

POLICY PAPER

DIVIDED WE FALL: BRINGING TOGETHER LEBANON'S OPPOSITION MOVEMENT

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WHY COALITION BUILDING IS KEY FOR LEBANESE POLITICAL OPPOSITION GAINS IN THE COMING ELECTIONS





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, Lebanese opposition movements have failed to successfully compete with the country's establishment, sectarian parties. The latest parliamentary elections, held in 2018, underscored this political impotence. Ahead of the polls, the establishment parties faced a tide of turning public opinion, as popular anger rose over decades of state neglect and mismanagement. Opposition figures and leaders featured prominently in large-scale protests, offering a non-sectarian alternative. The frustrated crowds seemed impressed, yet – when opposition parties ran in the 2018 elections – they won just one parliamentary seat.

To be sure, opposition parties face intimidating, systemic obstacles when competing in Lebanese elections. Establishment parties have long benefited from a raft of unfair advantages in attracting votes. These factors range from the country's crooked electoral laws, which allow sectarian parties to manipulate voter distribution, to more blunt instruments like bribery and intimidation. Sectarian leaders have also traditionally relied on extensive patronage networks, developed over decades, and dominance of legacy media in Lebanon. These challenges all contributed to the poor voter turnout for opposition groups in the 2018 elections.

Nevertheless, Lebanese opposition groups must shoulder blame for failing to form effective, unified coalitions ahead of parliamentary elections. In 2018, non-establishment parties mustered only the belated, imperfect alliance Kulluna Watani, while long-term coalitions have remained elusive. Confronted with splintered opposition parties, voters struggle to understand what an opposition government would look like, and what policies it would advocate for. Moreover,

the divided opposition parties ceded the opportunity to pool their human and financial resources against the well-resourced, slick electoral machines of Lebanon's establishment parties.

As Lebanon approaches another round of parliamentary elections, scheduled for May 2022, opposition parties face old threats and new opportunities. The establishment parties still enjoy some long-standing, systemic advantages like the biased electoral law and capacity for voter interference. Yet promising cracks have emerged in other traditional sources of the establishment's electoral clout. Once-sturdy patronage networks have partially crumbled amidst Lebanon's unprecedented economic crisis, which many blame on the country's sectarian leaders. Various media outlets have started openly criticising establishment politicians and airing opposition perspectives, albeit within defined parameters for now.

Yet the opposition movement will almost certainly spurn these emerging openings without forming an effective coalition for the upcoming elections. Non-establishment parties acknowledge the necessity of presenting a united front and have started forming some alliances. The alarming fact remains, however, that the opposition movement still lacks a formal, unified coalition – with parliamentary elections a mere seven months away.

If the 2022 elections do proceed, the political stakes will be incredibly high. Form a united coalition, and Lebanese opposition groups stand some chance of gaining a potentially invaluable foothold in Parliament. Remain divided, and the country's establishment political parties will almost certainly sweep the elections yet again, collecting thoroughly undeserved political legitimacy along the way.



WHO IS THE OPPOSITION?

By its nature, Lebanon's opposition movement can only be identified by first demarcating the sectarian establishment that it opposes. Six main political parties dominate parliamentary seats: the Shi'a parties Hezbollah and Amal Movement, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, the Sunni Future Movement, the Christian Lebanese Forces, and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party. Several independent parties and individuals also entered parliament by forming electoral coalitions with the six main establishment parties.

For this paper's purposes, the opposition movement encompasses the political parties that did not win parliamentary seats in the 2018 elections.¹ This criteria for exclusion aligns with the "*kellon yaani kellon*" ("all of them means all of them") label, which came to define the October 17 uprising as opposing the entire sectarian establishment. Under these criteria, this paper identified 23 political opposition groups that adhere to this criteria and received responses from eight: the Lebanese Communist Party, Beirut Madinati, LiHaqqi, Sab3a, Lubnan Yantafid, the National Bloc, Taqadom, and Tahaluf Watani. The paper also benefited from interviewing independent pressure support group Nahw al-Watan.

The difficulty in defining Lebanon's opposition movement provides some early clues about the main challenges facing it. On a policy level, Lebanese voters face confusion about the ideologies and platforms that many opposition parties adhere to, not least because these groups have only recently formed. Procedurally, opposition parties have struggled to form broad coalitions amongst themselves, placing each party at an organizational and financial disadvantage vis-à-vis the establishment parties.

UNITE AGAINST THE MACHINE

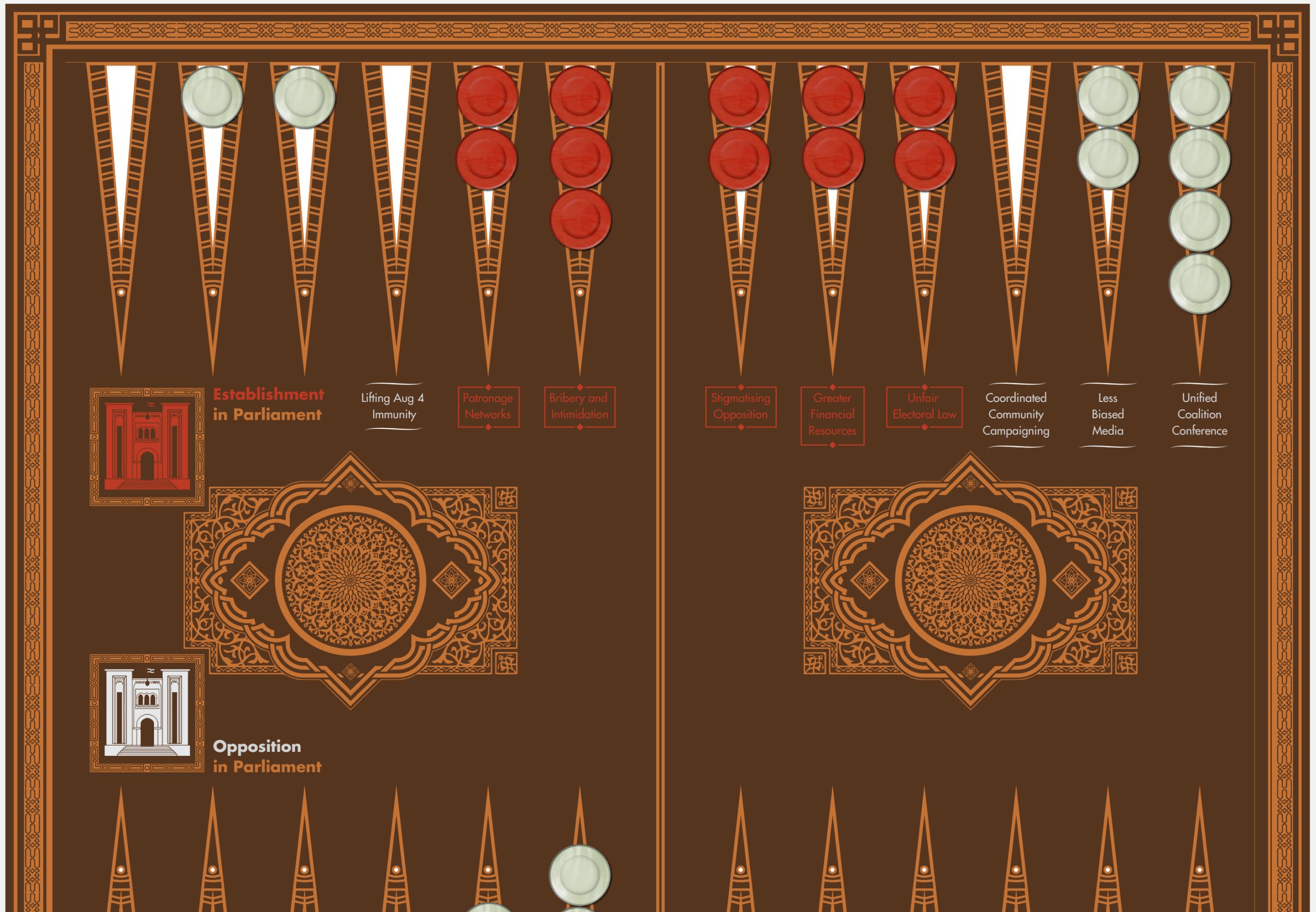
For opposition parties, the 2018 elections demonstrated the crucial importance of forming effective coalitions to challenge the establishment parties. In May 2018, eleven independent and secular groups put forward 66 candidates in a unified electoral list called Kulluna Watani. The list contested nine of Lebanon's 15 electoral districts but won only one seat. The coalition list was weakened by late preparation of the list due to arguments over alliances, a weak common agenda and insufficient local campaigning.²

A strong coalition would have improved opposition parties' prospects of overcoming systemic obstacles facing new entrants to Lebanon's parliament. First, establishment parties benefit from the skewed distribution of financial resources, which places opposition parties at a significant funding disadvantage. In 2018, legacy media – primarily television and radio stations – also favoured establishment parties by charging thousands of dollars per minute for interviews or appearances, putting these opportunities out of reach of most opposition groups.

Some opposition group candidates have gone into debt to finance their electoral campaigns; meanwhile, establishment parties have long hijacked state resources to fuel their patronage networks, or "electoral machines" (*makanat intikhabiyye*), that mobilise voters along electoral, financial, and sectarian lines.³ In this patently unfair contest, new entrants receive virtually no protection from Lebanon's Supervisory Commission for Elections (SCE). The SCE is neither truly independent nor capable of imposing limits on campaign spending

TURNING THE TABLES

HOW THE LEBANESE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT STACKS UP AGAINST OPPOSITION COALITIONS





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or auditing candidates' financial reports.^{4,5} This lack of regulation heavily favours establishment parties, which reportedly flouted official spending limits during the 2018 elections, while also bribing voters with direct payments.⁶

Secondly, a comprehensive opposition coalition would stand a better chance of counteracting the cynical fragmentation of parliamentary challengers under Lebanon's rigged electoral law. Updated in 2017, the electoral law introduced proportional representation at parliamentary elections for the first time. However, the reform favours majoritarian political power, overlaid with some symbolic proportionality, while enabling sectarian gerrymandering of major constituencies. In the 2018 elections, these tactics allowed establishment parties to isolate homogeneous sectarian political blocs, thus imbuing those votes with greater electoral clout. Meanwhile, the lack of effective coalitions made it difficult for opposition groups to form electoral lists efficiently – a problem augmented by the organisational inexperience of many non-establishment candidates and parties.^{7, 8}

LEBANESE OPPOSITION FRONT: A FRUSTRATED DREAM?

Since the 2018 elections, opposition parties and movements have tried to form coalitions capable of

presenting a united front against the establishment. As early as January 2020, prominent opposition groups entered negotiations to establish a formal coalition, which was eventually formed as the Lebanese Opposition Front (LOF – *جبهة سياسية وطنية معارضة*).⁹ The negotiations became more serious towards mid-2020, before the Beirut Port explosion emphasised even further the need for a unified opposition position. At this point, it seemed realistic that most Lebanese opposition parties could use the LOF as an effective and comprehensive coalition ahead of the 2022 elections.

Unfortunately, serious fractures emerged amongst the developing opposition consensus. After the Beirut Port explosion, three Kataeb members of parliament resigned and declared themselves as standing in opposition to the government. For some opposition groups, this crack within establishment politics represented an opportunity to endorse and align with the resigned Kataeb MPs, thus bolstering the opposition's strength by "combining representational credibility with revolutionary credibility".¹⁰ Other non-establishment groups viewed Kataeb's inclusion in opposition coalitions as a betrayal of the opposition movement's revolutionary ethos (See: All of Them Means All of Them). The Beirut port explosion also precipitated a failed attempt to form an opposition government after Hassan Diab's cabinet resigned. The abortive grab for power caused various opposition blocs to start coalescing around broadly left- or right-wing political programs, which amplified ideological differences.

The groups that accepted Kataeb's inclusion eventually formalised the LOF – albeit with a far narrower spectrum of members. As of early September 2021, the LOF remains the only formal opposition coalition in place, comprising members mostly drawn from



smaller groups. These members include Red Line, The Meeting of Tishreen, 17th Rebels, Rally for the Revolution (TMT), Pulse of the Uprising of the South, Union of Northern Revolutionaries, the Third Republic, and the Gathering of Lebanese in France. Three larger groups also participate in the LOF: the Independence Movement, Kataeb, and Progress (Taqadom). In its current manifestation, the LOF – which is described as “predominantly right leaning” but also contains left-leaning groups – has put forward a coalition based on political pragmatism, sovereignty, anti-corruption, and anti-sectarianism.

“We agreed on a common political agenda and that’s the key. When you agree on political objectives you form coalitions. It [the LOF] is not a coalition on political identity ... but there are missions we need to get done ... pragmatically speaking the alliance makes those things more possible.”
– Interview with member of the LOF

The LOF has internal by-laws which stipulate decision-making, as well as internal committees for coordination and leadership which hold regular weekly meetings and workshops on primary political issues in Lebanon. The LOF also issues joint press releases. LOF respondents stated however that it is an aligned and streamlined political opposition front with a clear agenda, but *not* an electoral alliance, and intends to work with all opposition groups on a common electoral list.

INFORMAL COALITIONS

Critiques of the LOF contributed heavily to the proposal of the 13 April Alliance, a separate bloc of opposition groups. On 13 April 2021, 16 political opposition groups released a joint statement calling for a different

opposition coalition. The co-signing groups were Beirut Madinati, Revolution of Lebanon, Street, The People's Observatory for Fighting Corruption, From October (Mintishreen), The National Bloc, The National Alliance (Tahaluf Watani), Protectors of the Constitution, For Us, Rebels of Rashaya and the West Bekaa, Youth of October 17, Beirut Revolutionaries, and Cry of the Nation¹¹.

The formation is yet to become an official coalition, however it has continued expanding membership through a ‘vetting process’ that one interviewee described as taking several months. The formation has not yet released any official press releases nor designated an official representative. They have, however, produced policy documents seen by Triangle, which lay out policy platforms covering issues of civil citizenship, sovereignty, economics, and social and environmental justice.

Box 1: Naqaba Tantafid

In parallel to the April 13 call for a united coalition, a similar bloc of opposition movements joined forces under the list *Naqaba Tantafid* (The Syndicate Revolts) to successfully contest the July 2021 elections for the Syndicate of Engineers. According to parties involved, the electoral process provided a steep learning curve in cooperation and negotiation. Several interviewees cited issues such as a lack of procedural professionalism, especially among newer groups, as well as personality clashes. A further, important concern was the alleged sidelining of women in different stages of the negotiations. Despite the challenges, all respondents said that their parties would willingly participate in a similar coalition in future. The LOF is also participating in syndicate elections in case-by-case cooperation with the April 13 grouping.



The Syndicate of Engineers victory was both influential and symbolic for opposition groups and their efforts to wrest control over non-parliamentary levers of power. Establishment parties have co-opted most of Lebanon's professional syndicates and unions, successfully neutralising organised labour and other forms of potential pressure for reform. Opposition groups hope to replicate their successful cooperation under the *Naqaba Tantafid* ticket in other, upcoming syndicate elections. Electoral targets include syndicates for pharmacists, dentists, lawyers and teachers. These campaigns will be key steps in enhancing opposition groups' ability to campaign in the parliamentary elections.

INDEPENDENT PARTIES

Noticeable absences from the April 13 formation and LOF are some of Lebanon's largest and more experienced opposition groups including LiHaqqi, The Lebanese Communist Party, Sab3a, and Citizens in a State. While expressing support for the need for united coalitions, more established parties cited a lack of professionalism and political clarity as preventing them from forming formal coalitions with less-experienced partners. "We are not interested in forming coalitions just for the sake of having a joint press release... if there is no substantive plan for action, community engagement and serious public mobilisations, then we see no point in spending time forming coalitions," said one major party representative.

LOCATING DIVISION

"When ideology is not what brings groups together, then what is?"¹²

Lebanese opposition parties have historically struggled to form coalitions under comprehensive policy platforms. Opposition alliances tend to lack the clarity of political vision often demonstrated by establishment parties, whose supporters know exactly what to expect from their chosen group. Given the ideological fragmentation of Lebanese opposition parties, Lebanon's 3.6 million eligible voters face a confusing list of options for where to place their votes outside the already extensive list of establishment parties. Moreover, the electorate seems uncertain about why so many different opposition groups exist, and what prevents these groups from unifying. In this way, the opposition's disunity complicates voters' desire to identify parties capable of trusting with their desperate hope for a better future.¹³

Several factors explain the lack of coherence between the policies of opposition groups and movements in Lebanon. In some cases, political alliances have flourished in relation to single-issue campaigns, such as those opposing the Karantina incinerator and the Bisri Dam. The specific objectives of these coalitions meant that political and civil society groups did not need to overcome broader policy disagreements beyond the immediate controversy at hand. However,

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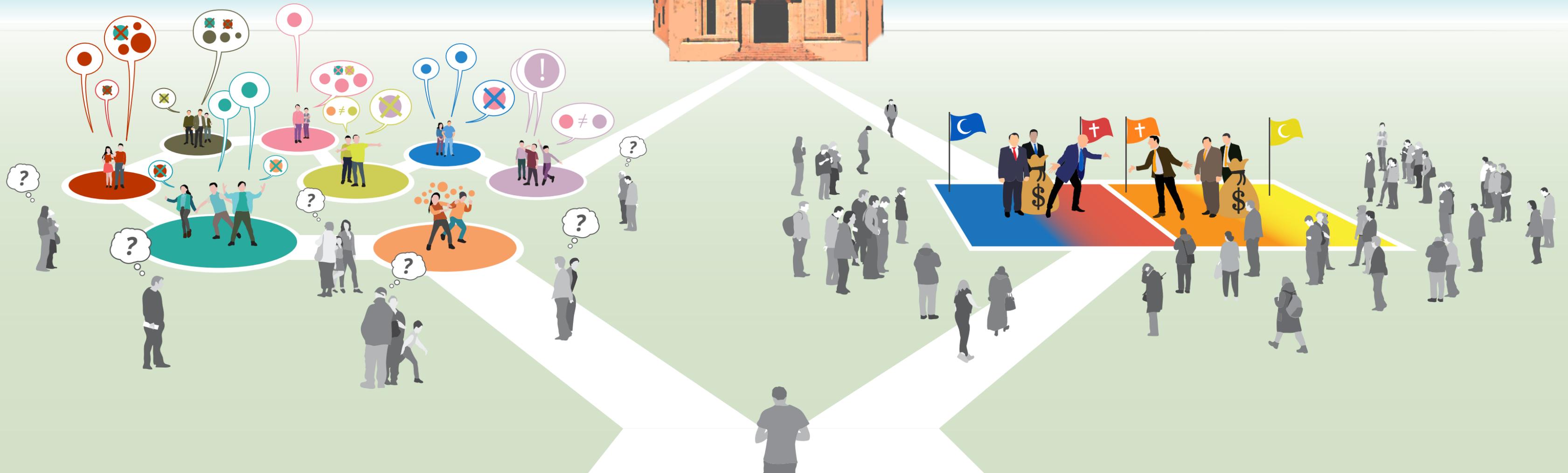
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PATH DEPENDENCE

THE ELECTORATE'S JOURNEY TO NEJMEH SQUARE

OPPOSITION

ESTABLISHMENT





a single-issue based approach means that, prior to the 2018 elections, there were few political programs for voters to support beyond the immediate point of outrage; nor were there political organizations or long-term coalitions to capitalise on the various waves of public mobilization. Public confidence has fallen further due to inconsistency between issues-based protests and election campaigns, as well as logistical hurdles like a lack of permanent staff and consistent funding sources.

Opposition movements have also commonly emerged from Lebanese civil society, which had long provided essential services in lieu of the state, and offered prominent non-sectarian voices on reform issues. Yet, those same civil society-influenced Lebanese opposition groups emphasised de-politicised identities and horizontal consensus-based decision-making structures, which made clear policy positions harder to establish.^{14,15} This often manifested in wide-ranging calls for change around broad-based slogans which enabled wide sectors of the society to “mobilise around easy-to-personalize consensual discourses, clear of ideological and contentious politics. Those same beliefs, however, side-lined the political and structural coronaries of the conflict, as well as the socio-economic grievances that underlined people’s demands on the streets.”¹⁶

Many Lebanese opposition groups have positioned themselves as post-ideological,¹⁷ responding to a combination of societal political cynicism¹⁸ and desire to avoid attackable political labels such as being ‘anti-religious’ or ‘left-wing.’ Lebanon’s bitter history with establishment sectarian politics saw groups claiming to represent the uprisings (in 2015 and 2019) insist that the protests were “apolitical”

and could function without ideological organizing.¹⁹ While equated with pragmatism and non-alignment – where diverse policy challenges require flexible non-ideological positions – a lack of unifying ideology has also contributed to the mushrooming of opposition groups without any clear points of difference, capable of attracting attract voter loyalty. For their part, establishment political parties have done their best to de-legitimise emerging non-sectarian parties by appealing to social fears and stigmas they themselves have entrenched through the institutionalised sectarian system, complex electoral law manipulation, and intimidation tactics.²⁰

BOX II: All of Them Means All of Them?

The revolutionary slogan “all of them means all of them” signalled the opposition’s intention to break away decisively from politicians and parties that participated in previous, establishment governments. Since October 2019, that disqualifying criterion has created rifts between opposition groups, especially in relation to two civil war-era parties: Kataeb and Hezbollah. The LOF included Kataeb as an opposition coalition member after Kataeb’s post-August 4 resignation from the parliament and rebranding as an opposition group. For many opposition figures, Kataeb should play – at most – a supporting role in opposition coalitions, given its participation in several earlier governments alongside the leading establishment parties, not to mention the Lebanese Civil War. Kataeb’s inclusion in the LOF coalition became a major factor in other opposition groups calling for the separate April 13 coalition.



A similar situation causes contention amongst opposition groups in relation to Hezbollah. Certain opposition parties have historical links with Hezbollah, including the Lebanese Communist Party and The People's Observatory for Fighting Corruption. These ties have created rifts with other opposition movements, given that Hezbollah forms an essential pillar of the establishment government. While parties like the Lebanese Communist Party have stopped short of forming official alliances with Hezbollah, some opposition coordination efforts have excluded them based on their informal connections.

- Establishing an independent judiciary.
- Attaining economic justice and a fair distribution of losses in the current financial collapse.
- Holding an independent inquiry into the 4 August Beirut blast and removing political immunity from all suspects.
- Holding forensic audits into the accounts of Banque du Liban and all public institutions.
- Reforming Lebanon's economy towards stronger productive sectors and social protection mechanisms.
- Reforming the electoral law.
- Holding all holders of public office to account for financial and other crimes.

LACK OF PROCEDURAL CONSENSUS

"We have not even sat together to be able to disagree"

A key cause for Lebanese opposition groups failing to mediate policy differences is disarmingly simple: they have not met to discuss those differences. From early 2020, most major opposition parties and movements negotiated about forming the LOF coalition. Those same groups have not, however, held any common dialogue or convention to discuss key points of *policy* agreement and divergence. One major reason for this has been that some parties lack in-depth policies for discussion and/or a broader vision for reforming political culture in Lebanon. Despite these challenges, opposition groups evidently harbour common grievances and targets for change, which could be discussed at such a policy roundtable. Almost all opposition parties agree on:

- De-sectarianising politics to establish a social contract based on equality among citizens.

It must be noted that some of these policy positions remain vague, difficult to define, and are widely touted by those seeking to enter Parliament. On occasion, even establishment parties have campaigned, albeit rhetorically, on anti-corruption reforms and the abolition of political sectarianism. Nevertheless, the common concerns identified do constitute fundamental areas of agreement amongst opposition parties which, if sufficiently discussed and developed, could become the basis for a broad, effective coalition. This potential will remain a forlorn hope, however, if those groups do not meet.

UNPREPARED FOR THE POLLS

The failure to build a strong opposition coalition has left non-establishment parties woefully underprepared for the 2022 elections. With the scheduled polls just months



away, voters seem far from having clear alternatives to the establishment, sectarian system. For information, potential opposition supporters must choose between one official coalition (the LOF), one incipient coalition (April 13), and various high-profile opposition parties that are operating independently. Without a unifying coalition, it remains virtually impossible for voters to understand what an opposition government would look like and advocate for.

Indeed, opposition groups and movements still cannot even agree on whether to plan for this electoral cycle. Some prominent opposition parties are proceeding on the basis that the upcoming elections will be postponed – a familiar event in Lebanese electoral history. Other interviewees warned, however, that the establishment parties could be banking on opposition groups making this assumption. This would lead to the opposition being caught off-guard if the elections proceed in May 2022, as scheduled. Other opposition parties expressed their lack of faith in the electoral process altogether, pointing out the major structural disadvantages endemic to Lebanon's electoral laws. Instead, these groups call for a transitional independent government to pass crucial reforms before any elections occur.

NAHWAL WATAN: ELECTION SPECIALISTS?

One potential step towards better preparation for elections has been the emergence of Nahwal Watan (NW), a new lobbying and electoral campaigning organisation for Lebanese opposition groups. NW intends to form a unified opposition electoral list and electoral machine for 2022, capable of matching the establishment parties. For this purpose, the organisation claims to have engaged a team of professionals with international experience and expertise in electoral

management and political organizing. So far, NW has contacted parties from both the LOF and April 13 groupings, as well as parties outside both alliances.

While NW responds to a clear need for coordinated opposition campaigning, important questions remain about the organisation. NW has not clearly identified its funding sources and includes political figures with previous ties to the Lebanese establishment. On a practical level, NW faces considerable obstacles to achieving a true consensus amongst opposition parties. As of early September 2021, NW has still not signed MOUs on electoral campaigning with any opposition parties. It is unclear how NW will resolve different terms between the MOUs signed with various opposition groups, even though it plans to seek equal terms across all prominent parties. The proposed candidate selection process looms as another potential stumbling block for the NW experiment. Triangle understands that parties will need to submit candidates to NW, which will retain final decision-making power. This system means that there is a chance that opposition parties' preferred candidates may not pass NW's vetting criteria, posing a risk of further delay and / or groups abandoning the process altogether.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The ancient adage of 'divide and conquer' has never lost political relevance and bears a timely warning for the Lebanese opposition today. Forming a united front remains a fundamental pre-requisite to re-balancing the structural disadvantages facing opposition groups in Lebanon. The 2022 elections cannot be taken lightly. Even with a rigged system, the opposition does have a chance to win seats in Parliament, which would signify



a shift away from 30 years of sectarian establishment rule. However, the opposition movement risks ceding fresh legitimacy to Lebanon's political elites, unless it can put up the strongest electoral fight possible. And, that fight – without doubt – will be best fought through a powerful opposition coalition.

A first step must be coordination and conduct of an inclusive unified conference of opposition groups. This would form the basic platform for negotiating through political difference and attract significant publicity to the fact that the opposition takes its responsibility to succeed seriously. The agenda of such a conference must separate debates and decision-making across immediate primary barriers to cooperation, and relegate longer-term secondary issues that can be worked on at later stages. Primary issues in this respect include:

- Establishing minimum criteria for official registration and recognition of opposition parties, including membership numbers, internal procedural requirements and the presentation of a foundational policy platform.
- Replacing consensus decision-making within the coalition with a three-quarter majority requirement to prevent 'spoilers' from delaying progress.
- Delineating space for contested establishment parties and figures, or smaller non-registered parties who wish to be involved in the opposition to play supporting roles without undue influence over decision-making.
- Identifying and agreeing upon issues pertinent to electoral performance – such as community engagement and list formation strategies – while separating others, such as Hezbollah's weapons, to later stages of policy negotiation and implementation.

- Creating a clear position statement about participation and attitudes to elections under an establishment-biased electoral law. Key issues include independent monitoring of elections, enabling fair representation and allocation of the diaspora vote, and proposing a new alternative electoral law.

Opposition groups should also seek to snowball their successes in syndicate elections to other representative bodies such as unions to increase their structural power. Further, broadening the coalition to include small and medium business owners, and other sectors of the productive economy hit hard by the crisis, will increase the level of non-political pressure on the establishment.

Opposition groups must also establish long-term support building programs in parallel to their electoral ambitions. Building trust with communities to counter establishment parties' clientelist networks is long-term work. It requires social solidarity and committed effort that reduces the reliance of poorer voters on benefits distributed by establishment parties. This also supports political agency and a sense of belonging that helps reduce sectarian identification among voters.

EDITOR'S NOTE (UPDATED)

Correction: The initial publication of this paper incorrectly stated that eight Kataeb members of parliament resigned following the Beirut blast of 4 August, 2020. This has been corrected to three Kataeb members of Parliament.

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