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13 YEARS AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS:
THE STRATEGIC CHOICES OF LEBANON'S
ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT MOVEMENT

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About the author

Karim Safieddine is a Non-Resident Fellow (2023-2024). He is a doctoral student interested in understanding the ways in which social movements, for what they represent in terms of various aspects of intellectual and organizational leadership, challenge or reproduce prevailing power relations and ideological norms between late 20th and 21st century Lebanon.

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Cover photo: Lebanese demonstrators gather at Martyrs' Square for an anti-government protest against dire economic conditions and new tax regulations on communication on October 18, 2019 in Beirut, Lebanon.
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Introduction

In 2011, the Arab world embarked on a series of popular insurrections that called for the rejection of authoritarianism, rising inequality, and unemployment. Millions of people across the region joined the protests to break the cycle of fear created by neoliberal police states that had a strong hold on their daily lives. In the case of Lebanon, street protests had a somewhat different angle: the struggle for the fall of the sectarian regime. Published material on Lebanon's post-2011 social movements often elaborate on the "dilemma of sectarian politics" fragmenting the movement from within (Meier, 2015), the "lack of political organizing" (Halawi & Salloukh, 2020), and a "civil society focus" (Vértes et al., 2021) as some of the frames in which we recognize how the creation of power from below is potentially obstructed. While these insights are crucial, there seems to be an overall gap in the literature about centering particular behavioral and discursive choices, prompting this attempt to demystify the country's nonsectarian opposition. There is a need for an in-depth, microanalysis of the day-to-day choices made by specific groups and organizations engaging in political practice from below, as opposed to utilizing analytical frames that focus on overall structural fields informing these decisions. Any analysis of the rise of this anti-establishment movement that does not incorporate the emergence of alternative social relations centering the lives of individual organizers indirectly discounts the primary motivations and stories that inform their involvement and its impact.

Since 2011, nonsectarian activists, whom I conceive of here as political workers, have built coalitions; launched campaigns; organized demonstrations; run for elections; and built political groups, movements, factions, and parties that attempt to sustain and empower their political positioning in a precarious social and institutional climate. Repression, emigration, economic crises, COVID-19, and resource asymmetry are some of the macrostructural and top-down challenges that have inhibited the capacity of these movements to transform power relations in their contexts.

Despite these particular hindrances, the will of these actors and the political opportunities available to them at key moments encouraging popular insurrection have put forth crucial and everlasting discursive developments, culminating with the You Stink movement of 2015 and the October 17 uprising in 2019. These developments are highlighted by the choices and alignments pursued during the 2022 parliamentary elections, which in and of themselves sparked important debates regarding issues of organization and

the dynamic relationship between movements and state institutions with regard to representation and policy.

This paper is primarily concerned with an investigation of agency, as elaborated on by various conceptions of leadership in these contexts. How does agency manifest itself in contemporary movements that provide alternatives to hegemonic social conceptions? To further specify my focus: How do we categorize leadership in a variety of horizontal movements across the globe, many of which emerged after 2011 (the era of the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring)? The impact and practice of social movements in achieving wider social transformation have occupied many scholars for decades, resulting in crucial questions pertaining to the role of opportunity structures, strategic choices, recruitment mechanisms, and wider macrostructural conditions centered on the role of the state and political economy (Gurr, 2015; Tarrow, 2022; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Skocpol, 1979). However, constructing a theory of action and accounting for impacts have both faced a number of methodological shortcomings, alongside difficulties acknowledging context, subjectivities, and biographies.¹ On that note, leadership has often been a widely contested and debated concept within the scholarly social movement literature, particularly as research responding to the structuralist nature of political process theory stresses the analytical importance of agency when assessing movement growth and outcomes; incorporating emotions and actions; and indigenous institutions (Jasper, 2011; Bloom, 2015; Morris, 1986). Notably, Morris' expansion on indigenous institutions and the mass-mobilizing qualities, energies, and resources associated with social bases remains a crucial

¹ Regarding the aforementioned question of movement outcomes: while a few scholars have attempted to locate the role of movements in pursuing and achieving policy change (Wolfson, 1995; Burstein & Linton, 2002; Gamson, 2006), the attempts to better understand the impact of these movements on broader structural transformations have faced a variety of methodological issues, such as defining "impact measurements" and assessing the role of other exogenous variables that also affect transformative processes (Giugni, 1999, p. xxiv). Similar to tentative prescriptions advocated for by Giugni, Amenta et al. (2010, p. 302) highlight comparative methodological models across cases and local perspectives in order to make sense of the relationship between movement factors and causal outcomes. Giugni also specifies the importance of understanding and sketching the process through which movement impact is realized, while Gamson (2006) specifies culture and public discourse as a potential avenue.

response to structuralist interpretations of political process theory. The question remains: How do we better understand the dynamic transformation of these institutions and the human resources behind them? How do we provide an in-depth processual understanding of how these institutions are constructed, activated, sustained, and mobilized across networks and spaces?

This paper seeks to precisely investigate leadership in Lebanon's anti-sectarian social movement and the strategic choices of activists in the particular discursive environment of sectarianized politics. It provides a conceptual elaboration of the concept of a political worker based on a contemporary and adaptive understanding of Gramsci's interpretation of political leadership in the context of crises of legitimation, primarily motivated by the need to center the agency of movement actors in either strengthening or hindering their capacity to influence power relations that seem beyond their reach. The research is based on four focus group discussions conducted in 2023 with Lebanese activists. I identified four wide discussion categories that center the strategic choices of political workers: organizational leadership and management, theories of change between discursive and grassroots dimensions, utopian imaginaries and local adaptation, and electoral politics (their utility and shortcomings). What follows is an elaboration of four thematic categories inspired by the focus groups: radical politics, grassroots organization, electoralism, and leadership. Focus groups primarily involved actors who played a direct coordinating role before and during the following popular milestones I relied on to better understand the strategic choices made in contexts of popular upheaval: the "People Want the Fall of the Regime" marches in 2011, the You Stink movement in 2015, the October 17 uprising in 2019, and the parliamentary elections in 2022. Discussion questions and guiding statements fixate on the wider context in which these protests were situated, the immediate response of activists on the ground, the preliminary work done by pertinent organizations before each milestone, and the discursive themes put forth by actors as they contested the overarching attitudes and hegemonic conceptions of the sectarian regime.

Through a biographical elaboration of individual workers' trajectories, which I argue provides empirical strength in understanding movement dynamics in Lebanon's institutional settings of political leadership and initiative, this paper locates the primary thematic categories (both organizational and discursive) that drive the discussion between nonsectarian political workers and in turn highlight the lessons learned by those who engaged in this empirical exercise. These include (but are not restricted to): critically engaging in electoral milestones; stressing the tensions between grassroots entrenchment and garnering public opinion; navigating the conflicting considerations of

radical ambition and local conservative constituencies; and benefiting from the inclusive fruits of horizontalism while sustaining a responsible legacy of leadership.

Theoretical Framework as Applied to the Lebanese Context: Political Worker Behavior Changes the Meaning of Common Sense

To define my conceptual framework of political workers, I build on two different traditions and contributions to the literature on bottom-up politics: Gramsci's (1973) examination of the role of intellectuals, and Bamyeh's (2012) adaptation of the term organic intellectuals. Gramsci poses essential critiques of the phenomenon of traditional intellectuals – who embody a social class of their own – and expands on the role of organic intellectuals as providers of theory, ideology, justification, and normative and moral leadership for a specific social class. In much of his work, he attempts to answer key questions concerning the organizational, discursive, and strategic choices of communists in the very sensitive and transformative era of the emergence of the Soviet Union; key economic changes with regard to the transformation of capitalist in the early twentieth century; and the rise of fascism in Europe. In the context of these transformations, Gramsci presents a critique of orthodox Marxism, and centers culture and ideology as key ingredients of any political project, moving beyond a classical economist response to capitalism. In other words, rather than merely fixating on inevitable social class contradictions, he puts forth the need for organic intellectuals to provide a counter-hegemonic project in the pursuit of transforming the wider common sense of social forces (Gramsci, 1973). In contemporary social movement literature, this component of intellectual work may often be understood as framing. An interesting added value in the Gramscian framework is that intellectual labor is seen as a practice pursued by anyone with political will, rather than a specialized minority.

To critically build on Gramsci, I suggest that highlighting the role of organic intellectuals in terms of their activities, production,

and capacity to form or shift common sense requires definitional flexibility regarding the relationship between the intellectual and social class. Bamyeh (2012) provides an amendment to the concept of the organic intellectual in the pursuit of understanding the aforementioned relationship in a more malleable sense, alongside providing a more inclusive delimitation of social class, not necessarily fixing the intellectual within the particular economic social group they seemingly represent. In other words, I prioritize the organic intellectual's intellectual function, not their class identity. This function is comprised of: releasing popular historical readings and analyses of a particular sociopolitical situation; articulating a theory of change and policy prescriptions with local and global dimensions; and engaging in collective and public conversations that advance these analyses, theories, and positioning in the wider discursive field. Also, taking Gramsci's pushback against the economism of orthodox Marxism to its logical extreme, I commence with the assumption that individuals committed to being a discursive political worker are agents with a large array of motivations, including cultural and organizational considerations and setups.

Hence, while the contemporary literature on organic intellectuals has defined them in the context of a particular role to be fulfilled by a specific movement "officer" (i.e., the intellectual), Gramsci (1973, p. 132) affirms a more malleable understanding of organic intellectuals who permeate the political space in a variety of functions – these intellectuals pursue organizational directive work, blurring the lines between their involvement vis-à-vis that of other organizers. This is further affirmed by his refusal to constrain the role of organic intellectuals to that of movement orators, pushing against a technocratic understanding of a division of roles between cadres – political talent is henceforth not necessarily restricted to one or few departments, but is instead approached in a holistic manner.

On that note, the concept of political workers borrows many characteristics and behaviors from this conceptual adaptation of organic intellectuals who refuse the constrained positioning of traditional intellectuals. However, the concept of political workers builds on the concept of organic intellectuals to incorporate a much more expansive application of labor: the labor of persuasion, negotiation, recruitment, and instilling public emotion (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004, p. 171; Gramsci, 1973, p. 132). Their leadership is not necessarily public or official, and fulfilling their role does not necessitate a high-ranking or highly visible position within the organization of which they are a part – it simply necessitates their labor. While these workers tend to subscribe to a particular theoretical paradigm for their work, or "theory of change", the product of their labor does not usually match their expectations. Expected products include,

but are not restricted to: discourse popularization; electoral advancements; protest accumulation; movement expansion; and the expansion of their own individual influence and share of the political space, regardless of any self-proclaimed ideological or collective pursuit. Understanding the role and consequences of political work from a Gramscian sense goes beyond conventional interpretations of movement actors to better amplify that intellectual function and discursive prioritization; this is an inherent characteristic of the political worker across history, and most particularly a product of today's digital era. It is also amplified by the crisis of leadership and the objective weakness of the social infrastructure surrounding these workers, as demonstrated in the Lebanese context. It is crucial to underline the dialectical nature of the political worker; as they are not only actors who produce, but are themselves constantly being produced by the development of their own movement structures and the wider movement atmosphere that surrounds them.

Political workers is a suitable theoretical frame in the Lebanese context primarily because this context suffers from institutional poverty: collective forms of plural leadership, governed by impersonal and democratic societal mechanisms, are actively suppressed in favor of an individual manifestation of political initiative and control (Weiss, 2009). Accompanied by a rent-based neoliberal economic system primarily centered on unproductive sectors, monopoly structures, and client-patron networks sponsored by sectarian leaders themselves (Baumann, 2012), leadership in the country has been understood primarily as a socioeconomic, tribal, and identitarian-authoritative relationship between a number of leaders and their sectarian constituents. As opposition groups and organizations became more explicit and institutionalized, micro-leaders stood out by having some sort of representational leverage and capacity to speak in front of the local media. Nevertheless, as opposed to the function of sectarian leaders with material resources and the ability to use force, these political workers were unable to enforce a decision by simply casting a vote within an elected committee. Due to the weakness of institutionalized politics in the country – the practice of politics based on sustainable mechanisms that coexist between the impersonal, bureaucratic forms of elected hierarchical leadership and solid ethical and ideological codes and norms – political management within the opposition movement became a force of momentary direct action highlighted by the initiative and direction of particular movement workers who generally rely on the labor of their small restricted circle to push forward their political projects (Safieddine, 2023). This is also amplified by the lack of resources needed to create sustainable labor in the pursuit of fixing and stabilizing these institutions. In other words, in the case of Lebanon, political workers arise as a product of this crisis of institutionalized leadership – one can hypothesize a similar pattern in neighboring countries,

particularly as regimes within these regions have not invested in creating these very societal institutions.

While there are outliers, it is no secret that in this small country most political organizations rely on the labor, leadership, and strategic calculations of a select number of actors. In addition, Lebanon's political environment is generally hostile to nonsectarian actors attempting to envision alternative social-political relations. Political parties that center their cross-sectarian ideological framework are rare, and postwar arrangements revolving around NGOs dominated the movement community in which many of these workers operated (Nagel & Staeheli, 2015). It is crucial to note that the innovative exchange provided by the labor of these workers does not compensate for the notorious structurelessness that accompanies questions of power, decision-making, and practical on-the-ground direction. Despite its ongoing systemic limitations, political work remains the primary analytical mode via which we can better monitor the fruits and contributions of a movement by engaging in biographical conversations with individual participants, organizers, and leaders.

Background and Mapping

Lebanon is a country governed by a sectarian system: a power-sharing mode of governance that mediates the interests of sectarian-religious leaders who respond to different constituencies (Weiss, 2009). Accompanied by a rent-based neoliberal economic system primarily centered on unproductive sectors, monopoly structures, and client-patron networks sponsored by sectarian leaders themselves (Baumann, 2012), leadership in the country has thus been understood primarily as a socioeconomic, tribal, and identitarian-authoritative relationship between a number of leaders and their sectarian constituents. Nevertheless, it would be reductionist to suggest that there are no outliers to this rule, especially as recent scholarship has highlighted the role of leftist, democratic, and liberal cross-sectarian factions in the country with alternative functions to the country's leadership; this role begins to mirror the toolset generally scrutinized in the global social movement scholarship (Haugbolle, 2013; Halawi & Salloukh, 2020).

Following the Arab uprisings of 2011 and a new wave of antiregime marches and demonstrations, old and new communities of activists began to shape the country's contemporary anti-establishment movement. In later stages, important milestones such as the garbage protests of 2015

(popular demonstrations in response to the trash piling up on the streets and the regime's mismanagement of garbage), the independent municipality campaign Beirut Madinati ("Beirut, our City" – an alternative nonsectarian electoral list for Beirut's city council), and the October 17 popular uprising of 2019, all produced a "new new" set of unofficial leaders who navigated Facebook groups, created small organizational units, and sat on relatively open coordinating tables attempting to plan future protests, formulate concrete proposals, and put forth a general rescue roadmap for a crisis-ridden state (Deets, 2022; Geha, 2019; Karam & Majed, 2022).

Below is a list of movement organizations from which I was able to select specific participants to take part in the four focus group discussions, and whom I perceived as emblematic of the political workers this study seeks to investigate:

Aamiyet 17 Teshrin: Founded in 2019 as a platform publicizing and disseminating protest calls and footage of demonstrations on social media, it later transitioned into a left-leaning political group that was composed of former members of the Democratic Left Movement. One of its major figures is Ali Mourad, who ran in the 2022 parliamentary elections in one of the country's southern districts (El Kak, 2019).

Lebanese Communist Party: Founded in 1924 as the Lebanese People's Party, the party was later established as the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party, and then as the Lebanese Communist Party in the mid-1960s. While the party has a long history that intersects with the convoluted and complex dynamics of the country's civil war, alongside a struggle of liberation against the Israeli occupation, it later transformed in the context of a variety of phases: (1) the country's heavy polarization over Hezbollah's arms following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005; (2) the party's role in a variety of popular protests against the sectarian system after 2011; and (3) the party's significant electoral role in the south during the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections. Its most visible figure is Hannah Gharib (Munoz, 2019; El Kak, 2019).

Tayyar al-Taghyeer Fi al-Janoub: Founded in 2022 after the parliamentary elections as a coalition between various personalities and former candidates within the South III district. Its most visible figure is Ali Mourad, who is also a leading member of Aamiyet 17 Teshrin ("Etlaq Tayyar El-Taghyeer Fi Al-Janoub", 2022)

Tol'et Reehtkom: Founded in 2015 as a street-protest campaign tackling the waste management crisis, the group's name became the primary slogan of the anti-establishment wave of demonstrations that emerged in that year. Centered on digital media and a street-based organizational orientation, the group utilized fierce and populist rhetoric

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focused on critiquing and degrading sectarian leaders. Its most visible faces included Wadih el-Asmar and Asaad Thebian (Khneisser, 2019).

Alternative Media Syndicate: Founded in 2019, it was established as an alternative association for journalists coming from a variety of subfields. While still new and with few resources, the syndicate aims to create a parallel structure that challenges the status quo of the Lebanese Press Order and the Press Editors' Syndicate, both seen as ineffective and incapable of liberating themselves from sectarian associations and protecting the rights of journalists and press workers. Its most visible face is Elsy Moufarrej (Mhanna & Safieddine, 2021).

Association of Depositors in Lebanon: Founded after the 2019 uprising, the association grouped depositors who refused the policies imposed by banks to arbitrarily withhold their savings and accounts. The association is known for executing a variety of disruptive protest acts in banks and across a variety of financial and government institutions in the country. It has also worked closely with members of parliament and lobby groups to propose particular prescriptions for the financial crisis from a progressive point of view. Two of its most visible faces are Ali Noureddeen and Nizar Ghanem (Alwan, 2023).

Tayyar al-Mojtama'a al-Madani: A secular organization founded in 1998, it focused its efforts on raising awareness on the issue of sectarianism; the group played an integral role in the 2011 anti-establishment protests ("The People Want the Fall of the Sectarian Regime"). Its most visible player was Grégoire Haddad, the former Archbishop of the Melkite Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Beirut and Byblos (as a religious figure, his support for secularism was noteworthy among the general public); its most active participant today is Bassel Abdallah (Bahlawan, 2021).

Lana: A secular, social-democratic party founded in 2020 that emphasized conceptions of nonsectarian practice and social-economic justice. Its primary members came from a left-wing student tradition that emphasized conceptions of national liberation and countering Israeli aggression, developing an affinity with resistance symbols, and distancing itself from Hezbollah's circle (including putting forth hardened critiques of its internal deliberations and use of political violence). Its most visible figures include member of parliament Halime Kaakour and activist Darine Dandachly.

Li Haqqi: A local grassroots electoral campaign established in Mount Lebanon during the 2018 parliamentary elections; it later emerged as an increasingly influential political force in the region, eventually transforming into a national political movement with a decentralized function during the

October 17 uprising. While Li Haqqi has presented a discourse primarily based on secularism, democracy, and grassroots politics, it has often avoided the question of direct power politics in the sense understood by the Lebanese system itself, instead focusing on building a social infrastructure of people across regions and varying localities while presenting its general vision and policy roadmap in its approach to the economic crisis.

Mada Network: Has a similar structure to Li Haqqi, but was built explicitly bottom-up, particularly from secular clubs established in different universities, regions, and sectors. While the Secular Club at the American University of Beirut (AUB) was established in 2008, the Secular Club at Saint Joseph University (USJ) was established in 2011. Eventually, both clubs took part in a variety of milestones that concerned the anti-establishment in the country, including the 2011 demonstrations following the Arab Spring; the 2013 "No to Parliamentary Extension" (La lil-timdeed) campaign; the 2015 You Stink protests following the country's waste management crisis; and the independent municipality campaign, Beirut Madinati, in 2016. In 2017, the Mada Network was established between the two clubs, only to include the Secular Club at Notre Dame University - Louaize a year later. While focused on a student-based discourse, the network later incorporated an explicit political and economic stance that is explicitly left-leaning and opposed to Hezbollah's hegemony in the country. Following the 2020 university elections, in which the clubs scored a landslide victory in two of the universities in which they were founded, the network expanded to other universities and regions, eventually partnering up with a variety of forces (including Li Haqqi) to form three local grassroots electoral campaigns in Beirut, Matn, and the south during the 2022 parliamentary elections.

Citizens in a State: A progressive political party established by economist and public intellectual Charbel Nahhas in 2016. Starting out as a small group of professionals, technocrats, and youth, the party put forth particular economic policies to address the systemic crises facing the country. Fixated on the importance of presenting a clear economic project and the ways through which state-capture can be achieved, the party experienced enormous growth among the country's professional middle class. It also presented a systemic vision centered on transitioning from a sectarian state to a civil state. Its development paved the way for its own electoral campaign, Qadreen, in the parliamentary elections, which gathered around 30,000 preferential votes for its lists and candidates.

Method

With the help and support of the Arab Reform Initiative, and in collaboration with a number of movements and organizers from a variety of political groups and parties, I conducted four focus group discussions, each tackling a specific inflection point in the development of the country's opposition: 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2022. Participants approximately embody political workers who invested their energies and labor across these different milestones. I leverage my subjective positioning as someone who worked across groups, civil society groups, and coalition networks in order to gain access to the focus group participants – in other words, many of the subjects in the study are persons I have worked with closely across coalitions and organizations. Participants include independent leftists and progressives, on-the-ground campaigners, and members and former affiliates of: the Lebanese Communist Party, Li Haqqi, the Mada Network, the Alternative Media Syndicate, Citizens in a State, Tol'et Rehtkon, the Association of Depositors, Lana, Aamiyet 17 Teshrin, Tayyar al-Taghyeer Fi al-Janoub, and Tayyar al-Mojtama'a al-Madani.

In each of these discussions, participants clarify the context in which they were working, the build-up prior to popular mobilizations that took place, the primary efforts they engaged in during these upheavals, and the lessons learned in the process. This was accompanied by key forward-looking insights about the future of the movements and the efforts and adaptations that invested political workers ought to pursue in the face of compounding challenges. The interesting empirical significance provided by focus group participants was also guided by online research in which I situate primary texts, social media posts, statements, and recruitment tactics released by actors. The insights outlined in the next section concern the thematic categories inspired by these discussions, as opposed to a rigid empirical analysis of the material gathered.

Elections Across Spaces: A Mobilizing Tool

While complicated and extremely limited in a region dominated by autocratic rule, electoral politics finds a space in Lebanon across regions and sectors largely in the service of reproducing a sectarian mode of representational politics and economic dependency (Bellin, 2012; Baumann, 2012).

Despite the democratic limitations of Lebanon's national model in terms of allowing representation for alternative forces, the country's anti-establishment circle, which has been increasingly taking space and amplifying its capacity since 2011, utilized the contradictions of the electoral system to exploit their own opportunities.

This section attempts to outline the debate that emerges as one theoretically and practically assesses the utility of electoralism from the eyes of the organizers. While the subjective positioning of myself as an organizer is indeed present in this assessment, it is primarily based on the focus group conversations that took place with former and current organizers.

Primary takeaway and theoretical intervention

This section begins by acknowledging the limitations of electoral practice, specifically for nonsectarian anti-establishment representation, in providing movement growth; these limits include gerrymandering, inconsistently held elections, and sectarian quotas. Nevertheless, the electoral process in Lebanon has provided for certain practical benefits and fruits, such as highlighting public opinion, proposing policy changes, offering a space for new discourses and ideas, and building an organizational community of activists capable of contesting the social space. What is most interesting about how anti-establishment activists utilize elections is not necessarily the polarizing argument between those who consider the election cycle useful for ensuring representation and those who believe reform from within is a useless endeavor, but a more practical hands-on argument about the nuanced organizational and discursive opportunities provided by the electoral space despite its limits.

More importantly, the electoral process is not simply a structural imposition, but a reality constructed by political workers, many of whom have participated in this study as focus group participants. In other words, the emotional labor required to mediate between candidates and team members, the managerial aspect of setting criteria and ensuring productive meetings, and the inspirational-ideological meaning-making process provided by more experienced candidates, organizers, academics, researchers, and commentators, are part and parcel of the process to construct an electoral space that looks less like the rules of engagement enforced by the sectarian status quo.

Legal and institutional limitations of the electoral space: Examples across domains

Municipality elections: These elections have been one of the most inconsistent avenues of electoral participation in the country, with the elections called off for the entirety of the civil war, only to take place in the late 1990s following a nationwide campaign demanding they be held by the postwar authorities then. Today, while municipalities have crucial and essential functions over the geographical area they preside, the country's most recent economic collapse alongside decades of local corruption and embezzlement have limited their practical scope and authority (Chaaban et al., 2016).

Student elections: Historically a battlefield between sectarian forces importing their considerations into campus life, student elections have also incorporated a space for progressive and alternative movements that have organically grown within university walls. Nevertheless, the universities that have hosted these elections are limited by their demographic range, excluding tens of thousands of students getting their education at the Lebanese University. This is also accompanied by significant limits put forth by university administrations, which do not allow elected student councils to act autonomously or engage with the national political frame (Yonker, 2021).

Parliamentary elections: These elections are one of the loudest and most significant arenas of political contestation in the country. Nevertheless, sectarian quotas and district divisions have made electoral gerrymandering a constant issue. Despite the advantages of proportionality in the most recent amendment to the electoral law, the legal and institutional makeup of the electoral process continues to pose essential barriers to entry for progressive and alternative forces (Deets & Skulte-Ouais, 2021).

Elections as a discursive battlefield: Big politics, polarizing sentiments, policy

For the first time in the past 15 years, electoral politics during the 2018 parliamentary elections incorporated particular causes concerned with economic policy, women's rights, resistance to sectarian discourse, and good governance (El Kak, 2019). After 2013, with the spread of the secular clubs

across universities, the youth wings of sectarian factions were obliged to incorporate student policy into their election platforms during student elections in order to catch up with the discourse put forth by alternative student groups. For quite a while, in response to the rampant corruption and an escalating economic crisis, policy became an integral part of the overall discourse; this escalated further during the onset of the October 17 uprising. In reference to the organizational shortcomings of alternative movements between 2018 and 2022, a focus group participant who was a former member of Citizens in a State suggested the movements were fully invested in adopting the discursive wave of public opinion and locating innovative ways to steer it.

Electoral politics, particularly during the 2022 parliamentary elections, gradually began to center around large political issues in the country, including how to hold the banks accountable, the Beirut port explosion investigation, Hezbollah's arms and prior assassinations, the relationship with neighboring regimes and governments, and gender politics and stigma. Rather than solely centering around the contestation between traditional sectarian forces, the conversation in 2022 allowed nonsectarian opposition to be a part of the national conversation. This is because political workers were able to go beyond a discourse of good governance neutrality and engage with certain elements of national politics that have historically concerned various constituencies, sectarian or otherwise. One focus group participant from Li Haqqi particularly referred to how outlining the political roadmap and common denominator between volunteers was crucial to mobilizing members and reaching a consensus on a package to be communicated to the wider public.

Elections as an organizational experience: Camaraderie and skill-building

Elections are first and foremost an organizational experience, requiring leadership, technological expertise, managerial talents, worker enthusiasm, communications (whether on social media or in public spaces), and typical political pronouncements that encourage popular mobilization. This experience is a collective one, further solidifying membership ties and allowing for a transition of skills across generations of organizers and actors. The process is hence an essential building block in the pursuit of the creation of new leaders, as opposed to solely retaining an old base of cadres. One colleague from the Mada Network specifically focused on the ways in which the secular clubs in the south of Lebanon were

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able to speak to a wide range of actors and potential recruits while gathering votes. Nevertheless, they also mentioned the challenge of organizing new participants in the context of limited institutional capacity and resources that induce activation.

This organizational experience allows for the construction of a community between activists who enter these spaces from a variety of backgrounds and regions. Elections therefore allow for the construction of an alternative space and, over time, alternative daily routines and social relations that are distinct from those prevalent among sect-based communities and partisan spaces. One participant accounts for movement growth following an electoral milestone from this context; the elections are thus also seen as a tool by which people in local settings can get to know one another and create a common space of political and social belonging.

The challenge, however, is how to avoid creating a new sect in the midst of confessional politics. Hence, these alternative communities ought to unlearn the creation of echo chambers that do not interact with their direct surroundings. The challenge is to create a reality in which the secular community is both trans-sectarian and open to the rest of society; a participant with the Alternative Media Syndicate specifically mentioned concerns about a restrictive bubble of radicals with a discourse dissociated from the uneasy contradictions of wider society.

Theory of Change: Grassroots Building and Discursive Practice

Lebanon is a small country with a very tightly knit community; connections exist across and between different sectarian, ethnic, and political communities. Lebanon also contains several cities with large populations and a strong media infrastructure. On that basis, Lebanon is both a village and a city; it is both one-on-one recruitment and grand political projects informing a wide range of actors. Nevertheless, different political actors and grassroots movements oftentimes treat the country as if these categories were mutually exclusive. While it is difficult to exclusively use only one method of reaching an audience and transforming the overall common sense, anti-establishment movements in Lebanon have generally oscillated between the labor of an influencer and the labor of an organizer, each of these with their own tactics and daily practices. In this section, I pursue several cases of movements that have primarily relied on

one or the other of these theories of change in the hopes of achieving an analysis better capable of understanding both their shortcomings and accomplishments.

Primary takeaway and theoretical intervention

This section presents two different theories of change as applied by different actors and movement communities. By utilizing the input provided by different focus groups and interview participants, I attempt to map out the learned lessons interpreted by these actors and their conflicting experiences. While there are no straightforward nor conclusive assessments for most activists, it is rather clear that a dialectical and contextualized reading of movement tactics, strategies, and methods seems to be the most appropriate way forward; nevertheless, this is something to explore further in a future study.

Circling back to the role of political workers as producers of discourse, it is crucial to emphasize two points: first, grassroots-building is a communication tool used by organizers and coordinators to elicit strength and participatory local functions, both of which are appealing to recruits familiar with the language of social movements, and second, grassroots formations in of themselves provide strength to the media reach of movements (this is especially true as the primary avenue for actors to articulate their descriptive and prescriptive assessments of different social and political situations has been social media).

Limitations of grassroots building in the context of global media development

The question of power relations in the context of Lebanon concerns the ways in which political forces compete with one another both militarily and discursively. This puts forth several challenges for alternative movements, most of which emerged structurally after 2011 and are trying to compete with sectarian political forces that have largely established themselves in the process of the civil war (El Khazen, 2003). With disproportionately more resources at their disposal, warring militias were later incorporated into the postwar state, which has increasingly taken the form of a power-sharing system between sectarian parties, monopolistic capital interests, and affiliated businessmen. Coupled with

regional backing, the postwar political reality has made sectarian forces increasingly competitive relative to any form of dissent that has the potential to emerge within many regions. On the other hand, the globalization and digitization of the social sphere have provided alternatives for anti-establishment movements for recruiting, communicating with, and mobilizing different individuals and social groups. This development in mass media, particularly social media, has led to the replacement of traditional communitarian recruitment with various forms of media engagement (Aouragh, 2016).

In the absence of an already existing and long-lasting local communitarian infrastructure for the opposition from the pre-social media era, youth and engaged residents and citizens not already part of disciplined and well-knit social structures generally affiliated with conservative elements of society find themselves disconnected from any local sphere, resorting instead to the online world for a sense of belonging. This has in turn made the online world a more attractive and easy network for many political workers looking for recruits; social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become engines for social movements aiming to promote themselves. Participants active in the environmentalist movement that emerged following the 2015 waste management crisis, and who played a key role in the You Stink movement, particularly noted the importance of Facebook in calling for protests and organizing volunteers. In other words, global media was able to compliment, if not sometimes replace, the live meeting space, providing people with larger platforms with significant leverage a greater ability to influence and steer protest directions and objectives.

Limitations of discursive practice: Loud in echo chambers, silent in society

Despite this investment in new media to promote new social movements, political workers have not been able to escape the algorithms that contain them, further reproducing echo chambers that are incapable of reaching a wider audience (particularly the stakeholders with whom they are supposed to be connecting in the Lebanese context). Online echo chambers further present a faux-resource curse for activists, in which online engagement initially seemed to create a counter-hegemony, but in reality only allowed these actors to escape tough questions about entrenching their presence in key societal spaces (Terren & Borge-Bravo, R. 2021). "Our impact is far bigger than our size", said one participant from

the Lebanese Communist Party in reference to the lack of solid, resourceful, and sizable grassroots investment. In truth, discursive practice highlighted by social media can necessarily only complement other vital components of social struggle, which ought to include the creation of local chapters with solid budgets and cultural-political centers, investment in an alternative economy that makes use of technology and solidarity networks to contest clientelist structures, and the creation of a social bloc with a variety of economic and political forces that share a common vision and roadmap.

Universal Radical Politics Versus Local Adaptivity

It is no secret that the organizations and movements being addressed in these papers, ranging from feminist movements to progressive economic collectives to left-wing organizations, do not stand as central social forces with imposing histories and social bases. On the contrary, these forces remain on the margin, benefiting from the historical emergence of an educated middle-class building gradual capacity in communication with slightly more accessible elite circles (Haugbolle, 2013). While the popular protests that emerged after 2011 have offered some prospects for grassroots community-building, the lack of a consistently available material network of clientelist provision has rendered these forces incapable of competing with sect-based forces. In this paper, I outline the perspectives of different organizations on the available alternatives amid this power asymmetry.

Primary takeaway and theoretical intervention

This section outlines ways in which alternative sociopolitical forces either pragmatically positioned themselves in atmospheres unfamiliar to their own political ethos, or disruptively disturbed the public sphere of such a hegemonic climate (based on sect-based accommodation, patriarchal social structures, and neoliberal perspectives of the market) by contentiously challenging these perspectives with their own universal liberal or leftist packages. While there is indeed no strict dichotomous division between either of these tracks, with actors invoking both strategies in a dialectical manner, there is a noticeable categorical difference between actors predominantly using one or the other. This has affected how

these actors are perceived not only by the wider public, but also by other political workers, financiers, and allies who take note of a person's adaptivity or principle.

On that note, the intellectual labor of political workers is most demonstrated by their ability to leverage the knowledge of transnational learning processes that promote radical ideals and blueprints in an instrumentalist fashion. In other words, radically and transformatively ambitious political projects are useful only in their capacity to be localized in favor of a context-friendly adaptation that speaks to the public they hope to mobilize, recruit, and potentially contain. Radical politics fails if it creates an additional elite echo chamber divorced from the considerations of one's context. The case study of Beirut Tuqawem (a grassroots electoral campaign, discussed more fully below) demonstrates a moderately successful attempt by radical political workers engaging in a local sphere that does not exactly resemble them, aided primarily by creative communication strategies and language games that supported their ability to connect with their local constituency.

Radical politics as an instrumental element of movement-building

Global and transnational conceptions of movement building have always been part of the Lebanese political scene. From fascism and the Kataeb party to Marxist-Leninism and the Lebanese Communist Party to ideas of national liberation and third-world socialism in conversation with Baathist and Arab nationalist parties, the local scene was never strictly local, but has rather been informed by regional and international developments in political thought and power (Mendel & Müller, 1987; Bardawil, 2016). Our modern epoch is no exception, particularly following the Arab uprisings of 2011, and the sudden calls revisiting the need to dismantle the sectarian regime in Lebanon that year.

Developments in post-Soviet leftism, feminism, environmentalism, NGO politics, green socialism, critiques of anti-imperialism, and questions regarding the role of the modern state have all contributed to shaping various elements of the country's opposition movement (Buck-Morss, 2006). Educated youth, and certain components of the middle class with early exposure to these concepts, have utilized university campuses, alternative city spaces, intellectual digital spheres, and organizational structures to engage in cultural and political discussions regarding the ways such ideological packages translate to the Lebanese context. Inspired by similar trends in the region and world, political workers in this epoch were driven by such

packages to imagine an alternative reality and methods to implement contentious practices. One assessment provided by an environmental researcher who was active during the 2015 anti-establishment protests and concerned with the waste management crisis is that international frames related to green politics were key to commencing local research on the matter. These primary studies were key components of early advocacy networks.

The assessment of the role of radical politics continuously oscillates as a conversation between past and present, tradition and modernity. Just as modern political parties attempting to reimagine the role of the nation-state contested the feudalists and tribal lords of the past, today's political workers are attempting to reintroduce radical politics to a scene that has been increasingly depoliticized in the past few decades, particularly after the civil war. Following the war, categories such as left and right were no longer part of the conversation, and discussions over concrete policy had been increasingly marginalized over time under the Syrian regime's mandate over domestic Lebanese politics (El-Husseini, 2012). In other words, radical politics was not introduced into the scene by these contemporary political workers, but rather was reintroduced and revisited after a long period of antipolitics (with exceptions, most notably Hezbollah's capacity to enforce itself as a resistance movement in south Lebanon) induced by the incentive of certain political and economic interests during the postwar period. Nevertheless, reintroducing politics in its radical form raises questions about how various audiences, particularly many of the constituencies of sectarian parties, receive such a discourse.

One particular point raised by a community organizer with the 2015 You Stink movement revolved around the ways in which traditional leftist organizations were necessarily alienated in the context of the popular protests, particularly as many constituencies and audiences were disillusioned with the role of traditional outlets of social transformation and political participation. Instead, popular political street campaigns became the standard norm for those looking for an alternative space; nevertheless, this process was not sustainable.

Grassroots organizations observing or taking part in the elections milestones of 2018 and 2022 did not necessarily take the process for granted. Disruptive and radical imagination, fused with the ambitious platform provided by a popular uprising and the enormous grievances produced by the August 4 port explosion, resurfaced as left-wing political workers, many of whom participated in the focus group discussions, offered compelling critiques of candidates and movements that were overly focused on using these milestones to achieve discursive or institutional gains.

How to build a conscious pragmatism

The question of pragmatism, in this case, relates to ways in which one's radical and utopic understanding of how the world ought to be shaped is moderated by the local considerations of the context in which they live. In the case of Lebanon, the aftermath of the October 17 uprising and the August 4 port explosion has made many radical ideologues realize the importance of adjusting their line of logic to the internal logic of Lebanese society, even when components of this logic have reinforced the polarizing sentiments of the divide between the March 8 Alliance and the March 14 Alliance² (such as the need to address Hezbollah's arms). Other important adjustments in the commentary of many activists include how they viewed the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) package, withholding their reservations about the IMF's global policies and focusing their critique on how the bank owners and allied politicians are unwilling to enforce crucial reforms and laws that restabilize the financial sector in exchange for a necessary yet difficult IMF package. Participants particularly noted that despite the IMF's disastrous record in many developing countries in the past few decades, the ruling class's problem with the IMF was that it stubbornly fixated on the need for restructuring the financial system, which in turn would come at the expense of the interests of specific political and economic elites (Ishker & Youssef, 2022).

Another element of pragmatic behavior relates to how the middle-class liberal-left intelligentsia, primarily based in Beirut, had to converse and find common ground with local opposition to sectarian forces in various regions, despite such opposition's reinforcement of dominant social and

² After the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon, the political space was polarized between two camps attempting to provide different answers to several dilemmas: the question of Hezbollah's arms, the relationship with Syria, tools to protect Lebanon from Israeli violations and expansionism, and the future of state-building in the presence of Hezbollah and the post-civil war power-sharing paradigm. While the March 14 alliance, which primarily consisted of the Future Movement, the Progressive Socialist Party, and the Lebanese Forces, stood against Hezbollah's arms and Syrian influence, the March 8 alliance, which primarily consisted of Hezbollah, the Amal Movement, and the Free Patriotic Movement, articulated the need for Hezbollah's arms and a revised-positive relationship with Syria.

political norms regularly strengthened and emboldened by members of the establishment. Traditional opposition figures in various regions in the country have been associated with patriarchal behavior, crony business ventures, and oligarchical tendencies in NGOs and recently established political groups. However, this did not necessarily create a barrier of communication between alternative actors, and many of these figures negotiated for more power and space within the anti-establishment front.

Global versus local in Beirut: Beirut Tuqawem as a case

Beirut Tuqawem was a grassroots electoral campaign founded in February 2022 for the Beirut II district during the parliamentary elections that year. Initially, it began as a de facto partnership between three circles of activists: the Mada Network, Li Haqqi, and the actors who spearheaded the 2018 Kelna Beirut campaign (most notably, [Ibrahim Mneimneh](#)). The campaign focused on a radical and clear discourse advocating for secularism, justice for the victims of the Beirut port explosion, a socially just resolution to the economic crisis and a plan to redistribute losses, and the establishment of a popular and peaceful resistance against Hezbollah's arms. Structurally, the campaign also centered itself on a form of participatory democracy in which the general assembly of the group voted on the candidates it ought to run before and after the negotiation process with other organizations and groups. In other words, Beirut Tuqawem is not an electoral list, but a grassroots campaign that proclaimed the need to create a unified list in the district.

While the primary organizers and coordinators behind Beirut Tuqawem were progressive leftists with a global ideology in how they would interpret and practice politics, the campaign commenced with several strong local points that are worth noting: an emphasis on how the country ought to transition both constitutionally and politically from the arrangement put forth during the postwar period; a particular fixation on Hezbollah's usage of political violence, which had a specific resonance for Beirut locals affected by the May 7 events of 2008 (when Hezbollah practically used its arms to take control of the city in response to political pressure on its security apparatus); and a hardened, contentious discourse on how bank owners ought to pay the price of the crisis.

Furthermore, as the campaign became more entrenched within the city, its conservative member base (particularly those who identified as opposition but retained traditional values and inclinations) began to grow, inducing a dynamic and dialectical interaction between traditional locals and

political worker ideologues. While the initial left-liberal ideologues remained in leadership, feedback from more conservative social components allowed the former to adjust their discourse based on the expectations provided by the latter constituents, especially as they formed a significant portion of the voter base. An exercise on how one ought to promote civil marriage, LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms, and an overall civic code for personal status laws ensued.

This dialectic did not occur without problems, particularly as conservative forces also running for elections made use of the general political climate of the city in order to instigate both fake news and hate speech in the pursuit of targeting alternative actors [among opposition lists](#). In the process, candidates such as Ibrahim Mneimneh and Nuhad Dumit were negatively portrayed as proponents of LGBTQ+ rights and civil marriage. In response, the Beirut Tuqawem campaign indirectly tackled this frame; instead of commenting on the framing itself, they focused on the importance of freedom as a neutral concept, alongside the need to challenge the tools utilized by establishment forces to continue their corrupt political monopoly on the Beirut scene.

Leadership: Obstacles and Windows

Leadership, despite being one of the most crucial and fascinating determinants of political transformation in the twentieth century, holds a passive position in many social science disciplines today in the name of locating wider macrostructural conditions that seem to navigate the world of social movements (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). In Lebanon particularly, as opposed to traditional historical analyses that highlight intra-elite and sect-based tensions, the contemporary literature on post-2011 social movements has increasingly focused on overall movement patterns (Meier, 2015). This is especially pertinent when these new social movements, in and of themselves, claim to represent a new conception of leadership that does not replicate the authoritative-sectarian hierarchy of traditional leaders in the country. This has also led to the nature of leadership within these movements being under-studied in the scholarly literature. Stemming from an agency-laden and quasi-epistemological belief that politics is primarily driven by stubborn leadership exploiting “appropriate” conditions, this section puts forth the different forms of leadership found in Lebanon’s post-2011 movements.

Primary takeaway and theoretical intervention

The question of horizontalism in this context circles the discussion back to the theoretical profile of the political worker as a movement character constrained by the contextual limits of the institutional crisis facing leadership paradigms in the country. This is particularly pertinent among oppositional grassroots movements that structurally differ from more organized and communally rooted sectarian parties founded and developed in the twentieth century.

As opposed to providing a solely descriptive analysis of leadership within alternative social movements, this section further demonstrates the shortcomings of various types of organization that dominated the anti-establishment movement in Lebanon, and then goes on to propose a number of steps in favor of reforming leadership. It also highlights the contrast between self-proclaimed horizontal movements on one hand and relatively authoritarian and oligarchic leadership structures on another. Nevertheless, it is unambiguously clear that aspects of both “ideal” types of leadership have been represented in various organizational models. Moving forward, leadership cannot be ignored as a critical component of willful actors who regularly make organizational and political decisions, as opposed to simply following a predetermined wave of structures setting their times and place.

Horizontalism: Growth and limits

When addressing anti-establishment social movements in Lebanon and the region after the 1990s, it is crucial to take into account the shift that has occurred, particularly that which is influenced by the fall of the Soviet Left and the emergence of alternative leadership among a “New New” Left (as opposed to the New Left of the 1970s and 1980s) (Guirguis, 2019). This movement family has grown increasingly frustrated with its predecessors’ incapability to incorporate democratic ideals of organizational and state governance. This climax in horizontal nonsectarian groups in Lebanon in general, and Beirut specifically, took place after 2011.

Horizontalism, in practice, manifested quickly given the development of the digital sphere in the context of the Arab Spring (Chalcraft, 2012). Facebook and Twitter were platforms through which march dates and protest titles were advertised to a digitalized youth population increasingly using social media as an alternative to traditional media outlets. In this context, alternative media platforms become increasingly a crucial, instrumental, and strategic medium for horizontal

organizers attempting to compete with political parties with significant societal and material links with local communities.

In 2019, activist participants particularly noted the overwhelming spread of WhatsApp as a cheap and readily accessible communication application, particularly after it successfully incorporated and amplified its capacity to organize individuals into groups and collective functions. Activists were thereby provided with an important shortcut for organizing meetings, distributing roles, and making quick decisions. The standard system of a general assembly, coordinating committee, and open-ended working groups became a textbook application for most social movements in the country; these elements were also eventually utilized by the local chapters of sectarian parties, albeit more effectively given the resource advantage they possessed.

Movement oligarchs: Pseudo-leadership in action

Despite the de jure horizontal nature of these new political movements and structures, a de facto form of oligarchal leadership in each group began to stabilize. Due to low financial resources and lack of overall capacity, alongside a natural asymmetry and poor division of roles between those with the ability to provide labor (particularly actors with more leisure and a higher economic standing) and those whose means were more limited, accompanied by a poor process of group institutionalization, a select number of actors in each group began to monopolize both the decision-making and movement-building processes.

At the same time, pseudo-leadership within these movements has not always been countered by “authentic leadership”. Critics of movement oligarchs tend to build a culture of completely doubting the internal mechanisms of the group, losing faith in the process of lobbying and negotiating a way out of the process. A sense of despair, accompanied by the emotionally draining process of mediating between different intellectual and political currents, paved the way for rejecting leadership. Following the opposition’s shortcomings during the 2018 elections, and further amplified by the negative perception of political leadership over the past few decades, protesters made it very clear that the uprising they were shaping would be a leaderless one (Ziadeh-Mikati, 2022)

Furthermore, in the midst of this polarizing conversation on movement structure, social movements, particularly in times of paralysis, have raised a new generation of movement bureaucrats incapable of seeing the need for urgent action alongside the innovation of mobilizing tools that go beyond

the typical repertoire inherited from the traditional left and built on by the post-2011 era of political workers. A basic summary is as follows: as of 2023, the discourse and public debate are no longer in the hands of the anti-establishment movement. On the contrary, social panic and hate have dominated the political scene, putting forth instrumental scapegoats (refugees, LGBTQ persons, etc.) amid an unending and ever-expanding economic collapse. The counter-questions that the movement workers are not answering are: How do we accumulate power when we are weak? And if the political scene does not belong to us, what can we do to kidnap it from those who control the media, economic monopolies, and the coercive apparatuses of the state and sectarian militias?

Next steps

Social movements in Lebanon should not cling to the “tyranny of structurelessness” (Freeman, 1972) that has only reproduced hierarchies in a supposedly horizontal context. Instead, transparently agreeing on a division of roles, acknowledging the instrumental impact and importance of personal leadership, and focusing on going beyond the start-up model of the conventional political groups these movements have been used to are all crucial in order to transition to a different mode of organization: one which stresses responsibility, accountability, and structural ambition.

Creating a sense of shared ownership has been an issue for centralized parties that do not allow for a common work culture that in turn mediates between the leadership and the base. Bypassing certain structural limitations in favor of dynamic action gives movement workers the confidence to experiment with their labor and measure their impact in terms of affecting the overall common sense.

When tools of either structure or structurelessness begin to promote a sense of inactivity, lack of internal communication, and the absence of a shared sense of belonging, new tools ought to be innovated in the pursuit of shifting strategy, regardless of how stubborn certain movement bureaucrats (however well-intentioned) can be.

The start-up model of small activist groups in constant competition over a discursive share has come to an end; historic agreements between various opposition components with similar political, social, and economic leanings ought to take place in order to push the labor of activists into products that are much more ambitious and capable of addressing the needs of the wider constituencies.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

This project is a work in progress, for my own pursuits and for those of all political workers and researchers attempting to locate wider theoretical advancements to their movement application. I am excited to not only read follow-up research on bottom-up formations in the country, but also to further expand on the critiques directed at the thematic categories and methodological packages of analysis that are advanced, highlighted, and emphasized in this paper. This is an ongoing exercise to better discover the different ways in which these movements can amplify their presence, power, and discourse.

The paper attempts to make use of biographical and processual illustrations and insights provided in focus group sessions. Given the methodological and theoretical models of interest to me, I find such illustrations useful for better elaborating on and contextualizing the thematic categories that define the primary problems dominating the country's nonsectarian social movement sphere: leadership, radical imagination, electoralism, and grassroots politics. While not exhaustive, these four themes encompass the questions and problems laid out by movements throughout the years, and clarifying their categorical salience allows us to disentangle essential conflicts and contentious organizational and theoretical dilemmas that continue to take place. In other words, this exercise is first and foremost a tool to better locate solutions as opposed to contemplating past quandaries and mishaps. Finally, the dynamic and ever-changing relationship between movement organizers opens the possibility for mutual lessons learned amid common crises. These lessons include:

Rejecting the dichotomous relationship between local and global, radical and conservative, in the pursuit of an encompassing strategy that energizes radical and ambitious visions in the country accompanied by a local sensitivity that is interested in the extent to which the terms and projects advanced by political workers are accessible.

Assessing the need for responsibility and leadership while accounting for horizontal mechanisms of wider participation capable of benefiting from the talents of a wider recruitment pool; this further amplifies the capacity-building of organizations and talents and breaks the implicit oligarchal grab some organizers have on their entities.

Not falling for the trap of electoralism while accounting for the true, material limitations of anti-electoralism. In other words, electoral politics is merely a space and moment in which political workers can benefit from the energies it provides to

build their movement and score short-term wins. It cannot replace the building of sustainable structures, especially in a structural context that does not allow for robust political institutions.

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