as well.

⁹⁰ This information originates from my primary interviews, internal knowledge as a participant in the oppositionist arena, as well as my research at The Policy Initiative.

This coalition is seen by most opposition groups as being an extension of the “March 14” camp, which emerged in 2005 following the assassination of former PM Rafic Hariri, in opposition to the pro-Syrian/Iranian March 8 camp. This coalition is also known for having close ties to the banking sector as Antoun Sehnaoui, the chairman of the Société Générale de Banque au Liban (SGBL), is one of the Kataeb’s main financial backers. In order to distinguish between the large number of mentioned groups with different backgrounds, policy stances, and alliances, Table 1 below can serve as a reference for readers throughout this thesis: ⁹¹

Table 1: Background information on new opposition groups based on survey data from The Policy Initiative.

Political Group	Founding Year	Voting Members in 2021	Ratio of Women Members	Women in Executive Body	Economic Policy Index	Social Policy Index	MPs in Parliament	Member of Lebanese Opposition Front?
MMFD	2016	400	N/A	N/A	Left	Left	No	No
<u>Madinati</u>	2016	50	56%	57%	Center-Left	Center-Left	No	No
<u>Mada</u>	2017	500	60%	> 50%	Center-Left	Left	Ibrahim Mneimneh ⁸⁹	No (but allied in elections)
<u>Sabaa</u>	2017	N/A	40%	30%	Center-Right	Center-Right	No	No (but allied in elections)
LiHaqqi	2018	330	41%	45%	Left	Left	No	No
<u>Tahalof Watani</u>	2018	70	36%	22%	Center-Left	Left	Paula Yacoubian	No (but allied in elections)
<u>Al Marsad Al Shaabi</u>	2018	150	40%	29%	Center-Left	Left	No	No (but allied in elections)
<u>Aamiyet 17 Teshrin</u>	2019	200	50%	40%	Center-Left	Left	No	Yes
<u>Khat Ahmar</u>	2020	100	40%	33%	Center-Right	Center-Left	Waddah Sadek	Yes
Taqaddom	2020	70	36%	27%	Center-Left	Left	Mark Daou Najat Aoun	Yes
<u>Liqaa Teshrin</u>	2020	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No	Yes
Lana	2021	N/A	N/A	N/A	Center-Left	Left	Halimeh Kaakour	No (but allied in elections)

⁹¹ Data for this table is retrieved from the following study I conducted for The Policy Initiative: “Lebanon’s Political Alternatives: Mapping the Opposition” available at: <https://www.thepolicyinitiative.org/article/details/123/lebanons-political-alternatives>

The political background of the LOF surely did not align with the views of more progressive groups like LiHaqqi, MMFD, Mada, Lana, and Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi. However, due to the need to finalize electoral lists, candidates that belonged to the Lebanese Opposition Front, as well as other conservative figures like Melhem Khalaf, were able to impose themselves on negotiation tables. An organizer in the Beirut Al-Taghyeer list,⁹² which secured 3 seats in the capital's second district, said that when the list registration deadline approached, right-wing candidates like MP Waddah Sadek (Khat Ahmar) “became a given” as a “nation-wide deal” was being struck across different districts. They described the situation bluntly:

“There was a case of blackmail: We were basically told that the opposition is heading towards unity, whether we liked it or not.” (Interview 7, Mada & Beirut Tuqawem, 03/06/2022)

Indeed, attempts to pressure progressive actors into allying with liberal or centrist candidates were taking place across districts. In Mount Lebanon 4, LiHaqqi was the group with the largest grassroots presence and was expected to lead the oppositionist campaign in light of its respectable performance in the 2018 election, when it came very close to winning a seat. One of the reasons LiHaqqi did not win in 2018 was due to the presence of a second opposition list – one led by current MP Mark Daou who had refused to join the Kulluna Watani list that LiHaqqi headed at the time. By 2022, Daou was leading the new Taqaddom party and intended to run with activist Dr. Najat Aoun Saliba and the backing of the Kataeb party's Chouf and Aley branches. As a progressive organization and an opponent of the Kataeb, LiHaqqi became internally divided over whether to ally with candidates in the LOF such as Daou and Aoun Saliba. This led to an internal vote

⁹² The “Beirut al-Taghyeer” (Beirut of Change) list included three candidates from Beirut Tuqawem, which is a progressive group, mostly comprised of activists from secular university student clubs. The list also included liberal and conservative candidates from Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi, Tahalof Watani, Sabaa, Khat Ahmar, and the National Bloc.

that culminated with the withdrawal of LiHaqqi candidates in Mount Lebanon 4 and Beirut 2.⁹³ They also chose not to form a separate list with left-leaning actors like MMFD or the LCP in order not to undermine the other opposition lists' chances. This decision led some LiHaqqi members to resign and join the “Twahadna lil-Taghyir” (United for Change) list, which ultimately brought together candidates from Taqaddom, Tahalof Watani, Lana, the Green Party (close to Kataeb), as well as others. A similar situation unraveled in South 3 where another Lebanese Opposition Front candidate, Ali Mourad of Aamiyet 17 Teshrin, joined the opposition list despite objection by some groups in the alliance. The three aforementioned districts – namely Beirut 2, Mount Lebanon 4, and South 3 – accounted for 8 of the 13 “change MPs”.

While some candidates joined these alliances and others withdrew, groups like MMFD decided to run against them in some districts. MMFD indeed fielded candidates in all 15 districts but failed to win a single seat, coming the closest in Mount Lebanon 2 where journalist Jad Ghosn fell a few votes shy of a seat. MMFD's losses, according to an interviewee and member of the party, can be attributed to two factors: first, the group did not have the organizational capacity and resources to organize grassroots-driven electoral campaigns across 15 districts; second, it failed at convincing other opposition actors to endorse their program and run on their lists. Thus, MMFD ran without allies in 9 of the 15 districts it participated in, with its only somewhat stable ally being the LCP, with whom it ran in North 1, North 3, South 2 and South 3.

As such, political organizers and funders were deploying concerted efforts to make sure that “revolutionary and conservative elements from outside the traditional

⁹³ LiHaqqi only fielded one candidate in the 2022 election: Abir Naji in Mount Lebanon 3, as the alliance in Baabda did not include the LOF. It did, however, include a candidate from the National Bloc who allied with Kataeb in Mount Lebanon 1.

establishment work together” (Interview 6, Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi, 02/06/2022). A main driver of these concerted efforts was Kulluna Irada, a self-described advocacy group for political reform, which funded various electoral campaigns and had close ties to the Kataeb. Described by an interviewee as “a disaster which should be held accountable for what they did during the election”, Kulluna Irada was accused of having a hidden political agenda that serves the banking sector and the Kataeb, noting that they actively sought to impose candidates on certain lists while sidelining those opposed to them (Interview 5, Madinati, 02/06/2022). The chairman of Kulluna Irada, Albert Kostanian, is a former Kataeb member and the childhood friend of Samy Gemayel, the current head of the party. Kostanian is also the host of a famous TV political show “2030,” launched during the 2019 uprising and presenting itself as an anti-establishment platform. Recently, he attended the yearly commemoration of former sectarian warlord Bashir Gemayel, alongside other opposition MPs.⁹⁴

The Madinati member’s accusations against Kulluna Irada, which were corroborated by three other interviewees (Interviews 1, 3, and 6), reflect a broader disconnect between two factions of the opposition which dates back to the events that followed the August 4 Beirut port explosion in 2020. Prior to the blast, there were attempts to unite the opposition and reignite the uprising, quelled through repression and the pandemic as previously mentioned. Negotiations between groups were ongoing but progressive actors had concerns over the programmatic alignment of such a front. These negotiations completely fell apart when Kataeb MPs as well as Neemat Frem and Michel Mouawad resigned from Parliament as a result of the explosion. October uprising groups (that have since joined the LOF) lent their support to these MPs, seeing their resignations

⁹⁴ This year’s commemoration was attended by at least 6 of the 13 alternative MPs: Waddah Sadek, Mark Daou, Najat Saliba, Yassin Yassin, Melhem Khalaf, and Paula Yaacoubian.

as an opportunity to “reignite revolutionary moment within the opposition” (Interview 2, Taqaddom, 31/05/2022). Conversely, other October uprising groups still considered these MPs as part of the establishment, and refused to join forces with them. They began negotiating separately and formed the April 13 Alliance, formally establishing the division of the opposition into two camps in the run-up to the election.

Table 2: Composition of the Lebanese Opposition Front and the April 13 Alliance prior to the 2022 general election.

Lebanese Opposition Front	April 13 Alliance
Kataeb	National Bloc
Independence Movement	<u>Madinati</u>
Project Watan	<u>Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi</u>
<u>Taqaddom</u>	<u>Minteshreen</u>
Khat Ahmar	<u>Tahalof Watani</u>
<u>Aamivet 17 Teshrin</u>	
Other smaller groups: لقاء تشرين، الجمهورية الثالثة، تجمع مواكبة الثورة، ثوار ١٧، إتحاد ثوار الشمال، مجموعة ثوار عكار، نبض الجنوب المنتفض	Other smaller groups: شباب ١٧ تشرين، زحله تنتفض، حماة الدستور، ستريت، نقابيون احرار، ثوار بيروت، وطني هويتي، ثورة لبنان، زغرنا الراوية، لقاء البقاع الثوري، شباب لطرابلس

This division of the opposition did not translate into electoral alliances, though, for it was trumped by the aforementioned pressure to form united lists, which came from groups and voters alike. According to multiple interviewees, groups who had concerns over these alliances were not opposed to cooperation in the face of the regime, but were worried about the economic agenda of the Kataeb party, Michel Mouawad, Neemat Frem, as well as opposition groups like Khat Ahmar. In the next section, these differences in policy positions are discussed more thoroughly, showing how a fragmented neoliberal opposition makes it easier for the regime to continue with its shadow economic plan.

B. Lacking a Progressive Agenda: How the Shadow Economic Plan Persists

“Anyone who panders with the idea of privatization [of state assets], whether out of good or bad intentions, is a partner in the crime against society.” (Interview 1, MMFD, 30/05/2022)

“The problem is that there are people who decided that the Sovereign Wealth Fund is a big crime against the people. No, it is not the case, and we will not accept this.” (Interview 4, Khat Ahmar, 01/06/2022)

The two above quotes by members of opposed alternative political groups captures the tension surrounding the debate over the proposal of a sovereign wealth fund. A sovereign wealth fund, in its most basic sense, is a state-owned investment fund that is meant to generate money for the government. In light of Lebanon’s financial collapse, traditional political parties, the Association of Banks in Lebanon (ABL), as well as some oppositionist figures, have called for the formation of a sovereign wealth fund to manage the country’s public assets and help cover a portion of the banking sector’s losses. Since the state is bankrupt, the private sector would have to be the one investing in these assets in the hopes of generating new profits.

According to the quote by the Khat Ahmar member, there are several public assets that the state is unable to afford managing but that could generate a profit if efficiently managed by the private sector. From their perspective, people are wrongly assuming that a sovereign wealth fund implies that state assets are being sold outright, which is not technically the case. They argue that sovereign wealth funds can be managed through privatization, which should not be seen through a binary lens: when the private sector

invests in state assets, they will have a stake in these assets, so it will be a partial privatization, proportional to the actual investment they make. Moreover, they note that most public assets in Lebanon have little to no value for investors, especially state-owned enterprises like the electricity or telecommunications sectors. The real “cash cow” that investors would be after is real-estate in the form of ports, lands, and buildings, which would generate significant money if sold or rented out for multiple decades. These types of assets are the actual target of a sovereign wealth fund, and the “shadow plan” to seize them has already been under way for more than two and a half years:

“The shadow plan is to do nothing and let the economy adjust itself while allocating losses on autopilot in the most Darwinian way. In technical terms, people’s income has plummeted due to the exchange rate, so their overall consumption capacity fell, and therefore imports will drop. Because there’s an increase in emigration, consumption will drop, but also more emigration means more dollar inflows, so the economy will eventually self-balance in the most brutal way. What does this have to do with privatization? Simply because, in this trajectory which we are on, asset values will drop in dollar terms to a point where they become so cheap. So, I think the shadow plan is to wait it out until state assets become cheap enough to buy. This will lead to massive and unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Anyone who panders with the idea of privatization, whether out of good or bad intentions, is therefore a partner in this crime.” (Interview 1, MMFD, 30/05/2022)

In other words, a sovereign wealth fund can only generate meaningful profits if it foregoes the public assets of future generations. Furthermore, these profits will be at least partially used by the regime to cover losses of the private and public sector, rather than, for instance, prioritize universal social protection for the increasingly impoverished segments of society or to secure public health and education goods for all. According to interviewees from MMFD, LiHaqqi, and Al Marsad Al-Shaabi, there are many alternatives to partial privatization along progressive and redistributive principles. These include writing off the capital of bank shareholders, seizing their assets, implementing a “haircut” on large depositors, establishing a wealth tax, and other forms of wealth

reclamation based on evidence revealed by forensic audits and the lifting of banking secrecy. While some of these demands have been raised by social democrats such as Beirut Tuqawem, Lana, MMFD, and LiHaqqi, they have not been broadly adopted by the opposition. In fact, some view the matter from an ideological lens that results in drastically different policy positions, and denotes divergent societal values:

“We don’t want to go to the extremes in terms of taxation: We don’t want to overburden the person with \$100 yet completely ignore the person with \$10. A state’s income to finance safety nets is not just through taxes. We have a lot of different resources that aren’t being used like state assets, maritime assets, oil, the diaspora – all of this can be exploited.” (Interview 4, Khat Ahmar, 01/06/2022)

Such stances reflect the ideologies and potentially vested business interests of members within those organizations. Taking a closer look at Khat Ahmar’s positions on various economic and social policy matters further reveals a reformist perspective that does not oppose how Lebanon’s economic model had been operating throughout the postwar period:

“We have to address the economic crisis, but we want to go back to what was really working. It was working. It had flaws, yes, but those flaws we know them, and we’ve identified them, and we want to change them. It’s not about a complete radical transformation, but about specific reforms in specific places. We’re attached to a free market economy but want to make it productive and add something essential: safety nets in education and healthcare.” (Interview 4, Khat Ahmar, 01/06/2022)

For Khat Ahmar as well as other LOF groups, the economic model spearheaded by the March 14 movement was working but was tarnished by corrupt individuals and a lack of reforms. The solution thus lies in new and clean politicians that could undertake reforms, rather than a “radical transformation” in the system and its structures. The same Khat Ahmar member adds that the role of the state in the economy ought to be relegated to facilitating production by easing procedures to start businesses, reducing taxes, and setting incentives for startup companies:

“The state is not supposed to intervene by determining the direction of the economy and who is allowed to produce what – this would put limitations on people’s ambitions.” (Interview 4, Khat Ahmar, 01/06/2022)

These approaches to the economy, which seek to hollow out the state, marketize all forms of social existence, and treat social services as “add-ons”, echoes Jamie Peck’s arguments on the nature and nuanced genealogy of neoliberalism. As Peck insisted:

“it is necessary to recognize the free-market project’s adaptive (and co-optive) capacities, rather than relying on cartoon-like versions of its supposedly invariant essence”⁹⁵

Peck shows in his book that following the failures of Thatcherism and Reaganomics, proponents of the neoliberal project recognized the need to make up for “market failures” by rolling out sets of social and institutional reforms that would not undermine neoliberal fundamentals. This “roll back/roll out” approach by international financial institutions, as termed by Peck, helped facilitate the spread of neoliberal agendas across the world. This resulted in the global normalization and hegemony of the neoliberal model, and it may help explain why progressive groups like Mada and Lana gave in to pressure to run on the same lists as LOF candidates.

Although the stances of Khat Ahmar stand out as the most right-leaning among opposition groups, the aforementioned TPI study finds that almost all opposition groups and MPs are centrists when it comes to the economy (Table 1). For instance, when probed about the manner by which opposition groups would distribute financial sector losses, only two of fifteen respondents completely agreed that they should be exclusively covered by banks and large depositors (Figure 1).⁹⁶

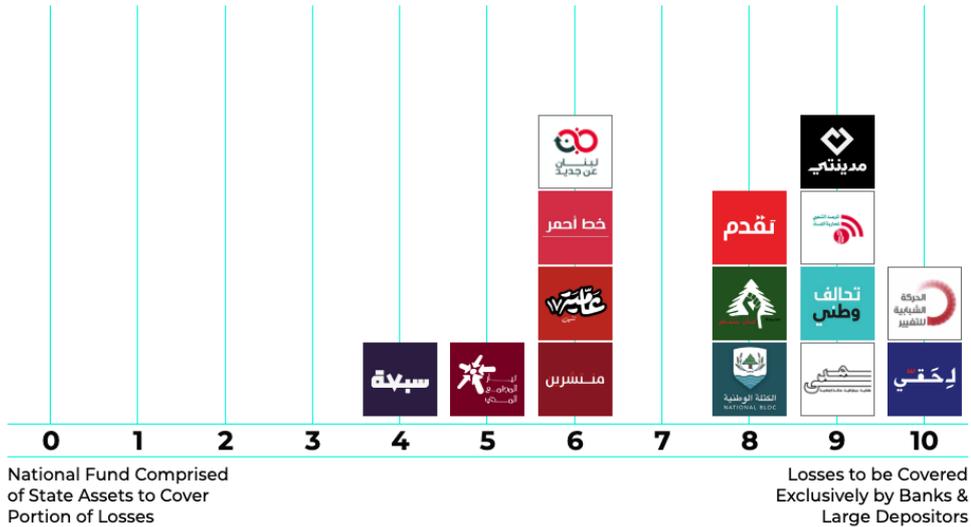
⁹⁵ Peck, Jamie. *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p.276.

⁹⁶ Figure is taken from the following public database: <http://politicalgroups.thepolicyinitiative.org/>

Figure 1: Stances of new opposition groups on the distribution of financial sector losses, data from The Policy Initiative.

Financial Sector Losses

Lebanon's financial sector has incurred massive losses. Some have argued that a National Fund comprised of state assets can be used to cover a portion of the losses. Others consider that these losses should be covered by banks and large depositors. How would you best describe your group's stance on this policy debate?



In fact, during an Al Jadeed show in September 2022, following a series of bank hold-ups by depositors forcibly recovering their own funds, “change MP” Melhem Khalaf came at the defense of the banking sector, declaring that “depositors and banks are both in the right because we now have victims facing other victims.”⁹⁷ This approach which equates oppressors and their victims exposes a broader disconnect between some opposition MPs and a struggling citizenry.⁹⁸

Although center-left groups remain committed to principles of redistributive justice, accountability, and sovereignty, they have thus far been unable to impose their progressive discourse onto the broader oppositionist arena. Excluding MMFD’s

⁹⁷ The segment of the Al Jadeed show can be viewed here:

<https://twitter.com/halimshebaya/status/1572668763295842311?s=46&t=pdR82vU9bM4LdGihOuNcGg>

⁹⁸ Khalaf’s stance on bank hold-ups does not reflect the views of all other opposition MPs. In fact, MP Cynthia Zarazir held up a bank herself in order to access her savings and afford a medical procedure she urgently needed. Various opposition MPs, though not all, supported Zarazir’s actions.

program,⁹⁹ no group has developed a full and comprehensive program that thoroughly diagnoses the roots and causes of the crisis while laying out a concrete recovery roadmap that protects society from the interests of political and financial elites as well as foreign donors. Instead, socioeconomic prescriptions by “change MPs” were presented in broad, populist terms that diluted and weakened their policy stances. Indeed, by visiting the websites of Taqaddom (MPs Mark Daou and Najat Aoun), Osos (MP Michel Douaihy), Sahlona wal Jabal (MP Yassin Yassin), Lana (MP Halimeh Kaakour), or Tahalof Watani (MPs Paula Yaacoubian and Cynthia Zarazir), one can notice that political programs are replaced by short manifestos, “general policies”, “visions”, or bullet-point styled “political papers” of a few pages.¹⁰⁰ This inability to turn populist discourse into a practical plan, coupled with pragmatic electoral concessions that diluted the importance of programmatic clarity, has hence contributed to the persistence of the economic shadow plan. It also reflects a misunderstanding of class struggle, which I move to discussing next.

⁹⁹ MMFD’s program can be accessed here: <https://mmfidawla.com/en/economic-political-vision/>

¹⁰⁰ Taqaddom’s manifesto: <https://taqaddomlb.org/manifesto-%7C-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88>

Osos’ general policies: <https://ososlebanon.org/en/general-policies/>

Sahlona wal Jabal’s electoral program: https://www.sahlonawaljabal.com/?fbclid=IwAR0a-WIC9dZ8rRdRw_voAlj2fT3TmjAa4lhok6dxVqgSosHktg9-isG9k

Lana’s political paper: <https://www.lnalebanon.org/political-paper/>

Tahalof Watani’s political vision:

<https://tahalofwatani.org/%d8%b1%d8%a4%d9%8a%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%a7/>

C. Centrist Discourses: How Class Struggle Gets Sidelined

“The entrance to class struggle is social protection yet the opposition doesn’t champion it. Even left-leaning groups only pay lip-service to it through vague and weak language.”

(Interview 8, former LPA, 03/06/2022)

Due to neoliberal policies, systemic corruption, and clientelistic practices, Lebanon has always struggled to establish a dependable public welfare system that guarantees people’s rights to education, healthcare, shelter, and a decent life. Regressive social assistance policies that are gatekept have had the edge over redistributive mechanisms of a universal nature which strengthen loyalty for the state over sectarian patrons. According to an interviewee heavily involved in and informed on the labor movement, one of the opposition’s main challenges is its lack of inclusivity of marginalized social classes:

“The new opposition makes flawed assumptions about the population. In order for people to be able to revolt, you need some type of safety net to fall back on. If you skipped work, you need a bit of savings. If you’re sick, you need insurance. If you’re fired from your job, you should be able to protest without fear, while telling your sectarian leader that you don’t need them because you have unemployment benefits. But most people in Lebanon, especially blue-collar workers, don’t have these rights. This is the key to understanding the lack of mobilization – that the protection of these people is solely based on their patron-client relationship. Whereas, when you are part of the bourgeoisie, it is much easier for you to protest.”

(Interview 8, former LPA, 03/06/2022)

The October 17 uprising distinguished itself from past mobilizations precisely because of its class-based and decentralized character, particularly during the movement’s early days. Indeed, chants such as “Class-based! Class-based! Our battle is class-based!” and the Arab Uprising’s infamous “bread, freedom, and social justice” swept the streets. Once the movement began losing its momentum, an interviewee noticed

costly, and disincentivize hard work.¹⁰² Such neoliberal stances on poverty and class are well captured by the following commentary:

“If someone has money, people assume he is a criminal and if someone doesn’t, they assume he is working class. But if you look more closely, the person with money has spent their life working tirelessly to get these things while the broke person spent their days in the casino and cabarets, spending money on women, gambling and drugs.” (Interview 4, Khat Ahmar, 01/06/2022)

These classist sentiments fall within a discursive repertoire that, as iterated by Brown, economizes subjectivities and views humans as a form of capital, who should always be productive. Furthermore, they undermine labor as a category and eliminate its collective form, class, making it harder for class consciousness to emerge. Literature has shown that processes of democratization were much more successful in contexts with active labor movements that center class in their struggle: in Tunisia, the General Labor Confederation played a central role in the overthrow of Ben Ali in 2011 while Sudan’s Professionals’ Association was also a key player in the ousting of Al Bashir in 2019.¹⁰³

While the 2019 uprising in Lebanon did trigger attempts to reignite a labor movement that had been repressed throughout the postwar period, an interviewee noted that those efforts were led by individuals mostly organizing around professional orders rather than workers’ unions (Interview 8, former LPA, 03/06/2022). Professional orders are different from unions in that they are meant to organize their respective profession – decision makers in those contexts are rarely seen playing a political role by calling for protests or strikes. On the other hand, and from a historical standpoint, workers’ unions

¹⁰² Irwin, Neil. “Unemployment is High. Why are Businesses Struggling to Hire?” *New York Times*, April 16, 2021.

¹⁰³ El Gizouli, Magdi. “Mobilization and Resistance in Sudan’s Uprising: From Neighborhood Committees to Zanig Queens.” *Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper*, 2020; Netterstrøm, Kasper Ly. “The Tunisian General Labor Union and the Advent of Democracy.” *Middle East Journal*, 70(3), 2016, pp. 383–398.

have been key in struggles for social justice and equality around the world, particularly by exercising the power of withholding labor.¹⁰⁴

Lebanon – a country that is regarded as a beacon of neoliberalism since its inception – has had a number of notable general strikes throughout its history that led to improved workers’ conditions: In May 1946, a women-led strike by tobacco workers at the “Regie” company risked spiraling into a general strike across the public sector following the death of 19-year old Warde Butros Ibrahim at the hands of the army.¹⁰⁵ This forced the company to negotiate with workers and ultimately led to parliament passing the, albeit flawed, Lebanese Labor Law. Similarly, in 1972, workers at the Ghandour factory also went on strike and were brutally repressed, leading to two deaths that triggered a national strike.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, fired workers were reinstated and minor improvements in labor legislation followed. These types of direct actions in the prewar period, which reflected a strong sense of class consciousness and class power, came in a context where communist and socialist ideologies were far more widespread.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, union federations led by the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and the Communist Action Party were integral political players but they lost influence over the course of the civil war, as many leftist leaders were assassinated, and as the USSR collapsed.¹⁰⁸

Attempts to reignite the labor movement in the postwar period took place again through the General Labor Confederation (CGTL) in the 1990s, though one might wonder how much these mobilizations were fundamentally based on the needs of workers, or if

¹⁰⁴ Bou Khater, Lea. *The Labour Movement in Lebanon: Power on Hold*, Manchester University Press, 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Jirmanus Saba, Mary. “The Power of Withholding Labor: The General Strike as Cultural Work,” *The Public Source*, January 20, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Traboulsi, Fawwaz. *A History of Modern Lebanon*, Pluto Press, 2007.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

they merely reflected a fight over political power between former president Emile Lahoud, who was close to CGTL leader Elias Bou Rizk, and former PM Rafic Hariri.¹⁰⁹ Regardless, the CGTL was completely co-opted by the end of the decade through fraudulent electoral practices that brought the Amal Movement to power.¹¹⁰ Public sector workers, particularly teachers, tried mobilizing in the early 2010s in demand of a better salary scale and, though they resisted valiantly, their movement was also torpedoed through the co-optation of the league of secondary public school teachers in January 2015.¹¹¹

Overlapping with the Spinneys supermarket employees' strike of 2012, this was the last concerted effort at organizing a large-scale labor movement led by workers themselves.¹¹² Since then, labor mobilization efforts have mainly focused on the elections of professional orders, beginning with the election of Jad Tabet of the Naqabati list as head of the Order of Engineers and Architects in 2017.¹¹³ Alternative opposition groups engaged in similar organizing efforts following the October uprising, first getting Melhem Khalaf elected as head of the Beirut Bar Association,¹¹⁴ and then winning in the Order of Engineers and Architects amongst others.¹¹⁵ These movements, although effective in undermining the hegemony of traditional parties, did not conceive of the struggle in class terms, nor did they prioritize the broader political role that a class-based

¹⁰⁹ Bou Khater, Lea. *The Labour Movement in Lebanon: Power on Hold*, Manchester University Press, p.68-74, 2022.

¹¹⁰ Baroudi, Sami. "Economic Conflict in Postwar Lebanon: State-Labor Relations between 1992 and 1999." *Middle East Journal*, 52(4), 1998: 531-550

¹¹¹ Bou Khater, Lea. "Public Sector Mobilization Despite a Dormant Workers' Movement," *Confluences Méditerranée* 92, 2015, pp. 125-142.

¹¹² Safieddine, Hicham. "Unionizing in Lebanon: The Struggle is Elsewhere," *Jadaliyya*, October 11, 2012.

¹¹³ Mouawad, Jamil. "Lebanese Trade Unions and Independent Professional Associations: A Review in Light of the Popular Movement," Arab Reform Initiative, November 9, 2021.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Chehayeb, Kareem. "Anti-Government Engineers Hopeful after Lebanon Syndicate Victory," *Al Jazeera English*, July 1, 2021.

movement could have. Instead, the labor movement became about pragmatic alliances between the left and the right rather than the development of a substantive popular force for radical change:

“Putting aside the fact that professional orders have regressive structures because they lump together business owners and employees, the labor struggle lost its meaning by making it about how to unite all groups that claim to belong to the opposition, from the left all the way to the extreme right.” (Interview 3, formerly LiHaqqi, 01/06/2022)

All these groups were fighting over a piece of the pie, splitting seats between one another, with each claiming to represent a portion of the opposition when, in fact, all of these groups only had a few dozen active members at most. As iterated by an interviewee: “They were negotiating over shares in a large opposition movement which they don’t control nor represent” (Interview 7, Mada & Beirut Tuqawem. 03/06/2022).

All my sources hence provide findings that demonstrate how, although new opposition groups recognize the importance of reigniting the labor movement, they focused exclusively on organizing within professional orders rather than trade unions. They also show how they failed to center working class politics in their rhetoric. Indeed, when I raised the issue of labor struggle and class consciousness during interviews, none of the respondents mentioned that their group is working on reforming the Labor Law, or introducing unemployment benefits, or fixing the General Labor Confederation’s archaic and regressive internal structure. When class issues were mentioned, it was always through discussions surrounding poverty or universal healthcare and education, but never in the context of labor power and its larger transformative potential.

Bayat would argue that the focus on top-down reforms, rather than anti-capitalist class struggle, emanates from a lack of revolutionary ideology and organization. This disconnect from working class politics can also be explained through Fisher’s theory of

capitalist imaginaries, or the idea that neoliberal ideology has become so normalized that we cannot conceive of radical alternatives to the status quo, so instead, we resort to reformist solutions that do not destabilize existing systems. This thought-process, nurtured through decades of socialization under neoliberal hegemony, qualifies as a subtle yet insidious counterrevolutionary ideological tool that is in constant operation: it is observed in the drafting of political programs, the formation of alliances, the discussion of strategies, or the diagnosis of the ills of the regime. In the following section, I further examine how the new opposition diagnoses the regime, revealing how political imaginaries are mostly reformist, and facilitate elite capture.

CHAPTER V

COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY IMAGINARIES

A. The Reformist Blueprint: How Pragmatism Facilitates Elite Capture

“There are corrupt people in this country, and there are corrupt people in all political groups, so we must identify who is corrupt in the state and in the private sector, and who is up to the task of managing the country and the economy.” (Interview 9, Sabaa, 07/06/2022)

Lebanon has long been regarded as a highly corrupt country, ranking 154th out of 180 in Transparency International’s latest Corruption Perception Index (CPI). Traditional political parties have also long argued that Lebanon’s ills emanate from corrupt practices, and that tackling corruption is the entry point to resolving the country’s deeper issues. Indeed, the two largest parties currently in Parliament – the Free Patriotic Movement and Lebanese Forces – both rose to prominence in 2005 as anti-establishment parties vying to cleanse the state from mismanagement and theft. Yet, they are accused by many to have become complicit of the regime, engaging in the sectarian apportionment of government positions and in the clientelistic distribution of privileges to their constituents.

Similar to FPM and LF, all new opposition groups call for more qualified representatives in public functions and want to hold corrupt politicians accountable. However, some more progressive oppositionists contend that Lebanon’s ills do not lie in individuals, but rather emanate from the neoliberal-sectarian system itself. This tension

reflects a broader and ongoing debate over who the opposition movement ought to oppose – the system as a whole or the establishment?

In the early days of the October 17 uprising, people collectively chanted the Arab Uprisings’ renowned chant “al-shaab yurid ‘iskat al-nizam” (the people want to overthrow the regime) without necessarily agreeing on what the “regime” represents. Over time, and through public talks in revolutionary squares, I recall conversations shifting from diagnoses of the “nizam” (regime) to attacks against the “manzume” (establishment). For some, this nuance might be interpreted as semantics. I believe it reflects a fundamental difference that shapes visions and strategies of political transformation. According to a former LiHaqqi member (Interview 3, 01/06/2022), reformists in the new opposition tend to relegate the “regime” to issues of sectarianism, focusing on electoral laws, religious courts, and clientelism, but leaving out the socioeconomic core, which is the cornerstone of the capitalist regime. He also adds how, when socioeconomic issues are raised, they often became diluted through vague discourse around matters of anti-corruption, retrieving stolen public funds, or tackling poverty, without proposing any substantive programmatic solutions. LiHaqqi was one of the few groups that tried, in theory, to propose a different roadmap which ultimately failed:

“The discourse [of LiHaqqi] from October 17 until what preceded electoral campaigns was one of the most radical amongst opposition groups, because it called for the formation of alternative structures like neighborhood councils and workers’ unions, in order to confront the regime outside its own arena... But LiHaqqi is ideologically heterogeneous, as it includes radical leftists as well as centrists. In order to keep these people together, you have to compromise, dilute your discourse as an organization, and come up with labels and principles that satisfy everyone. That’s what happened but it made LiHaqqi lose its identity and discourse which, over time, shifted closer to that of centrist opposition parties and the March 14 camp.” (Interview 3, formerly LiHaqqi, 01/06/2022)

This phenomenon reflects a broader process of deradicalization that shifted the discussion from how to uproot the system and create a new one towards matters of uniting the opposition and gaining representation within the state. Indeed, prior to the elections, groups like LiHaqqi did seek to center matters of wealth concentration, workers' exploitation, redistributive practices, and a democratic economy. Nevertheless, such discussions were not championed by most other opposition groups, who focused instead on grabbing power. The evident focus on unity and seizing power through a transitional government or elections reflected, consciously or unconsciously, an alignment with the "manzume" diagnosis rather than the "nizam".

Political actors certainly rely on different tools of contestation to reach their goals, from organizing peaceful marches or strikes, to violently rioting, or participating in elections. In Lebanon's case, most new opposition groups opted for the reformist electoral route, particularly once avenues for change through the streets were disrupted. While progressive groups that are represented in Parliament, like Beirut Tuqawem, acknowledged that "one shouldn't drown in Parliament and think that it's politics' unique stage" (Interview 7, 03/06/2022), others like Taqaddom claimed that it is the best place to lead political battles today:

"The 13 MPs who won represent, to an extent, the different segments of the uprising, and they are now in Parliament alongside traditionalists and oppositionists, so although Parliament is divided, it does reflect society and its fragmentations. In turn, Parliament is the best place to discuss those divisions and it is where everything should happen, for there is no political table that is equivalent to formal institutions." (Interview 2, Taqaddom, 31/05/2022)

Regardless of disagreements between "change MPs" over the centrality of Parliament in the struggle for change, they all do ascribe to a gradualist approach to political transformation which stands to gain from representation in Parliament. This

gradualist approach, as iterated by a majority of interviewees, assumes that there are cracks and contradictions within the system that the opposition could exploit. According to the Taqaddom member, “our representatives can show a new way of doing politics and parliamentary work, so this will push the rest of Parliament to work” as they vow to present legislative proposals and garner support for them (Interview 2, Taqaddom, 31/05/2022). Critics of this approach note that this strategy assumes that Lebanon is truly a democracy where decision-making lies in the hands of Parliament (Interviews 1, 3, 6, and 8). In reality, Parliament has throughout the postwar period only served as a vehicle to enact decisions made by sectarian leaders, beginning with the Hariri-Berri-Jumblatt troika, and followed by settlements between the March 8 (Amal-Hezbollah-FPM) and March 14 (Future-PSP-LF) camps.¹¹⁶ Considering that the interests of traditional parties overlap, particularly when it comes to their stances on the economy and financial sector, it is essentially impossible for “change MPs” to enact any law without their approval, as this interlocutor remarks:

“They want to legislate, but parliamentary committees are very well captured by the establishment, so they can’t do anything: They can’t pass any law, nor can they block one, so what is the objective from entering Parliament exactly?” (Interview 8, former LPA, 03/06/2022)

The quoted labor organizer claims that, rather than further demoralize society through failed attempts at top-down change through Parliament, the workers’ struggle should be the focus of the opposition movement instead. A former LiHaqqi member also adds that the idea that bottom-up change is a long-term plan while elections are short-term solutions is a false dichotomy:

¹¹⁶ The Kataeb are members of the March 14 camp and took part in various settlements with March 8 since 2005 but, due to their smaller political representation, were also left out of some bigger negotiation tables.

“Even if you win seats in Parliament, they won’t change anything in the short-term, and that’s without mentioning the deep state and how it operates. While any systemic change will take time, there are bottom-up solutions like solidarity initiatives that can meet some short-term needs for specific communities.” (Interview 3, formerly LiHaqqi, 01/06/2022)

According to a political organizer that backs progressive MPs – specifically Ibrahim Mneimneh, Halimeh Kaakour, Firas Hamdan, and Michel Douaihy – left-leaning groups are aware of Parliament’s limitations and recognize that there are other avenues for change, yet contend that participating in elections alongside right-leaning candidates was still the correct decision:

“From our perspective, the electoral path was imposed. The regime and segments of the opposition forced elections upon everyone. Due to the existing balance of power, which wasn’t in our favor, we had to run and, in my opinion, the participation of the majority of the Left was a positive thing. If the whole Left had boycotted, the 13 MPs would have all been neoliberals like those in the Lebanese Opposition Front, but instead we now have 4 or 5 progressive ones.” (Interview 7, Mada & Beirut Tuqawem, 03/06/2022)

According to some interviews, the victory of left-leaning MPs came at the cost of pragmatic concessions that undermined their progressive rhetoric in the eyes of certain voters (Interviews 1, 3, and 5): By allying with right-leaning opposition MPs and many other conservative candidates, progressives were implying to voters that winning is more important than being true to one’s principles, that politics in Lebanon remains about opportunism rather than concrete programs. This messaging was further cemented when the 13 “change MPs” announced that they would form a parliamentary bloc, though the bloc never issued a clear list of objectives, policies, or roadmap that united them.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Many public intellectuals and activists pushed back against the self-described “unity” of the “change bloc”, arguing that electoral campaigns alone reveal irreconcilable contradictions between the 13 MPs. For instance, one political scientist stressed: “There are calls from the “change” camp to give new MPs a chance. What are electoral campaigns for, then? Was it just a warmup? Aren’t we allowed to say that some of them do not represent us?” https://twitter.com/JamilMouawad/status/1527347718750089217?s=20&t=ISzw_sr9B5C1ywL5aMuzyw

Due to this lack of alignment and poor organizing, the “change bloc” clashed repeatedly in front of the public eye, beginning with the very first parliamentary session, when MPs were tasked with electing a Speaker of Parliament and their deputy. During that session, all 13 MPs reportedly voted for Ghassan Skaff as Deputy Speaker, an independent MP from Bekaa 2 who ran with the PSP and Muslim Brotherhood, and won with only 776 votes due to the sectarian allocation of parliamentary seats. Skaff, who was backed by all the March 14 parties, received 60 of 128 votes, losing narrowly to the March 8 candidate Elias Bou Saab of the FPM. The “change MPs” were heavily criticized for that decision, as it seemed like they had been co-opted by the March 14 camp from the outset. It was later revealed that prior to the session, the “change bloc” had an internal vote that led to the decision to elect Skaff: 7 MPs voted in favor of Skaff,¹¹⁸ forcing the remaining 6 to concede or risk revealing to the public that the bloc was, in fact, not in harmony from the start:

“What happened with Skaff, from the perspective of our base of support, was really bad and we were heavily blamed. We knew that some of the other MPs were blackmailing us, and we tried resisting until the final moment, but the pressure inside Parliament was mounting for our bloc to make one choice and not two. Since Skaff was the choice of the majority, we had to accept it because this is what makes us look serious and effective in front of public opinion” (Interview 7, Mada & Beirut Tuqawem, 03/06/2022)

The choice to vote for Skaff was a difficult one for “change MPs” because some saw him as a politically-independent figure with a clean track record. It was revealed, however, that Skaff was not only close to the PSP, but also ran twice with the Future Movement for head of the Order of Physicians, in 2010 and 2013. Regardless, some

¹¹⁸ Paula Yaacoubian, Rami Finge, Elias Jradeh, Yassin Yassin, Waddah Sadek, Mark Daou, and Najat Saliba voted in favor of electing Skaff while Halimeh Kaakour, Michel Douaihy, Ibrahim Mneimneh, Firas Hamdan, Cynthia Zarazir, and Melhem Khalaf were against.

segments of the opposition agreed with that choice. As articulated by a member of Madinati:

“Where’s the issue with Ghassan Skaff? He has a great personal track record, regardless of his past political affiliations...We [as an opposition] are too principled and lack political maturity in terms of reading situations and picking the lesser evil. The PSP candidate won’t be worse than the FPM’s, at least when it comes to civil rights issues. Traditional parties understand tactics, and that’s what we lack.” (Interview 5, Madinati, 02/06/2022)

As we can see, the new opposition in Parliament is facing the challenge of determining where to draw the line between pragmatic concessions and sticking to principles. During their first five months in office, and in the lead up to presidential elections, tensions within the “change bloc” progressively amplified. In the month of September 2022, “change MPs” engaged in a “presidential initiative” where they visited each parliamentary bloc to present to them broad principles and criteria for a suitable candidate. During the first failed session to elect a president on 29 September, the bloc voted for Salim Eddé, a millionaire businessman whose father held various ministerial posts between 1966 and 1998. Eddé had not announced his candidature and the bloc had not formally met with him to discuss his political views and programmatic stances. Eddé’s name was subsequently dropped, as it became clear that he was, in fact, not interested in the position. The “presidential initiative” was hence heavily criticized by segments of the opposition for failing to propose a serious candidate and for its lack of transparency and coordination with the public. As noted by an activist on their social media page:

“If “change” MPs had consulted their bases and groups in order to come out with a qualified candidate for president, then it would have been politically logical for them to visit other parliamentary blocs and pitch their candidate who has popular support. But them dealing with the situation without consulting their bases, and their crude meetings with

symbols of the establishment, reflects political naivety on the one hand, and turning against October 17 on the other.”¹¹⁹

The “change bloc” began to collapse on 18 October 2022 – symbolically, a day after the uprising’s three-year anniversary – during a session to reelect parliamentary committees. During the committee elections, Ibrahim Mneimneh was the only MP to lose his seat in the crucial Finance and Budget Committee, as he only received 44 votes while March 8-backed Adnan Traboulsi received 60 votes. Mark Daou unexpectedly ran for the same committee and received 22 votes, which would have been more than enough to secure Mneimneh’s reappointment. An awkward exchange between the two MPs followed on Twitter (Image 1),¹²⁰ accompanied by the withdrawal of Michel Douaihy from the bloc on the same day, signaling that the alliance was officially collapsing.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Facebook post by Jad Lezeik on September 18, 2022:

<https://www.facebook.com/jad.lezeik/posts/pfbid02xuV6Qdr1uji6UkSy7CQCqEcGJEnq7rbXV78bwJux7mADb65UobAp8bMgVZoQREtfl>

¹²⁰ The twitter exchange between Daou and Mneimneh can be accessed here: https://twitter.com/Ibrahim_mneimne/status/1582472274665357312

¹²¹ Michel Douaihy’s statement announcing his withdrawal from the “change bloc”: <https://twitter.com/MDOUAIHY/status/1582365288367935488>

Figure 3: Screenshot of the Twitter exchange between MP Ibrahim Mneimneh and MP Mark Daou on 18 October 2022.



This reality further cemented itself during the fourth failed session to elect a president on 24 October, when 8 of the 13 MPs voted for Dr. Issam Khalifeh – a public university professor and unionist – while Waddah Sadek and Rami Finge elected Michel Mouawad, and Mark Daou and Najat Saliba voted for a “new Lebanon”. Paula Yaacoubian did not attend the session as she was reportedly sick. Sadek announced his withdrawal from the bloc right after the session, signaling that he may join another coalition.¹²²

Ibrahim Mneimneh added that there are “attempts to pressure the change bloc into falling in line” with a deal to elect Michel Mouawad, a notorious defender of the banking sector who is funded by SGBL chairman Antoun Sehnaoui.¹²³ Mouawad opposes the lifting of banking secrecy and considers that the bankrupt state – hence depositors – bear

¹²² Waddah Sadek’s statement announcing his withdrawal from the “change bloc”: <https://twitter.com/WaddahSadek/status/1584489219791425537>

¹²³ Ibrahim Mneimneh’s statement: https://twitter.com/Ibrahim_mneimne/status/1583055146229338117

responsibility for financial sector losses ahead of commercial banks and the Central Bank.¹²⁴ Supported by the Lebanese Forces, Progressive Socialist Party, as well as other March 14 blocs, he also served on the Finance and Budget Committee since 2018, playing a key role in the mismanagement of the financial crisis and the implementation of the ongoing “shadow plan.”

When talk show host Marcel Ghanem asked Mouawad about Mneimneh’s opposition to his candidature due to his economic stances, he responded that if one can be in an electoral alliance and parliamentary bloc with Khat Ahmar (represented by Waddah Sadek – one of the thirteen “change MPs”) then they should not have an issue with voting for him.¹²⁵ Mouawad’s words reveal the contradictions spurred by pragmatic concessions since the start of electoral campaigns. As interviews showed and as discussed previously, commitment to a non-existent unity has indeed torpedoed attempts at forming a cohesive political “Change” bloc in the face of the banking elite and sectarian leaders. The quest for unity has instead sowed division and doubt within the ranks of the progressive opposition, inside and outside the walls of parliament.

These strategic decisions, I argue, emanate from a “post-ideological” pragmatism; a pragmatism which wagered that a leftist agenda could coexist alongside right-wing ideologies in a context of socioeconomic collapse and class struggle where leverage does not lie in the hands of progressive groups. Before examining the (post)ideologies that undergird these strategic decisions, the next section explores the political imaginaries of

¹²⁴ Laywer Nizar Saghieh stressing that Mouawad is one of the main opponents to the lifting of banking secrecy: <https://twitter.com/nsaghieh/status/1584503724419923968>

Michel Mouawad’s statement regarding who bears most responsibilities for the financial crisis: <https://twitter.com/waqa2e3/status/1575447201207263234?s=46&t=pdR82vU9bM4LdGihOuNcGg>

¹²⁵ The talk show episode that is referenced can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nlFU-JotQ8>

opponentist actors, further showing how neoliberal visions of change restrict what is deemed politically possible.

B. Limited Possibilities: How Neoliberalism Restricts Imagination

“Society isn’t aware that social protection is a right and that it is both realistically possible and easy to implement. But it’s just not in the imagination of people and that’s reflected in the opposition’s demands... Ultimately, we are a society that is disconnected from its rights because we are the beacon of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism started here, not in Chile, in my opinion.” (Interview 8, former LPA, 03/06/2022)

During interviews conducted for this thesis, I closed my conversations with participants by asking them about their prospects, hopes, and visions for Lebanon’s future. Most respondents focused on the role of new opposition MPs, highlighting the importance of pushing for reforms, finding commonalities with likeminded parliamentarians, and knowing when to seize opportunities when they emerge. Some also focused on the need to build bridges between the legislative arena and the grassroots, as the streets can support the efforts of reformist MPs by mobilizing when need be. The LOF interviewees also embraced the process of finding common grounds with different political blocs inside Parliament, viewing it as a natural feature of parliamentary work:

“We consider our pragmatism a good thing. We have this political flexibility and agile positioning, which some people might perceive as opportunism, but we value it.” (Interview 2, Taqaddom, 31/05/2022)

In the end, most answers fell within a pragmatic discursive repertoire, viewing political transformation as trickling down from parliament and being bound to “political realism” – or having “realistic” political expectations (Interviews 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10).

One interviewee, however, had an answer that stood out from the rest. They brought up prefigurative politics – or the idea of developing alternative structures and modes of organization that reflect, or prefigure, the kind of society one thrives for (Interview 3, formerly LiHaqqi, 01/06/2022). Prefiguration was embraced by various radical leftist movements since the turn of the 20th century, and participatory democracy was often its main tenet.¹²⁶ Prefiguration challenges groups to imagine alternative ways of organizing society; alternatives which directly challenge hierarchy, individualism, and capitalist modes of being more broadly. The philosophy behind prefigurative politics, explained by Leach, underscores how “the ends a social movement achieves are fundamentally shaped by the means it employs.”¹²⁷

In the context of Lebanon, this implies that any movement vying for systemic change ought to conceive of new ways of doing politics, rather than engage with the regime’s traditional tools of political apportionment, sabotage, and gridlock. In practice, these capitalist alternatives can take on different forms: participatory democracy within opposition groups, mutual-aid initiatives and worker-owned businesses, cooperative farming and community land ownership, squatting empty apartments or illegally privatized public land, to name a few examples. Although many of these initiatives have existed throughout the world and across history, Lebanon’s new opposition groups have not seriously considered engaging in them. As noted by the former LiHaqqi member when discussing alternative strategies of political contestation:

“There’s a clear hegemony over the way people view political struggle. Even when you explicitly tell people that we should build solidarity networks and alternative structures, they don’t view it as a form of political work but rather as charity. The dominant thinking is that the political path for change is through elections, and that elections are the only space where

¹²⁶ Leach, Darcy K. “Prefigurative Politics,” in *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, (eds. D.A. Snow, D. Della Porta, B. Klandermans and D. McAdam), 2013.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

change can be realistically achieved. Elections give a flawed sense of agency and hope.” (Interview 3, formerly LiHaqqi, 01/06/2022)

This interviewee experienced that reality firsthand, as LiHaqqi was one of the only political organizations which proposed, in theory, the idea of developing alternative structures outside those of the regime and working through them. The problem, as they recount, was that this radical idea was not implemented in practice and was instead subjected to “tremendous co-optation” by charity and NGO models:

“We spoke about developing a solidarity or cooperative economy, though no one really understood the difference between the two. They created something called “Tadamon El-Ness” (People’s Solidarity), which is mostly comprised of LiHaqqi members but is a separate entity. With time it became modeled like a charity; it wasn’t taking money from philanthropists, but it was taking from some people and giving to others. It wasn’t a sustainable, community-based, mutual-aid model which could impact day-to-day life. LiHaqqi wasn’t even able to establish one cooperative in its core community of Chouf-Aley. That work was eventually dropped from LiHaqqi’s activities, and transferred to a new NGO called Daleel Tadamon (Solidarity Directory), run by [former and current] LiHaqqi members.” (Interview 3, formerly LiHaqqi, 01/06/2022)

Although LiHaqqi failed in its efforts, it was one of the only organizations that, in theory, saw the importance of developing class-conscious tools of contestation with the regime. This reflected an awareness that elections were a limited avenue for change, and that society lacked alternatives to clientelist and capitalist institutions. The only other interviewee who did depict a drastically different Lebanon described it as a futuristic, technology-based nation which has “leaped forward a generation” by integrating smart governance and new technologies to its day-to-day life (Interview 4, Khat Ahmar, 01/06/2022). One example they provided was “internet roads” – or an Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) where new infrastructures would combine people, roads, and self-driving vehicles through an embedded system with enhanced digital

connectivity.¹²⁸ While this type of political imagination surely echoes innovative scientific outlooks, it remains rooted in the capitalist mainstream that measures progress based on the types of goods and services available for the middle classes and the rich. It is not a political imagination that dares to envisage a post-capitalist, counter-culturalist, and post-growth society that challenges neoliberal givens such as the commodification of housing, the inevitability of poverty, the patriarchal-nuclear household as the basic social unit, or humanity's extractive relationship with the environment. This reluctance and quasi-inability to dream of political utopias, as argued by Fisher is one of capitalism's defining ideological features and strongest subtle tools of self-reproduction.¹²⁹ In the final section, the tenets of neoliberal 'post-ideology' in the Lebanese context are explored.

C. Ideology in a Post-Ideological Age: How to Dilute the Left

"If you appear on television in Lebanon and call yourself a leftist, you will get attacked the next day... However, you can call yourself a leftist if you showed some reconciling with the right." (Interview 7, Mada & Beirut Tuqawem, 03/06/2022)

Ideology, in its most basic sense, is regarded as a system of ideas and values which shape political, social and economic stances. Conservative theorists like Fukuyama posit that "the decline of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe marks the culmination of ideological struggle."¹³⁰ Just like Milton Friedmann had argued, Fukuyama contends that "free-market capitalism, not socialism, was the final step in the

¹²⁸ Barrero, F., Toral, S.L., Vargas, M. & Milla, J. "Internet in the development of future road-traffic control systems," *Internet Research*. 20, 2010: 154-168.

¹²⁹ Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism*, Zero Books, 2009.

¹³⁰ Decker, James M., *Ideology*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p.161.

process of historical evolution.”¹³¹ The United States’ victory over the USSR had essentially eliminated the need to debate ideology, for capitalism had triumphed globally and ushered in a new ‘post-ideological’ age where “the struggle over the mechanism for change has been replaced by debate over pragmatic solutions to local problems.”¹³² In other words, ideology had not ceased to exist: We simply live in a world where alternatives to capitalism, as a way to organize and imagine the world, have largely gone extinct. Mark Fisher also argues that we cannot envision an alternative to capitalism because it has become so ingrained in us that we don’t even notice our role in reproducing it. This argument draws on Engels’ conceptualization of ideology through the theory of false consciousness:

“According to Engels...false consciousness represents a situation wherein subjects mistakenly believe that they act autonomously and independently of material constraint when, in fact, the very basis of their mental activity lies in their relation to socially established modes of production. Divorced from an understanding of materialism, ideas reflect not reality but illusion. While subjects may argue that their thoughts are ‘common sense’ or ‘logical,’ a false consciousness view of ideology would suggest that their idealism finds its source in the untenable premise that ideas precede things.”¹³³

The realities of socialization under present-day capitalism – which are accentuated by the spread of Graeber’s “bullshit jobs”, the rise of influencer culture, and the commodification of humans into self-promoting brands – has further bound success and happiness to individualistic wealth accumulation, triggering a mental health crisis that is treated as “natural fact” rather than a symptom of capitalism.¹³⁴ These new social truths, coupled with increasing economic precarity and looming stagflation, have created multilayered global crises that new social movements have struggled to respond to. For

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Decker, James M., *Ideology*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p.7.

¹³⁴ Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism*, Zero Books, 2009, p.19.

Bayat, a key to understanding the disorganized, reformist, and unsuccessful nature of Arab Uprisings is precisely the post-ideological context they emerged in:

“In contrast to the ideological times of the 1970s, the Arab Spring came to fruition in some kind of post-ideological interval; this was the aftermath of 1989 when the anti-communist revolutions in Eastern Europe were to mark the very end of oppositional ideology per se. So, with the end of socialism following the Eastern European revolutions, the very idea of revolution, which was so linked to and informed by socialism, came to an end. It was as though the world had gone beyond to sense the relevance of revolutions. So, the Arab revolutions happened at the time when the very idea of revolution had dissipated.”¹³⁵

This post-ideological context was indeed reflected in conversations I had with interviewees over their understandings of the political Left and Right. Perspectives generally varied: Some rejected ideology outright (Interviews 4 and 9), claiming that it is no longer relevant, that they do not believe in it, and/or that it is bound to naïve clichés and stereotypes. An LOF member described this stance through the following anecdote:

“Reality is that the left-right categorization died with the end of the rivalry between the USSR left and the pro-western plan. So, what are we really debating? Policies. And what are these policies driven by? How you position yourself as a person; let me give you an example: When I am a teenager with limited family income and I’m trying to make it in society, I will be extremely angry about the people who made it, and that is known historically. Once I become an employee and start making more money, I start wondering how I used to think like that. Eventually, I start owning my own company and the young teenager who I used to be like starts looking at me in the same envious way.” (Interview 4, Khat Ahmar, 01/06/2022)

While other groups in the LOF, like Taqaddom or Aamiyet 17 Teshrin, probably do not agree with the above anecdote, they do ascribe to a pragmatic, reactionary, and opportunistic political vision that privileges malleability, diplomacy, and compromise to reach common grounds with rival political actors. Taqaddom, in fact, views itself as a social democratic party but contends that the Left needs to be redefined as to “no longer

¹³⁵ Herrera, Linda & Khalil, Heba. “Critical voices in critical times: revolution without revolutionaries, an interview with Asef Bayat,” openDemocracy, December 14, 2017.

be associated with the likes of the LCP or, even worse, figures like Charbel Nahas” of MMFD. The role of the Left, for Taqaddom as well as other groups not necessarily in the LOF, is to push for a welfare state that facilitates access to basic services, namely healthcare and education. When compared to historical conceptualization of the Left, which focused on ideological class struggle and debated anarchist and communist forms of organizing society, these visions largely dilute leftist aims and bind them to western models of liberal democracy. As posited by the former LiHaqqi member:

“We imported the idea of the Left and the Right from the West: Do you want a State that owns some public services and increases taxes, or do you want more of a laissez-faire privatized model? These are the limits of ideological discussions. The notion that the Left can go beyond these mainstream ideas is no longer present.” (Interview 3, formerly LiHaqqi, 01/06/2022)

To my understanding, the objective of a radical emancipatory perspective is not a return to dogmatic, patriarchal, and hierarchical state-socialist ideologies of the past, nor a transition towards a new, diluted Left that prioritizes consensus and unison at the expense of ideological clarity and consistency. As argued by Bayat, ideology “has the danger of dogma, and the danger of making the ideology so unquestionable that it could be repressive as well”¹³⁶ – this risk led to the downfall of old leftist organizations and leaders, whose authoritarianism quickly revealed itself once they reached positions of power.

The proposed alternative by members of Beirut Tuqawem is to make the Left more unifying and fluid by “not pontificating and articulating the Left” (Interview 7, 03/06/2022). This approach, which seeks to simplify the Left through populist slogans of social justice and human rights, also faces the risks of diluting progressive discourse to

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

the point of co-optation. Although the strategy did result in electoral victories, alliances became the central focus of the electoral debate and sidelined programs. Bayat would even argue that by adopting an approach that builds bridges with ideological and programmatic rivals, “the forces of counter-revolution would have better chance to engage in acts of sabotage and to regroup to restore old order.”¹³⁷ Interviews with groups represented in Parliament, which took place less than a month after the vote, already revealed a certain amount of distrust and conflict between “change MPs” who were suspicious of each other’s intentions and agendas. These rifts only grew deeper with time, culminating with the collapse of the bloc only five months into Parliament’s four-year tenure. I would contend that holding onto the “change bloc” played into the hands of neoliberal ideology because it not only undermined the credibility of new MPs, it also undermined chances of forming a national progressive front. Indeed, the neoliberal strategies adopted thus far by Lebanon’s opposition have been easy to tame for the regime—and Bayat aptly explains the process through which this occurs:

“Neoliberalism has the effect of both creating dissent among the ordinary people, because it generates deprivation, exclusion and inequalities; but it also has had the effect of de-radicalizing the political class, meaning that it presents itself as a way of life for which there is no alternative. Therefore, any changes that should happen, happen within a context of this regime of power and its discourse. Once you do this, you tend to play the same games, deploy the same concepts in your opposition. Neoliberalism has the ability, and the tendency, to incorporate and absorb the radicalism that is coming to challenge it, by commoditizing and marketizing it.”¹³⁸

This phenomenon was most visible four days after the 2022 election results, when the 13 “change MPs” all attended the talk show of mouthpiece of the political and financial establishment, Marcel Ghanem, and were melodramatically congratulated with

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

music, flowers and chants of “Revolution!” live on air.¹³⁹ This scene epitomized the cooptative effects of elections, as new MPs smiled and embraced one another, implying that victory had been achieved when, in reality, living conditions continued to worsen, reaching drastic lows as new MPs remained powerless.

Ultimately, the struggle to overthrow Lebanon’s ruling class will evidently be a protracted one that is bound to smaller and larger victories as well as disappointments. Left-leaning opposition groups have tried to help organize and steer the movement in a progressive direction, allowing it to leverage critical junctures whilst creating new opportunities through concerted mobilization across political arenas. This thesis contends that despite some symbolic victories, the revolutionary movement is getting coopted by center-right oppositionists and traditional March 14 actors, who capitalized on compromises made by the center-left. The untenable relationship between the two camps has imploded with the recent collapse of the “change bloc” and set the movement in a dangerous trajectory of cooptation, demoralization, and possibly elimination. In order to salvage the legacy of October 17, I argue in the final section that an urgent ideological repositioning is needed by leftist actors inside and outside parliament.

¹³⁹ The opening congratulatory scene of the talk show can be accessed here: https://twitter.com/safar_jal/status/1527356621323587599

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: PROJECTING INTO THE FUTURE

In the pre-civil war period, Lebanon's traditional Left was well organized and active within labor unions and federations. The old Left crumbled globally by the end of the 20th century, in part due to anti-communist propaganda, sabotage, and violence, but also due to internal crises. These crises were structural, as a result of outdated and patriarchal leaderships, but also programmatic, due to dogmatic and abstractive language that no longer spoke to people in need of concrete solutions.¹⁴⁰ In Lebanon, the LCP and other leftist organizations lost relevance after the war as cooptative processes of NGO-ization took over, leading to the professionalization and bureaucratization of political activism.¹⁴¹ This depoliticization and deradicalization was accentuated by a rejection of politics as something inherently "bad" due to collective war trauma.¹⁴²

New hope reemerged in the 2010s, though, as a postwar generation grew more mature and sought inspiration in uprisings that erupted across the region. These new movements, devoid of programmatic clarity and strategic experience, fell victim to a range of counterrevolutionary tools in their attempts at defying the neoliberal-sectarian regime in 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2018. The 2019 uprising, although momentous in its scale and affective power, was not triggered directly by new opposition groups, but rather by socioeconomic structural conditions. The victory of 13 "change MPs" in the 2022

¹⁴⁰ Bou Khater, Lea. *The Labour Movement in Lebanon: Power on Hold*, Manchester University Press, 2022.

¹⁴¹ Kingston, Paul. *Reproducing Sectarianism: Advocacy Networks and the Politics of Civil Society in Lebanon*, State University of New York Press, 2013.

¹⁴² Hermez, Sami. *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

elections, though, was a direct testament to the organizing experience acquired over the past decade, and surely signals that a growing portion of society has turned against traditional parties.

However, as discussed throughout this thesis, the new opposition faced a range of internal and external challenges that undermined its long-term prospects and prevented the formation of programmatically-coherent opposition fronts: First, they privileged pragmatic alliances with ideologically incompatible candidates over programmatic alignment. Second, they failed to develop and spread a progressive agenda that could stand in the way of the regime's ongoing shadow economic plan. Third, their centrist discourses and strategies did not speak to working class grievances and could not reignite a class struggle. Fourth, they opted for reformist, top-down strategies that the regime can easily tame and co-opt. Fifth, most groups' political imaginaries did not fundamentally break with those of the regime, or they underwent a process of deradicalization that accompanied the loss of revolutionary momentum over time. Lastly, their strategies and stances appear to be largely driven by a post-ideological perspective that dilutes leftist aims and reproduces the neoliberal-sectarian status quo.

In light of these realities, an ideological repositioning by progressive actors appears to be necessary – a repositioning that redefines expectations from the legislative arena, develops new tools of contestation, and does not shy away from splitting the new opposition along programmatic lines:

“The goal of new MPs should not be to engage in legislation in the classical sense, because it is very clear that we don't have actual legislation in this country. And it's not just about presenting yourself as a political alternative. It's about showing a different way of doing political work by distinguishing between two separate blocks within the opposition: One that is leftist or center-left and another that is center-right. We owe that to people: showing them that political difference ought to be shaped by policy, not sect and geopolitical allegiance... Ultimately, the fault line

between our opponents and allies is the means of distributing financial sector losses. If we can agree on this point and on breaking with the regime, we can overcome the other issues we disagree on. As an opposition, we failed to do so during electoral campaigns.” (Interview 1, MMFD, 30/05/2022)

All progressive actors I spoke to, during fieldwork and casual conversations, agree on the need to consolidate organizing efforts and restructure the opposition into two or three camps. Although everyone recognizes this urgent need, there are no concrete efforts to do so as personal fights, grudges, egos, and political ambitions come in the way of a deal that brings together those vehemently opposed to the banking elite and all sectarian parties. If groups assume collective responsibility for organizational failures, such a progressive front could bring together members from groups like Mada, LiHaqqi, MMFD, Lana, Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi, and Madinati, as well as various other progressive figures. Such a step, if implemented properly, could lead to the spread of a clear socialist agenda that resonates with broad segments of society. It can also establish a sustainable political foundation to build on, in sharp contrast to the short lifespans of alternative political groups of recent years. The establishment of a leftist political front necessitates, however, a reckoning that radical change is a long-term project that is bound to encounter hurdles and defeats. It is also a project that requires radical hope in anti-capitalist alternatives that challenge neoliberal imaginaries and prefigure the kind of society one longs for.

There are no guarantees, however, that a socialist front can or will emerge. For years, the opposition movement has been held back by internal conflicts, tactical differences, and a range of repressive and cooptation tools. If collective accountability does not take place alongside a strategic shift, the opposition movement will likely remain

on a reformist and opportunistic trajectory with a limited political ceiling. The movement may even get completely swallowed by new March 14 actors who are filling the void left by the Future Movement. Without a progressive front that dares imagine a different society and political economy, any fleeting hope for systemic and structural change will be buried.

Lebanon is indeed at a critical juncture as the tenure of president Michel Aoun ended without the election of a new president or the formation of a new government. Political void is the preferred outcome of most traditional parties, allowing them to escape accountability while continuing to rule without oversight. From a humanitarian and socioeconomic perspective, the 2020s risk being one of the worst decades in Lebanon's modern history. This reality alone should suffice in pushing progressive actors towards a more ambitious political vision that is able, on the one hand, to include the most vulnerable segments of society and, on the other, to stand against counterrevolutionary forces inside and outside the neoliberal-sectarian regime.

APPENDIX

Interview #	Affiliation	Date	Location
Interview 1	Muwatinun wa Muwatinat fi Dawla (MMFD)	30/05/2022	Ras Beirut, Beirut
Interview 2	Taqaddom	31/05/2022	Gemmayze, Beirut
Interview 3	LiHaqqi (former)	01/06/2022	Hamra, Beirut
Interview 4	Khat Ahmar	01/06/2022	Gemmayze, Beirut
Interview 5	Madinati	02/06/2022	Manara, Beirut
Interview 6	Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi Li-Muharabat Al-Fassad	02/06/2022	Ras Beirut, Beirut
Interview 7	Beirut Tuqawem & Mada	03/06/2022	Hamra, Beirut
Interview 8	Lebanese Professionals' Association (former)	03/06/2022	Manara Beirut
Interview 9	Sabaa	07/06/2022	Karantina, Beirut
Interview 10	Minteshreen (disbanded)	07/06/2022	Zoom video call

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