POLITICAL ANALYSIS
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The Political Metamorphosis of Lebanon's Civil Society: Mapping the Change Movement

Executive Summary

While political and societal change in Lebanon might seem impossible, given the tenacious hold of particular interest groups and political actors, there are tangible expressions of a new political and societal movement that has emerged in the country. A key example of this are the 13 new "change" MPs won in the most recent parliamentary elections. Broadly defined as "the change movement" by its activists and wider public, this movement emerged from the 2015 "You Stink" protests, and the 17 October Revolution in 2019. What the movement's aims are besides opposing the current establishment is difficult to pin down.

This paper provides a deeper look into the emerging opposition politics in the country through an analysis of 30 political groups that are prominent in the loosely formed Lebanese change movement and that have emerged recently. The study draws from research conducted on each group to decode their policy positions and relationships with other groups within and outside of the movement, including surveys and in-depth interviews with members of each group.

The key findings are summarised below:

Political Orientation

- The Lebanese change movement's political centre of gravity lies slightly left of centre, with only 2 right-wing groups among the 30 groups surveyed, compared to 8 leftists and 20 centrists.
- While leftist change groups deem the issue of Hezbollah less urgent than centrists, as per popular perception, all agree that Hezbollah must be disarmed. More generally, the movement reflects the international understanding of the left-right political spectrum with their economic, administrative, and social policies.
- It is the movement's left-most wing, rather than its more centrist groups, that was most successful in obtaining votes and landing MPs in the recent parliamentary elections.

Policy Priorities

- Change groups share four core policy priorities: addressing the current economic crisis and its impact on food, health, housing, and education (mentioned by 89.7% of the groups), the independence of the judiciary and dealing with corruption, with particular mention of accountability for the Beirut port explosion (72.4% of groups), resolving the issue of Hezbollah (58.6%), and abolishing political sectarianism and building a civil state (51.7%).

Relationships with Groups outside the Movement

- Popular categories of "pragmatist" and "purist" are difficult to maintain when capturing change groups' relations with opposition parties that have adopted the banner of "change" and are controversial within the change movement, like the Kataeb and the Communist Party. Pragmatists tend to be politically centrist and to collaborate with controversial right-wing groups. Purists tend to be leftist, and some purists collaborate with controversial left-wing groups. The purist/pragmatist dichotomy has therefore more to do with the political left-right spectrum than with the general question whether to collaborate with controversial opposition groups.
- In the recent elections, change groups performed better on lists that excluded candidates from controversial opposition groups, than on mixed lists.

Relationships within the Movement

- There are several tightly knit clusters of groups within the movement: one of prominent purists, one of prominent pragmatists, and one of successful regional groups.
- Although most groups explicitly stated having good relationships with the other groups in the movement, there are also problematic relationships. Citizens in a State is most distinguished in this respect, with eight groups specifically mentioning having a bad relationship with the group. In contrast, some groups stand out as particularly well connected, as many other groups mentioned having good relationships with them: Tahalof Watani, Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi, LNA, the National Bloc, Taqaddom, LiHaqqi, and Mada.

Plans and Challenges

- The movement's main challenge is securing acceptable funding to continue its work, as groups have been significantly impacted by the crisis. It is harder to find volunteers and to pay salaries for professionals.
- The movement's plans are to follow up with and to support the "change" MPs, and to work towards larger, more unified parties and coalitions for the next parliamentary elections.

Engagement with the Voter

- Most of the change movement refuses to directly provide aid or welfare support for the public, as they want to avoid the vote-buying clientelism that traditional parties engage in. However, they actively engage the voter in awareness raising, street protests, and campaigns related to elections.

- While the movement's electoral gains speak positively of the public attitude towards the change movement, it is unclear to what extent Lebanese voters are truly in favour of "change." Electoral data show that the movement's gains would likely have been much smaller had Hariri's Future Movement (FM) run for election, as close to half of the current change seats were formerly occupied by FM members.

Gender

- Opposition groups considered controversial within the change movement fielded significantly more female candidates (16.9%) than the national average but landed no female MPs. The change movement proved most gender equal, although it is still far from full equality, with its 25% of female candidates and 30.8% of female MPs. Furthermore, women on purist lists from the change movement obtained almost twice the number of votes as their counterparts on lists that included candidates of controversial opposition groups.
- Change groups report 46.5% women in leadership on average, although interviewees and survey respondents in this research were only about 20% female, suggesting focal points in leadership are still much more male-dominated.
- Survey respondents ranked women's rights second only to corruption as the most important rights issue to tackle.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Lebanon has witnessed the emergence of a political alternative to the traditional sectarian politics, referred to as the "change movement" (7arakat al-taghyir). This movement finds its roots in the 2015 "You Stink" protests and the 2019 "17 October Revolution," achieving major political inroads in May 2022, as 13 of its candidates entered Parliament. While the movement is gaining prominence, there are still gaps in our understanding of which groups precisely make up the movement, and what their aims are beyond opposing the status quo.

The purpose of this policy brief[1] is to map the change movement's landscape. It analyses the diverse stances of constitutive groups on policy issues and the complex relationships between them. Seeking to capture the common understanding of what this change movement is, the following definition is adopted:

The Lebanese "change movement" refers to those groups that are not part of the current political establishment, did not partake in the civil war, and have not contributed to the present collapse of the state. These groups are reform-focused, have partaken in and/or derive from the movement ignited in the summer of 2015 and escalated on 17 October 2019, and thus tend to have emerged in recent years. Finally, these groups are seeking to achieve their political goals by working to bring key people into political office.

[1] *For the full version of the report, with more detailed descriptions and arguments, including a profile of each group, visit:* https://democracy-reporting.org.

This definition excludes certain groups that claim to be part of the change movement but are not considered so by the entirety of newly emerging groups.[2] This definition does not represent a judgement on our part on the opposition groups it excludes; the focus of this study is simply on the newly emerging groups.

2. Methodology and Limitations

For this mapping, members of 30 groups that fit the definition of "change," with preference given to leadership and electoral candidates, were interviewed and surveyed about their group's policy stances and relationships. Desk research furthermore collected information on vision, mission, and political program from the groups' official websites and social media when available.[3] The research spans across the 2022 elections, with most of the desk research and surveys carried out before the elections, and all interviews after.

This report is limited in several ways. First, the post-election research process means that some groups were still processing election results, so that some of the data might change. Second, although the study covers a larger section of the movement than previous research, there are dozens more groups, although many of them only have a grassroots presence, while attempts to contact others were unsuccessful. Third, 7 groups offered only partial survey data, while 1 did not provide any. All but 1 group provided interview data.[4] We have supplemented the missing information relying on other sources.

3. Mapping the Change Movement

In the following sections, the 30 "change movement" groups covered are analysed from the angles of the left-right spectrum, policy priorities, intergroup relations, plans and challenges, voter engagement, and gender.

3.1 The Left-Right Spectrum

According to our surveys, the vast bulk of the groups identifies either as firmly centrist (66.7%), or as centre-left (26.7%), while only a minority identifies as leaning right (either centre-right (3.3%) or right (3.3%).

Many interviewees, however, stated that the concepts of left and right are not relevant to Lebanon. One of them said: "The concept of right-wing and left-wing in its traditional sense no longer exists," while another added that "there is the left that is close to Hezbollah ..., while the right has priority in removing the party's weapons." Indeed, interviewees from centrist change groups were more critical of Hezbollah than those from leftist groups. Conceptualising politics of Lebanon through a language of left vs. right is therefore open to challenge.

[2] The definition excludes, among others, the Kataeb, Ossama Saad's Popular Nasserist Organisation, the Communist party, Moawad's Independence Movement, Makhzoumi's National Dialogue Party, and Neemat Frem's Project Watan. On the other hand, we have included the National Bloc, or Kitle Wataniyye, a traditional party that made a significant structural break with its past, effectively becoming a new party. See The Policy Initiative, "Lebanon's Political Alternatives: Mapping the Opposition," 2022, 4.

[3] The data collected for this research is published here: https://actionresearchassociates.org/mapping-lebanons-political-change-movement/.

[4] While we did obtain an interview with Citizens in a State, leadership later requested us not to use this data, as the party had decided it did not want anything to do with this report, asking "why must the international community know this information?" The party refused to partake in the survey for the same reason.

Internationally, the left-right political spectrum tends to associate the left with redistributive economic policies, social progressivism, and secularism; while capitalism, social conservatism, and a more positive view of religion tend to be associated with the right.[5]

Figure 1 plots the groups' position on the left-right spectrum against their economic policy, showing how the left-right spectrum in the change movement correlates well with economic policies as per the international understanding of the spectrum. Similarly, social justice issues were more relevant for leftist groups (57%) than centrists (15%) and rightists (0%). Regarding religion, however, the change movement is exceptional in its unified and clear stance: nearly every group surveyed states it pursues a politically desectarianised, civil state.[6] Socio-economically, then, the Lebanese change movement fits the international understanding of the political left-right spectrum well, despite common perception.

In the recent elections, leftist groups gathered more votes compared to centrist and right-wing groups,[7] with the consequence that leftist groups also delivered proportionally more MPs.[8] Leftist change groups have thus been most successful in convincing the Lebanese change voter.

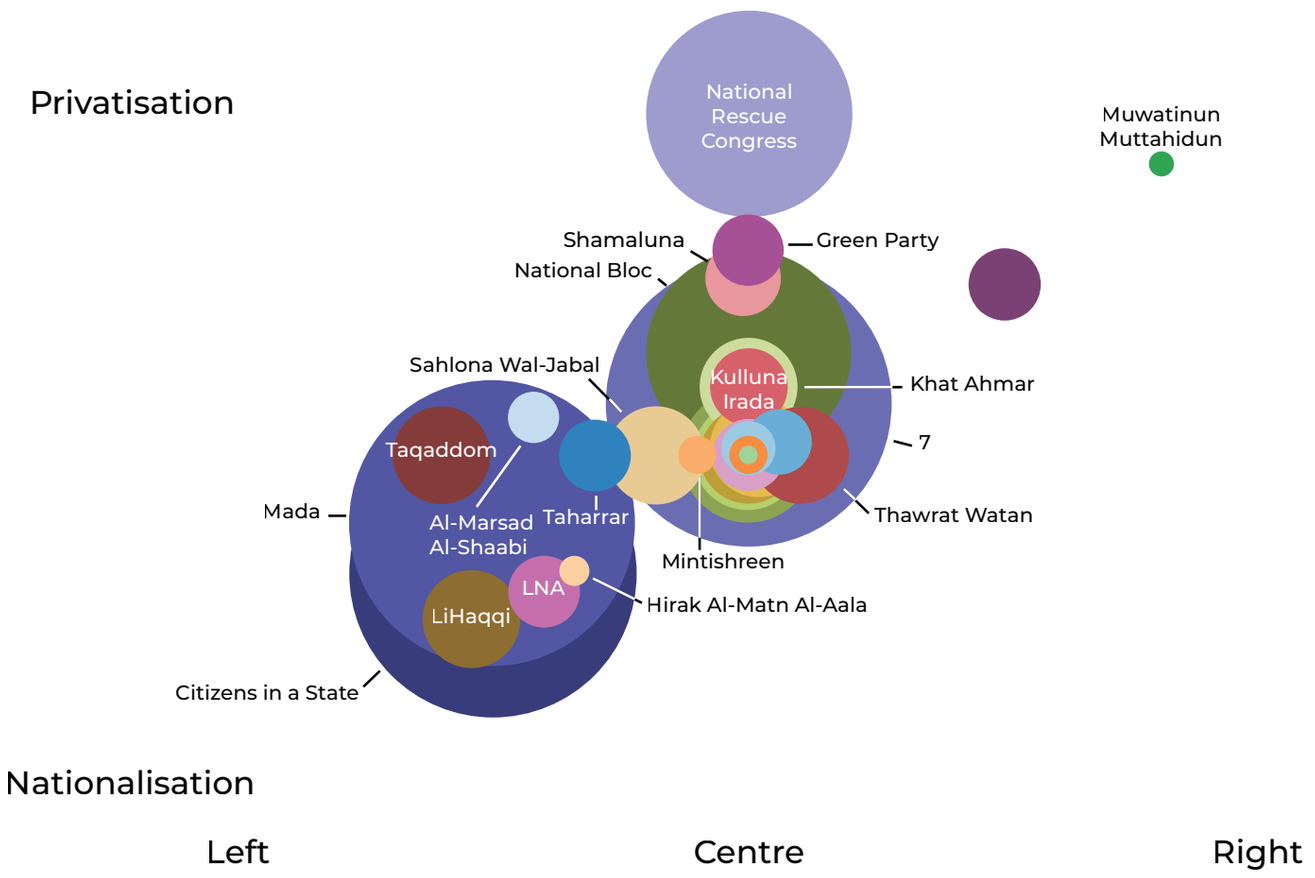

Figure 1: Change groups' political stance and economic policy are highly correlated.

[5] *Andrew Knapp and Vincent Wright, The Government and Politics of France: Fifth Edition, The Government and Politics of France: Fifth Edition, 2006, 6, 9, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203003497.*
[6] *Atlas Assistance, "Lebanon's Political Change Movement," 102.*
[7] *On average, a leftist group's most voted for candidate received 5.2% of votes in their district, while for centrist groups, that was only 3.4%, and 3.5% for rightist groups.*
[8] *5 change MPs from the 8 leftist groups, and 8 change MPs from 20 centrist groups.*

3.2 Policy Priorities

When asked about groups' policy priorities, interviewees referred to a variety of issues. The four main issues for the movement are described below, in descending order of importance.

The Economy

The main priority for the movement, as mentioned by 89.7% of the groups, is addressing the current economic crisis, and its social impact on food, health, housing, and education. The interviewees assess that the situation is very grave: the country is "in total collapse," the economic situation is "dire," citizens are "humiliated at hospitals, bakeries, and gas stations."[9] One of the main questions on this topic is how to distribute the losses of the 180 billion dollars missing from the banking system. Some centrist groups argue that this money must be recovered, while some leftists see the nationalisation or restructuring of banks as a solution, as they reject the veiled privatisation of the sovereign wealth fund. The reforms demanded by the International Monetary Fund are explicitly supported by several groups. Finally, fostering economic growth through investments in the private sector, and significantly strengthening social security, must be key components of an economic salvation plan.

The Judiciary and Corruption

The second most important issue for change groups relates to judicial independence, accountability, and corruption, as mentioned by 72.4% of groups. Many groups argue that the independence of the judiciary is non-existent in Lebanon, despite being stipulated in the Constitution, since 8 out of 10 of the highest judiciary body members are directly appointed by the executive branch.[10] The issue is seen as intimately linked with solutions to the economic crisis and the widespread corruption,[11] and as crucial to the highly symbolic investigation into the Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020. Holding its perpetrators accountable, as well as the political perpetrators of corruption and theft, are important demands within the movement.

Hezbollah

The third most mentioned priority (58.6%) was Hezbollah, either referred to explicitly (65%), or implicitly through the mention of "weapons" or "sovereignty" (35%). Many groups see Hezbollah as a state-within-a-state that has hollowed out the Lebanese state, thus challenging its sovereignty. The international factor, however, prevents some from dealing directly with the issue, even though they note the negative effects Hezbollah's operations have on the economy and international relations. All agree that Hezbollah must eventually turn its weapons over to the state, i.e., to the Lebanese Armed Forces, which should be the only legitimate holder of weaponry in Lebanon.

[9] Compare World Bank, "Lebanon Economic Monitor, Fall 2021: The Great Denial." (Washington, DC, 2022).
[10] Karim Merhej, "Towards an Independent Judicial Branch in Lebanon? Part 1: The Civil Judiciary," The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2021.
[11] "We cannot hold the corrupt accountable and return the looted funds without an independent judiciary," argues Jibhet 17 Tishreen.

Sectarianism

The fourth most important priority for groups in the change movement (51.7%) relates to sectarianism and the building of a civil state. Various groups argue that the Lebanese Constitution requires the abolishment of parliamentary sectarianism (Article 95) and provides a viable alternative to the current system by means of a sectarian senate (Article 22). Within the desired transition from a sectarian to a civil state, one where religion and state are (largely) separated, groups see the establishment of a unified personal status law and a civil marriage law as of utmost importance, since only a civil state can guarantee citizens' rights, they argue. Finally, groups believe citizenship and a sense of national identity must be strengthened to overcome the deleterious effects of the currently over-dominant sectarian identities.

3.3 Relationship With Groups Outside the Movement

Change groups were asked about their attitude towards traditional parties. The largest number of groups reports to be open to cooperation with traditional parties on a case-by-case basis (45%), and likewise reports to be willing to join national policy dialogues with governmental instances. A significant minority is completely closed to cooperation (24%) and another minority hovers in between these two positions (28%).[12]

Change groups have been commonly characterised as "purist" or "pragmatist" based on their willingness to work together with groups such as the Kataeb and the Independence Movement. Despite its popularity, the "purist-pragmatist" dichotomy is misleading. Rather than characterising a change group's general attitude towards controversial parties, it only captures their attitude towards controversial right-wing groups. "Purist" Citizens in a State, for example, refuses to work with the right leaning Kataeb, yet cooperates with controversial leftists, such as the Communist Party and the Popular Nasserist Organisation.[13] "Purists" tend to be politically left-of-centre, whereas "pragmatists" are politically centrist. It is therefore not surprising that "purists" are more lenient to left leaning controversial groups than such right leaning groups. The "purism-pragmatism" dichotomy therefore is more indicative of a group's position on the left-right spectrum than of their stance towards controversial groups in general. The usefulness of this language must be questioned.

The recent parliamentary elections provide a useful way to evaluate the question of collaboration between change groups from what could be called the "narrow" change movement – the groups that are the subject of this report – and groups that also run under the flag of change, or of "opposition," but are considered controversial, such as the Kataeb and the Communist Party. In most Lebanese districts, multiple change lists were registered for the elections, despite efforts to achieve unified lists. These change lists may be classified as "narrow," "controversial," or "mixed," depending on whether they respectively included only candidates from the "narrow" movement, i.e., from groups considered in this report, only

[12] *Only a single group reported being open to alliances with traditional parties: ACT.*
[13] *"Purists" Madinati and Mada likewise collaborate with controversial left leaning parties.*

from “controversial” groups, or from both camps. Thus, we find 26 “narrow” lists, 8 “controversial” ones, and 8 “mixed,” making for a total of 42 change lists.[14] Pragmatist Kulluna Irada’s pre-election surveys suggested that “mixed” lists would be strategically most successful for change groups from the “narrow” change movement. Purist Nahwal Watan’s surveys, on the other hand, suggested that the narrow change movement would be more successful by excluding candidates from controversial groups and running its own “narrow” lists.[15]

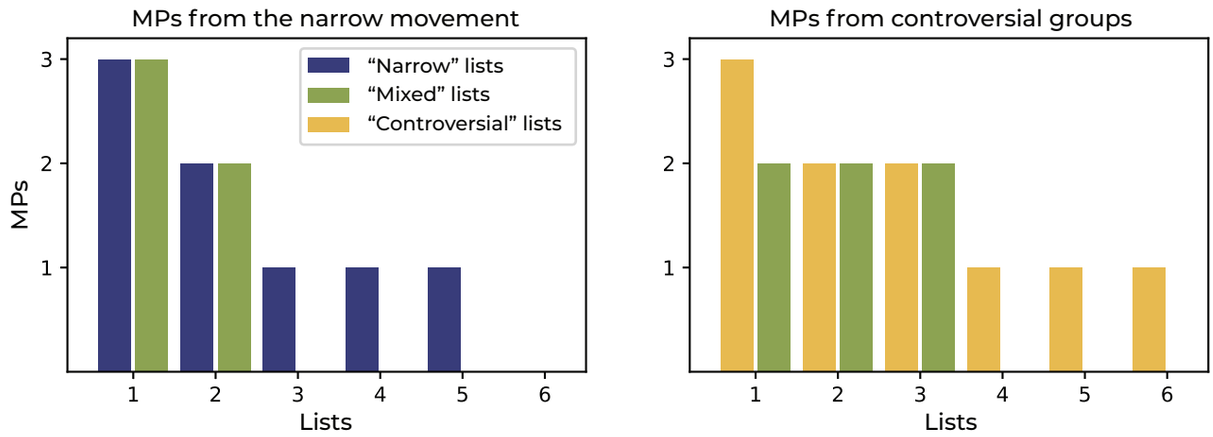

Figure 2: The number of MPs landed by different types of lists, with lists arranged in descending order of MPs.

Figure 2 shows for each type of list how many MPs were landed by respectively change groups from the “narrow” movement (left) and “controversial” groups (right). Thus, the left plot represents the commonly accepted list of 13 change MPs. 5 of them ran on 2 of the 8 “mixed” lists, while the other 8 change MPs ran on 5 of the “narrow” lists. The plot on the right shows that 16 candidates from controversial groups won a seat in parliament. 6 of them emerged from 3 of the 8 “mixed” lists, while 10 ran on 6 of the 8 “controversial” lists. In both cases, the “mixed” lists underperformed compared to the lists with respectively only “narrow” change candidates, or only candidates from controversial groups.

The percentage of votes that candidates from both camps obtained paints a similar picture, as seen in **Figure 3.** Candidates from change groups obtained proportionally far more votes on “narrow” lists than on “mixed” lists (left plot). The same is true for candidates from controversial groups, who obtained more votes on “controversial” lists than on “mixed” lists (right plot). Together, these results indicate that electoral alliances with controversial parties were less successful for both emergent “narrow” change groups as well as for the controversial groups themselves.[16]

[14] *While we identified 52 change lists, we were unable to classify 10 lists as none of the candidates’ allegiances were apparent. These were left out. They did not yield any MPs and garnered relatively few votes anyway.*
[15] *Atlas Assistance, “Lebanon’s Political Change Movement,” 68.*
[16] *This is especially true if one notes that the two most successful “mixed” lists, which supplied 5 change MPs, did not include very controversial candidates, and may have been viewed by most voters as “narrow” lists.*

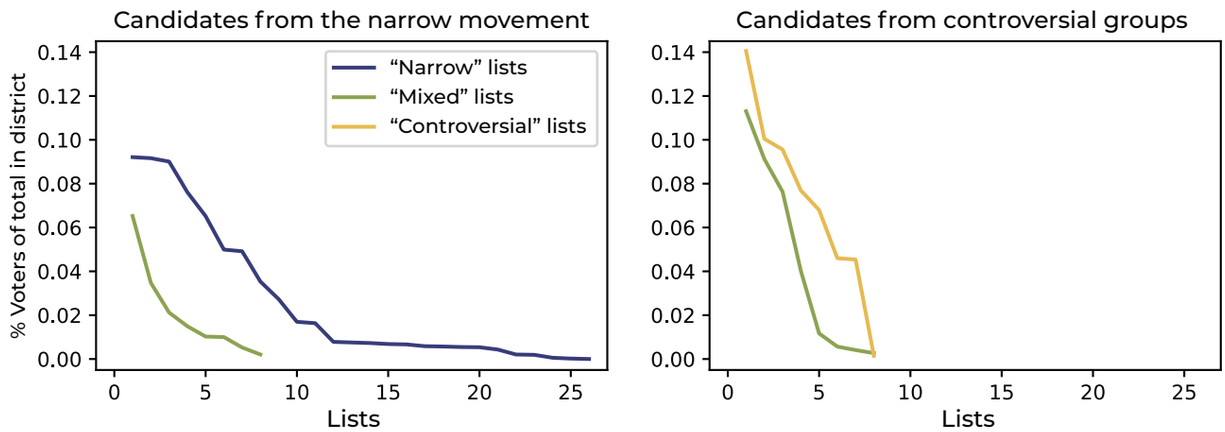

Figure 3: The percentage of votes obtained by different types of lists, with lists arranged in descending order of votes.

3.4 Relationships Within the Movement

Although most change movement groups explicitly stated having good relationships with the other groups in the movement, there are clear expressions of friction and varying degrees of working relationships. **Figure 4** visualises how often each group is mentioned by other groups in our surveys and interviews, and to what extent these mentions are positive. The following groups stand out as particularly well connected within the change movement: Tahalof Watani, Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi, LNA, the National Bloc, Taqaddom, LiHaqqi and Mada. A clustering based on this relationship data reveals a relational network among pragmatist groups,[17] another cluster of relationships among mostly leftist purists,[18] and a third cluster among regional groups and coalitions successful in the recent elections.[19]

More negatively, Citizens in a State was mentioned by 11 other groups, eight of which specifically noted having a bad relationship with the party. In the recent parliamentary elections, Citizens in a State created its own change lists, often running against other change lists. Several groups lamented Citizens in a State's unwillingness to cooperate or ally and judged that this attitude negatively affected the movement's electoral results by dividing the votes.

Madinati also sparked controversy over the elections as they formed their own, rival change lists, after failed negotiations with other groups in Beirut, which likewise is claimed to have negatively affected the electoral results. Many groups report relations with Madinati deteriorated over the elections, although Nahwal Watan cautioned Madinati should not be placed in the same box as Citizens in a State. A Madinati interviewee recalled the group's pre-election alliances with a variety of groups and wondered what would come of these. A third group with a history of controversy within the movement is Sabaa. Although the party was least liked among change groups in 2021, it is seen in a more neutral light today, and was only little mentioned in surveys and interviews, as the spotlight of controversy has moved to Citizens in a State and Madinati.

[17] *The National Bloc, Taqaddom, Khat Ahmar, ACT, Sabaa, and Mintishreen.*
[18] *Mada, LiHaqqi, Hirak Al-Matn Al-Aala, LNA, Al-Marsad Al-Shaabi, Tahalof Watani, and pragmatist RELebanon.*
[19] *Sahlona Wal-Jabal, Shamaluna, and Taharrar.*

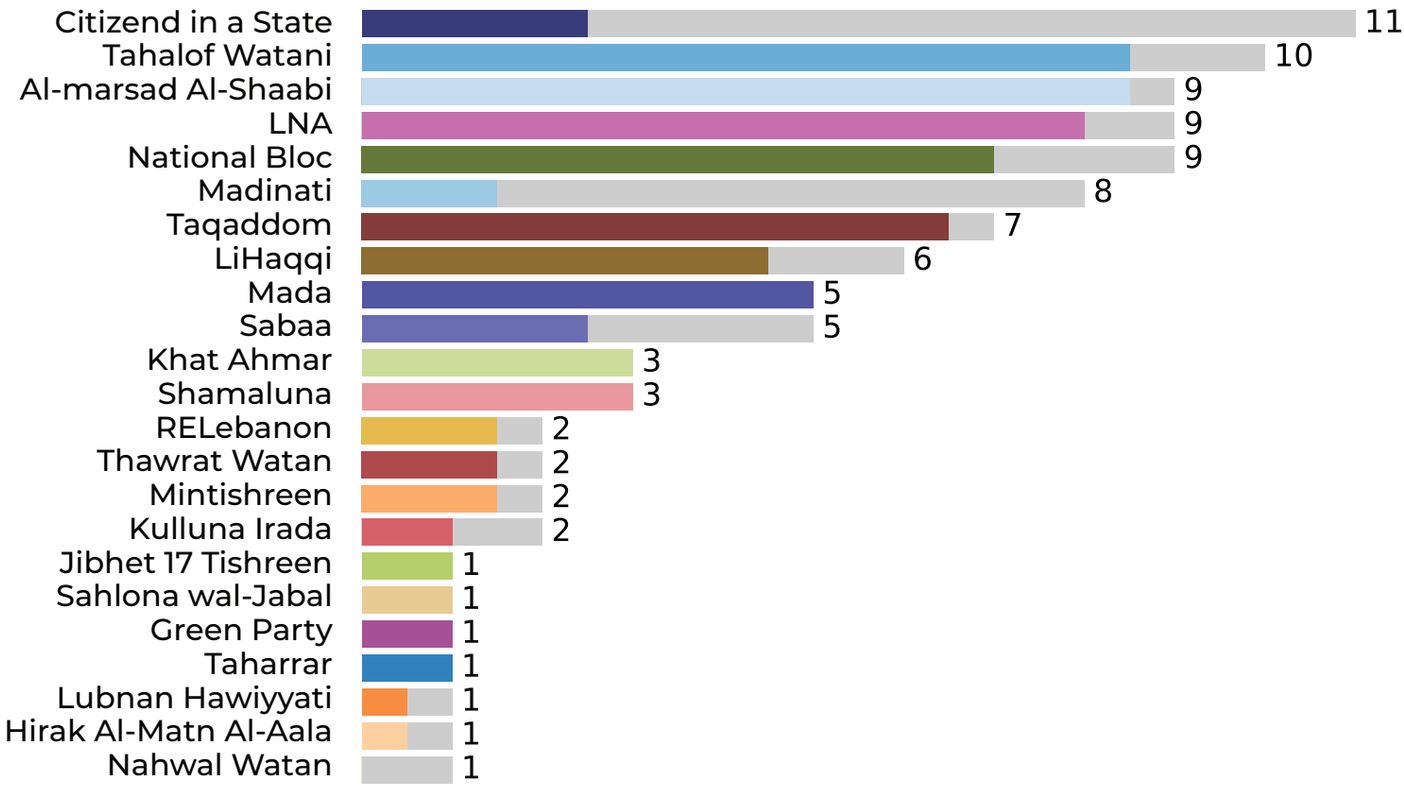

Figure 4: The number of times a group is mentioned by other groups in the survey or during the interview. The proportion of the bar that is coloured indicates to what extent the mentions were positive. A fully coloured bar indicates that all mentions were positive. A fully grey bar indicates that all mentions were negative.

Several groups report good relations with Sabaa. Sabaa itself reports that its periodic efforts to meet with other groups were often turned down, and the party is ready to give up its identity and merge with as many other groups as possible, under a new name, slogan, and identity, for the sake of a stronger and unified politics of change.

Two final focal points of controversy within the movement are Nahwal Watan and Kulluna Irada, both non-party organisations dedicated to change by supporting others in their political pursuits. They are blamed for exacerbating the purist/pragmatist divide in the movement, and for failing to deliver the (financial) support promised. Kulluna Irada responded that “many donors did not provide the support we promised when they saw the fragmentation [of the movement].”

3.5 Challenges and Plans

Most groups (79.3%) identify a shortage of finances as their main challenge. Many are unable to meet face-to-face due to rising fuel prices, and some confess having no money at all, or not even a bank account. Groups have difficulties securing salaries for key members, and thus are limited to the time these people can volunteer after their day jobs, while having to fill

important gaps with sometimes less-than-professional volunteers. While the economic crisis is identified as the main culprit for these financial troubles, some groups also blame their own strict anti-corruption funding policies, the high cost of running an elections campaign, and Nahwal Watan and Kulluna Irada's apparent monopoly on funding. Further challenges mentioned by change groups are the Lebanese's disappointment in the movement, a lack of maturity among change groups, some of whom lack vision or primarily care about their own status, a lack of training, slander and smear campaigns, and the clientelist system fostered by the traditional parties providing them with an unfair advantage.

Looking forward, several groups will focus on supporting and collaborating with the change MPs in Parliament, providing expertise, protection from "traps set by other parties," and follow-up, as well as to work together on developing laws. With the parliamentary elections of 2026 in mind, various groups insist on the importance of uniting the movement into a small number of larger, solid parties and coalitions, perhaps one leftist, one centrist, and one rightist, to present a viable alternative to the traditional parties. In the mid-term, however, the municipal elections of 2023 are considered highly significant, and some groups see change starting there rather than in Parliament, as the town hall is often seen to prop up traditional parties at the national level rather than focusing on local administration. Many groups, therefore, will have members running for election, although often strategically limiting their work to specific regions, due to the high cost of managing campaigns in the numerous municipalities.

3.6 Relations with the Voter

In their approach to change, groups prefer to engage the voter in activities related to awareness raising, protest, and bringing people into political office, rather than provisions of welfare or aid services that in principle the state should organise. The main reason for this is that such work resembles too much the vote-buying clientelism that traditional parties engage in.

Despite the recent electoral success, with 13 MPs for the change movement, and change votes up from 4.5% in 2018 to 9.2% in 2022, it is unclear to what extent the Lebanese voter truly is in favour of "change." Nearly half of the new change seats were formerly occupied by members of Saad Hariri's Future Movement, which refrained from running in the elections. This raises the question of how many votes and seats change candidates would have obtained had Hariri run. For many voters, the absence of their only viable sectarian option may have opened the way to voting for change. The apparent greater willingness of the Lebanese citizen to vote for change may therefore to an extent be an illusion attributable to a happy coincidence. Furthermore, in several districts, a large proportion of change votes came from the diaspora, suggesting that the Lebanese who (can) remain in country are less in favour of change. On the other hand, it is supposed that many potential change voters residing in Lebanon stayed at home due to the fragmentation of the movement in the

elections. Thus, it is unclear to what extent the Lebanese citizen truly is on board with the movement. Incomplete data make such an assessment partial guesswork.

3.7 Gender

Although a record number of female candidates ran in the recent elections, the Lebanese political landscape is still far from gender equal, with only 11.3% of electoral candidates and 6.8% of MPs female, see **Figure 5**. Lists run by opposition groups considered controversial within the change movement fielded significantly more female candidates (16.9%) but landed no female MPs. The "narrow" change movement proved most gender equal, although it is still far from full equality, with 25% female candidates and 30.8% female MPs on its lists. Furthermore, women on narrow movement lists obtained almost twice the number of votes as their counterparts on lists emerging from controversial groups. In the narrow movement, therefore, female candidates appear to have been taken more seriously both by their groups, who gave them places on their lists with a good chance of obtaining a parliamentary seat, as well as by the change voter, who gave these women their confidence. Change groups moreover report 46.5% women in leadership on average, although interviewees and survey respondents in this research were only about 20% female, suggesting that focal points in leadership are still much more male-dominated. Finally, survey respondents ranked women's rights second only to corruption as the most important rights issue to tackle.

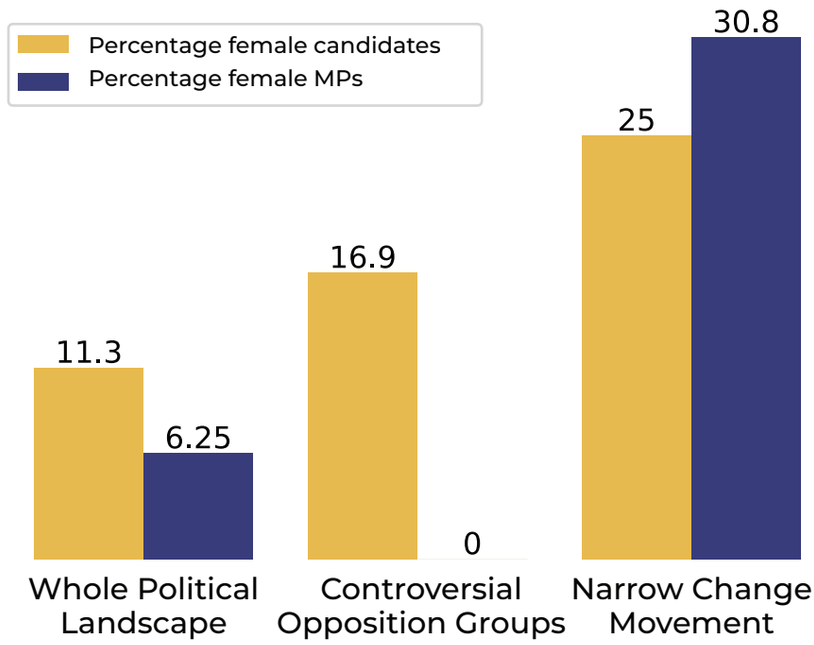

Figure 5: Female participation in the recent parliamentary elections. This figure compares the fractions of female candidates and MPs in the Lebanese political landscape in general, on controversial opposition groups' lists, and on the narrow change movement's lists.

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