From municipal politics to municipalism

Resisting legal and political infrastructures in Lebanon

Sara Dima Abi Saab

Minim is a municipalist observatory that amplifies the voice of municipalism by sharing practical and theoretical knowledge with the support of a community of activists, scholars, journalists, and public officials.

Dima is an NYC and Lebanon based activist, and a PhD Candidate at New York University in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies on the Cultural Studies track. Dima's research focuses on municipal politics and municipalism in Lebanon, looking to the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990 to frame and understand the trajectory of municipalities.

Photo credits: Nabil Ismail

ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG
OFICINA DE
ENLACE MADRID

Table of contets

FROM MUNICIPAL POLITICS TO MUNICIPALISM
RESISTING LEGAL AND POLITICAL INFRASTRUCTURES IN LEBANON[1]

In the late afternoon of 17 October 2019, my phone was flooded with videos, WhatsApp voice notes, and pictures of protesters running in the streets all over Lebanon. Lebanese officials announced a plan to increase taxes on petrol, cigarettes, and messaging services such as WhatsApp as an attempt to increase revenue. In the days leading up to October 17th, wildfires spread across the country, unable to be contained without foreign support due to a prior lack of maintenance and financial investment in firefighting equipment. Almost immediately after the planned tax hikes were announced, protestors gathered outside government headquarters. Throughout the night, it became apparent that the wildfires and intended taxation were just the tip of the iceberg — even as the government backtracked on its tax increase, protestors stayed on the streets for months to come, marking 17 October as the beginning of what is called the October Revolution in Lebanon.

The October Revolution has had a longstanding impact not only on organizing strategies in Lebanon, but also on the very understanding of grassroots mobilization throughout the country. Kareem Chehayeb, a journalist and activist, says, "The most significant victory of Lebanon's popular uprising last October was the reawakening of its paralyzed civil society." The recent wave of grassroots organizing and strategizing highlights what has been missing in Lebanon for

---

years. Chehayeb continues, "though considered vibrant because of the large number of NGOs and the near non-existence of civic spaces among its regional counterparts, politically active student movements, independent workers' unions, and other collectives have not played such a significant role as they did historically. The uprising, which inspired a new image of what the country could look like, nurtured opportunities for local grassroots organizing and collective-building that the country has not witnessed for decades."[2]

International media outlets quickly framed the protests as being a response to taxing WhatsApp. What was missing was an analysis on the ways in which the tax measure crystalized rampant governmental corruption in yet another service or infrastructure — telecommunications. This was while the country was still reeling from the 2015 'garbage crisis', plus other shortcomings, such as continuous electrical cuts and water shortages. The October Revolution quickly adopted the slogan Kilon Ya'ani Kilon; "all of them means all of them", affirming the protesters' intention to bring down all the country's politicians, regardless of religious identification or political affiliation. The uprising brought the country to a halt. Strategies of street blockades, strikes, and tent-installations in different squares caused schools, workplaces, and the economy to grind to a standstill for months on end. But, of course, the 17 October uprising was not spontaneous — the protests were yet another wave in public contempt that came at the heels of years of organizing, strategizing, and mobilizing against the continuous uptick of corruption and exploitation at the hands of the Lebanese political and financial elite.

The Lebanese October Revolution has provided the foundation from which to think through the distinction between municipal politics and municipalism in the Global South, and specifically in Lebanon. Prior to the Revolution, municipal campaigns in Lebanon, such as Beirut Madinati, had been identified as paradigms of grassroots organizing and municipalism by networks in the Global North. Put on its pedestal, Beirut Madinati has been used as an illustration of municipalism in the Global South, joining an array of international political movements organizing and mobilizing locally in an attempt to unseat entrenched political parties. The Beirut Madinati municipal campaign came to fruition in the aftermath of mass protests against the 2015 garbage crisis that saw the collapse of the waste management infrastructure at the hands of corrupt politicians. Beirut Madinati carried the calls of the You Stink protesters and created a campaign to run in the upcoming municipal elections of 2016.[3] However, the effort put into and eventual defeat of Beirut Madinati's campaign brings to the fore important conversations on municipalism, convergence, and electoral campaigns and their relationship with tackling the power structures through collective struggle.

---

2   Interview with Kareem Chehayeb, 16 July, 2020

3   Abu Rish, Z. (2016) 'Garbage Politics' MERIP, 14 Sept.

In this report, I offer the Lebanese context to expand our understanding of municipalism to identify the ways in which particularities present in legal and political infrastructures in the Global South force us to reckon with both the limits and potentials of municipalist struggles as envisaged in the Global North. I center on the notion of New Municipalism to distinguish between municipal politics and municipalism in the Global South, and think through Laura Roth's definition of this form of municipalism as a "political strategy that differs from others in the fact that it not only pursues building power from a specific place (the local level) but also in its approach towards politics. Its aim is twofold: to implement progressive policies, but also to radically change the way politics is done."[4] New Municipalism's notion of building power from a specific place while having an alternative approach towards politics is particularly important within the Lebanese context. Politics in the country requires decentralising electoral politics and state-sanctioned means of organizing, specifically because, since the 1970s, municipal politics has operated as the locus through which government power permeates. In a setting like Lebanon, where municipalities are legally used as a tool to expand state power, methods of theoretically and practically conceptualizing solidarity must, first, understand the limitations imposed on municipal institutions by existing legal infrastructures, and, second, look beyond such institutions in order to transcend the restrictions on the imaginary of an alternative political formation.

While Beirut Madinati's campaigns focused on municipal politics, in the wake of the 2019 October Revolution in Lebanon, movement organizing tactics and the expansion of communal efforts to engage with broader solidarity networks became differentiated from electoral politics. In looking at the marginalized and often-ignored voices and actions of migrant groups such as Egna Legna, this report centers on disenfranchised migrant-worker activism to illustrate municipalist efforts beyond the confines of electoral politics.

To understand the distinction between municipal politics and municipalism in Lebanon and the wider Global South, this report focuses on the history of the emergence of municipal politics and the inter-weaving of municipalities with colonialism. Offering this history reveals the intrinsic distinction between municipalism in the Global North and Global South and the effects of colonialism and imperialism on the potential for organizing. Then, I present the strategies of marginalized feminist and migrant organizers, and local agricultural initiatives as a way to envisage the potential for radical municipalism within the country. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between municipal politics and municipalism to offer a productive point of departure to think through taking on entrenched power, politics, and electoral processes in the Global South.

---

4   Roth, L. (2019) '(New) Municipalism' SpringerLink, Springer, Singapore, 14 Sept.

Historical formation of municipal politics in Lebanon

The longstanding legacy of French colonialism and Ottoman imperialism is preserved in Lebanon's municipal system. As happened with the 2019 Revolution, a proposal to increase taxes in Mount Lebanon lead to a peasant uprising amongst the Maronite Christian and Druze residents in 1860. While the rebellion targeted landowners regardless of religious affiliation, French and Ottoman powers relied on "religious heritage as a primary marker of modern political identity".[5] The French colonial regime posited religious identity as a means of categorizing, compartmentalizing, and ordering the residents. Prior to the uprisings of 1860, space was distributed through "genealogical geography", where communities were built around the land ownership of elite families. However, in response to the conflict, Ottoman and French authorities decided to partition Lebanon along sect-based religious lines. The employment of sectarianism by the French as a means of subduing the armed uprising was implemented at the same time as the Ottoman Empire was introducing municipal governance within the region.

While the French segregated and apportioned land and space to people based on their religious identity to cease the fighting and uprising, the Ottomans were introducing municipal governance to the region. The 1877 Ottoman Municipal Law "anchored this system…in an effort to reorganize provincial administration…to expand the power of the state".[6] The introduction of municipalities in Mount Lebanon, which formalized the administration and governing of specific regions, towns, and villages, came into effect at the same historical time as the same towns and villages were being repopulated along religious lines. "The municipal system was crucial to colonial and post-colonial state-building projects in Lebanon… in the early post-independence periods, the municipal system offered one institutional means for mobilizing both financial resources and local constituencies in the service of executive political maneuvering".[7]

The Ottoman introduction of municipal governance in Mount Lebanon in a moment where the French were segregating populations according to religious identity presented sectarianism as the new hegemonic mode of governance in Lebanon. Administrative duties and responsibilities became intricately connected to religious markers because of the institutionalization of segregation. Space was homogenized according to sect-based identity — the delineation of the borders of municipalities was determined by the sectarian identities. The intermeshing between sect-based spatialization and municipal governance was further solidified by the passing of the

---

5   Makdisi, U.S. (2000) The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon. University of California Press, 7

6   Abu Rish, Z. (2019) 'Municipal Politics in Lebanon' MERIP, 31 Jan., 3

7   Ibid. 5

Municipal Act of 1977 (hereafter, the Act). During the first two years of the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990, municipalities emerged as the primary political-institutional focus because the central government had lost control throughout the country. The Civil War killed over 150,000 people, and injured and displaced many more, ravaging the country. The opposing factions and militias reigned over the country's regions, and shifted the landscape to become one further defined and delineated by sectarian affiliation. Long after the War's end, the legacies remain, keeping the population permanently inhabiting the temporality of it — space, infrastructure, and resources have become sectarianized. This is in large part due to the ways in which the War was engraved into dominant legal and political imaginaries that governed materially and socially.

Two years into the Civil War, Lebanon's cabinet met and drafted the Act, which was largely presented as a decentralization decree intended to devolve government powers to the local institutions. While municipalities played a role in governing throughout Lebanon prior to the Civil War, the Act formalized municipal governance as that which holds jurisdiction over matters of public goods and services. Article 49 of the Act gave municipalities the tasks of "budgeting, crediting, offering loans, taxation, reconciliation, public programs for works, aesthetics, cleaning, health affairs, hospitals, water projects, lighting, urban planning, transportation, delineating the borders of municipalities, and developing and maintaining infrastructure"[8], amongst many other responsibilities. The Act operated as an attempt to sustain the central government's power in a moment where control over regions was compromised. The Civil War's end came with the institutionalization and politicization of the former militias during the War. Sectarian militia leaders who held regions and territory now did so legally and with their share of responsibility. The Act reinforced the divides created through the war, both politically and spatially, and entrenched warring militia leaderships into Lebanon's political system. This was managed through particular clauses of the Act that were reinforced by sectarian divides that appear through reliance on residential registration in municipal districts, and its spatial composition to define municipal boundaries. The residential registration emerged from the Act has been based on the only census conducted in Lebanon, in 1932 under the French Mandate, which ties the right to vote and stand in elections to the town in which one's father was registered during the census. This, of course, does not take into account the mass movement of people over the years since and particularly during the Civil War. The Act, thus, relies on the colonial legacy of tying individuals and families to the sectarianization of space and rights implemented during the height of colonial and imperial interference inside the country.

With the signing of the Ta'if Accord in 1989, which formally ended the Civil War, parliamentary districts were widened to be more inclusive of previously marginalized religious groups. While

---

8   Government of Lebanon Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (1977). 30 June

the Accord was written as a peace treaty with the intentions of eventually dismantling sectarian rule, it simultaneously relied on the contradiction that "politicians who owe their seats to a system of political sectarianism [would] work to actively dismantle it and the economic, social and legal networks that facilitate it"9. The post-war era in Lebanon transformed militias into political actors who relied on the deep entrenchment of sectarianism as the mechanism of governance and power. This simultaneously transformed municipal politics as they set their sights on the institution of the municipality as the site through which their rule would come to be exercised from the top down.

The jurisdiction of municipalities expanded greatly with the Act, however issues around funding by means of the Independent Municipal Fund (IMF) quickly emerged. As the Act and the IMF relied on registered residents informed by the census as their criteria for distributing funds, many municipal districts were under or over funded — setting up the Municipal Act to fail as a decentralization law. The discrepancy in distributing funds appeared immediately: "there are 42 municipalities whose resident population exceeds the registered one by at least a factor of two. Indeed these municipalities have a total registered population of only 231,000 people but the resident population is 916,000. This means that there are roughly 685,000 people unaccounted for in distributing the IMF. Meanwhile, there are 324 municipalities whose resident population is less than half their registered population. Such municipalities have a population of over one million people but their resident population is 336,000".10 As such, the implementation of the Act fails to adequately support the management of municipalities, while continuously reproducing sectarianized space and politics.

In Lebanon, where "religious organizations are entangled with state institutions in the sense that nearly all political parties are affiliated with religious organizations", sectarianism emerges as a network that is "made and remade in the built environment and through people's daily interactions".11 This governance is reinforced by enmeshing space or territory with sectarian polity and power, where the borders of municipalities delineate more than just a government district. Municipal politics has emerged as a mechanism of furthering the sectarianization of space, where the homogenous composition of municipal districts reinforces the cyclical reliance on sectarian identification as the hegemonic mode of governance. Municipalities hinder the institution becoming a site from which alternative political formations could emerge. The legal infrastructure

9   Mikdashi, M. (2019) 'The Magic of Mutual Coexistence in Lebanon: The Taif Accord at Thirty' Jadaliyya, Jadaliyya, 23 Oct.

10   Abu Rish, Z. (2016) 'Municipal Politics in Lebanon' MERIP, 31 Jan.

11   Nucho, J.R. (2017) Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power. Princeton University Press.

solidified through the Act make municipalities operate as another site of expanding state power and reinforcing sectarian modes of governance on a daily basis.

In the Act that governs until today, the legacies of colonial governance and of the Lebanese Civil War continue to permeate Lebanese society on a daily basis. As municipalities have developed as the site of governance in Lebanon, the lack of financial support creates a reliance on privatization measures as a means of accessing basic necessities in the country. Lebanon's political elite continuously increased their profiting from failing infrastructure in the country. Political party leaders of each religious sect hold onto a sector of the Lebanese economy: infrastructure such as waste, water, and energy are divided up and handed over for sectarian-political leaders to manage and profit from. This cyclical process increases the political elites' profiting while service infrastructure continues to fail. In other words, municipalities have become co-opted, and operate as another site through which corrupt state officials continue to permeate – now on the most local level. The implications of the Act reach far and wide. It has inhibited organizing on a municipal scale, increased privatized services as a means of reconciling the failure of the State in the provisioning of resources, and has allowed corruption to spread.

It is within this context that an analysis of municipalist efforts in Lebanon should be explored. In considering the ways in which municipal politics and sect-based segregation were intertwined and imposed through colonial and imperial governance in the 19th century, we can understand the Act as that which inhibits the potential for radical change through electoral politics due to its reliance on the colonially conducted census and sectarianization of space. In the next section, I will move on to question why Beirut Madinati received such acclaim from global municipalist movements despite its participation in elections which marginalize not only Lebanese citizens of various sects, but which also completely disregards the migrant and refugee population. If municipalities are coopted by the state's legal and political apparatus, what mechanisms can networks of activists and organizers use in their resistance to entrenched legal infrastructures that limit the potential of electoral politics? How can activists and organizers in Lebanon engage in municipalist efforts within the framework provided? Who can we look to in order to understand municipalist efforts in the Global South? And finally, how has the October Revolution changed the landscape and imaginary of collective grassroots organizing?

From municipal politics to municipalism: Shifting from electoral campaigns to civic organizing

Beirut Madinati, Photo by REUTERS/Mohamed Azakir

Beirut Madinati emerged in the aftermath of and in response to the 2015 garbage crisis, where waste management infrastructure saw its collapse due to the failed privatization of garbage collection and treatment. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Lebanese government shifted the site of waste management from municipalities to the central government to secure private contracts by companies from which politicians would profit. However, the subcontractors failed to secure sustainable dumpsites throughout the country, leading to tons of garbage lavishing the streets of Lebanon in 2015. With the mobilization of thousands against the corruption of the Lebanese government that brought on this failure throughout the country, various mechanisms of organizing erupted—one of which was Beirut Madinati's 2016 municipal campaign. The campaign emerged just a few months before the municipal elections and was composed of academics, activists, and professionals who sought to unseat Beirut's entrenched municipal officials. The initiative attempted to organize within the system to change the methods of governance. Beirut Madinati operated as an independent group that was politically unaffiliated with the hegemonic political parties within Lebanon. It posited itself as a non-sectarian and secular movement seeking to make Beirut more livable. "From redeveloping waste management services to increasing the city's public green space, to funding affordable housing"[12], the organization sought to lay out feasible solutions to problems plaguing the city.

---

12   Louthan, T. (2017) 'From Garbage to Green Space: The Rise of Beirut Madinati'. New Perspectives in Foreign Policy. Issue 13, summer. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Beirut Madinati attempted to facilitate a grassroots initiative to bring citizens into an alternative political formation in which local officials were held accountable, technocrats held office, and a political movement where collaborative organizing informed the policy and politics of local government. Beirut Madinati organized town-hall meetings, outreach efforts, and mobilized dozens of volunteers from diverse religious and socio-economic backgrounds to be able to compete electorally against the traditional Lebanese parties. While the campaign succeeded in energizing some voters, numerous challenges appeared to diminish voter turnout, leading to an upset for Beirut Madinati in the elections. With only a 20 percent voter turnout, "Beirut Madinati took a respectable 30 percent of the vote, and in the more-affluent eastern Beirut neighborhoods, it acquired over 60 percent.

The movement had managed to "disrupt political patronage networks, but it failed to produce any tangible political success."[13] The low turnout, the inability of Beirut Madinati to inspire broader networks of support, and the ultimate loss in the elections against the long-dominant Beirut List can be attributed to three main reasons. First, the legal foundation of municipalities, as produced by The Act, creates a structural constraint on who is able to run and who is able to vote in the elections. As described above, the reliance of the Act on the 1932 census makes it so that only the people who were registered in Beirut in 1932 can vote and run in Beirut municipal elections. This automatically excludes over two million people out of the two and a half million Beirut residents from voting, because they are not registered in Beirut. The Beirut Madinati campaign worked within the confines established by The Act, and as such their municipal campaign participated in the sectarianized political framework. Second, the failure of basic infrastructure, disparities in economic conditions, and limitations in access to basic necessities and resources is prevalent in Beirut and throughout Lebanon due to the legal and political cooptation and corruption of institutions such as municipalities. Lastly, and most importantly, the very goal of building an apolitical secular electoral campaign in a society deeply marked and structured along traditional sectarianized and clientelist politics is destined to fail. Engaging in municipal politics, rather than municipalist organizing, cannot succeed in a place such as Lebanon where the very legal structure forces the exclusion of over half the population from electoral politics.

Municipal campaigns in Lebanon rely on the notion that local, municipality-based politics operate as a point of departure for democratization and social change. The concept of the municipal scale as that which guarantees an "inherently better or more democratic level of government"[14] simplifies the complex structure of governance in place that marks the local and municipal as

---

13   Ibid. 3

14   Russell, B. (2019) 'Beyond the Local Trap: New Municipalism and the Rise of the Fearless Cities' Wiley Online Library, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 25 Feb. , 4

part and parcel of state power. In the context of Lebanon, the local level does not pave the way for democratization, and municipalities are certainly not sites from which mobilizing people can occur. The Beirut Madinati campaign learned this the hard way. The campaign's reliance and focus on electoral politics had a detrimental effect on their efforts and credibility. While many Beirut residents were energized by Beirut Madinati's campaign, it is important to ask, who of them were eligible to vote in municipal elections?

Within the same timeframe as Beirut Madinati's emergence in 2017, Banchi Yimer founded Egna Legna, 'Us for Ourselves', "an Ethiopian migrants group that advocates for domestic workers' rights in Lebanon". Egna Legna mobilizes against the discrimination and marginalization of domestic workers who are in Lebanon as a part of the kafala system15. Yimer explains the system as such: "By legally binding a migrant worker's immigration status to a contractual relationship with the employer, the position of the employer as tyrant is enshrined in kafala. They can withhold wages and inflict horrific abuses without consequence, turning the lives of domestic workers into a living hell."16 The organization created a network of solidarity and support among migrant workers, offering legal consultancy, shelters, financial assistance, running classes as well as community events — to create safe spaces for migrant workers to convene. Egna Legna partners with organizations and groups such as the Anti-Racism Movement, who have three Migrant Community Centers across Lebanon, and the Feminist Network.

Photo provided by Egna Legna (www.egnalegna.org)

---

15   The kafala system is a sponsorship program that brings migrant domestic workers into Lebanon through a sponsor who has legal responsibility for the domestic worker for the duration of their contract. In Lebanon, the kafala system prevents domestic workers from being covered by employment laws, and leads to the abuse and exploitation of migrant domestic workers. Passports are confiscated, and sponsors often refuse to pay wages, give breaks, and abuse migrant domestic workers without repercussion.

16   Yimer, B., et al. (2020) 'The Lebanese Revolution: A New Chapter of Kafala Misery' The Public Source, 18 Feb.

The networking and organizing by Egna Legna offers a concrete example of what municipalist organizing is, and how it operates in Lebanon. While combating the systemic issues that are part and parcel of the kafala system, the group organizes on a needs basis, and built an initiative attempting to bring solidarity and networking to benefit marginalized migrant workers. As a means of working against the kafala system, workshops such as soap-making and making craft accessories offer an alternative to the corrupt and oppressive system. One of the organizers of the crafts workshop, Tsigereda, wrote in an article, "that the aim is to teach migrant workers a trade on which they can make a living upon returning home to Ethiopia. Hopefully, it will provide them with an alternative to working under the Lebanese kafala system — criticized by domestic workers and human rights activists for subjecting workers to slavery-like conditions." This method of promoting sustainability creates an alternative political formation and shifts the site of survival from the hands of a state that inflicts harm to groups who care about people's collective wellbeing. This organizing mechanism helps alleviate immediate conflicts while building long-term support networks. Furthermore, "struggles that address everyday ways of sustaining life can build power in sustainable ways — rather than just relieving misery."[17]

Egna Legna displays the ways in which a sustainable impact on the day-to-day lives of individuals through municipalist efforts can develop. The difference between the practices of Egna Legna and Beirut Madinati highlights the importance of building a grassroots network interested in fighting power by collaborating to meet the needs of marginalized groups. Beirut Madinati's campaign sought to work within the system to shift power structures, which as discussed above, is untenable considering the ways by which the legal and political composition of the Lebanese State restricts the potential for change through electoral politics. Conversely, Egna Legna demonstrates how grassroots collaborative efforts on the smallest scale shape the ways in which community is understood. Proximity ceases to define spatial composition, and instead defines political alignment and solidarity. This is precisely the difference between municipal politics and municipalism as an organizing strategy for an alternative political formation. The kafala system is far from being dismantled, as is the hegemonic Lebanese state. However, with efforts to modify and improve daily life, Egna Legna provides resources, space, and community to marginalized peoples in Lebanon. This is the most profound example of municipalism in Lebanon, because "under certain conditions, collective projects to reorganize how we meet our needs can provide alternatives more powerful than charity, communitarianism, and individual survival."[18] Beirut Madinati, on the other hand, was defined by the limitations imposed by the Act and working within government structures, which restricted its potential from the start.

17   Zechner, M., and Rübner Hansen, B, 'Building Power in a Crisis of Social Reproduction' ROAR
          Magazine, issue #0.
18   Ibid. 7

Despite Beirut Madinati's limits, however, it still achieved international acclaim. This brings to question the politics of exposure and access, and forces us to consider who receives attention on a global platform, and why. Beirut Madinati is composed of academics, professionals, and activists of a specific intellectual class, which informs its ability to facilitate connections between global municipalist networks. Media, Internet, and academically savvy organizers can access broader networks for support and platform. Meanwhile, the most marginalized groups within Lebanon linger in afterthoughts and peripheries. Focusing on disenfranchised members of Lebanese society, or within any community, opens the door to developing an array of alternative political formations in the Global South. While we may be inclined to designate municipal campaigns such as Beirut Madinati as municipalist organizing, what has become apparent is that the legal and political infrastructure in Lebanon inhibits the possibility of organizing within the system. In order to locate municipalist organizing, we must look to initiatives such as Egna Legna, which works against and around the prevalent governing system as part of a broader strategy to contest state power. The Lebanese October Revolution, however, has encouraged the rise of other marginalized groups — shaping the messaging of the revolution —, and has inspired alternative political formations working outside of the state.

The October revolution: The rise of municipalism in Lebanon

Collective action since the October Revolution has provided a new means by which political action is imagined and materializes in Lebanon. The revolution's strategizing and organization has required the moving away from Beirut's urban centre. Collaboration in shutting down roads, for example, has required communicating with areas of the country that have long been excluded from movement conversations because of their physical distance. Proximity has come to mean something new in the wake of the October Revolution: proximity in political alignment, the desire for mutual aid, and in resisting the corruption and suffocation at the hands of the State has folded the spatial composition of the country. Peripheral regions and long-marginalized peoples have played a central role in the composition of this uprising, and have shaped the ways in which municipalism is to be conceptualized within the country. Most notably feminist organizers have led with chants and slogans that has shifted the discourse throughout the country to be more inclusive and conscious of class issues, capitalism, and the struggle of migrants, refugees, and LGBTQ+ peoples.

The language of President Michel Aoun and other members of parliament deflected blame for the dire circumstances within the country onto Syrian and Palestinian refugees; however, feminist organizers shaped rejection of this divisive and xenophobic language. From the onset of the revolution, the words "we will bring the downfall of racism, it must go" were put to the tune of "if you're happy and you know it clap your hands", alongside chants against xenophobic rhetoric

by political figures such as Gebran Bassil and Aoun. Bassil, the leader of the fascist Free Patriotic Movement, a member of parliament and son-in-law of President Aoun, has long called for the ousting of refugees from Lebanon — blaming refugees for draining the countries resources. Feminist activists came up with a song stating, "for those who war on refugees and are afraid of queer people, what do we tell them" to which the crowd responds, "your downfall is coming, your downfall is coming". The creativity and artistic style of these songs, often to the tune of popular Arabic or English songs, did more than create a catchy melody. The songs shaped the messaging of the revolution as they were sung in all corners of the country. The feminist slogans rejected any intervention or accusation from hegemonic political parties and leaders. Every time a politician gave a speech, the feminist organizers responded with a song that reverberated throughout the country in response.

The slogans and chants inserted marginalized voices of refugees, migrant workers, feminists, and queer people into the heart of the revolution's messages. This inclusion highlighted how different these protests were compared to the several historic uprisings that had occurred in Lebanon. The divisive rhetoric and the attempt by entrenched Lebanese politicians to deflect the blame on refugees and migrants, while still the prevalent discourse, was met with resistance. Instead of allowing politicians and financial elites to scapegoat refugees and migrants for the corruption they are responsible for, feminist organizers played a central role in quelling displacement of citizen's resentments and anger. For example, one evening there was a confrontation between people in two neighborhoods: the Christian neighborhood of Ain el Remmaneh and the Shi'ite neighborhood of Chiyah. As has been typical during the uprising, sectarian political parties instigate tensions with each other to encourage sectarian violence and disrupt the uprising's potential. After an evening of conflict and tension on a street separating Ain el Remmaneh and Chiyah, where the Civil War had started 45 years prior, feminist groups and mothers from each neighborhood called for a unity rally the following day. Thousands of feminist activists and other women gathered between the two neighborhoods, chanting: "No to a civil war, no to sectarianism" and "Ain el Remmaneh and Chiyah, take off your sectarian clothes", while giving out roses to each other. The protesters then marched through the neighborhoods welcoming the protesters from the other side of town, greeting them with flowers and applause. That moment was particularly important, particularly as Lebanese politicians have historically attempted to subdue uprisings with xenophobic and sectarian rhetoric. Considering the numerous crises facing Lebanon, the immense task of providing enduring solidarity became even more crucial.

Maya Mikdashi and Ziad Abu Rish eloquently sum up the present circumstances in Lebanon:

> Lebanon today can be described as featuring a set of multiple and overlapping crises. These include developmental, infrastructural, fiscal, and currency crises. Developmentally, revenue generation has come to standstill and its over-reliance on attracting external financial flows through the service

sector (primarily banking and real estate) has meant that its distribution was quite lopsided. The electricity, water, waste management communication, and transportation infrastructures of the country are dilapidated. Electricity is rationed, the drinking water supply is inconsistent, while mobile and Internet services are expensive and inadequate. Fiscally, the government is unable to balance its budget, due to the combination of an annual debt-servicing burden equal to a third of the annual national-state budget and a taxation system that is overly reliant on indirect taxes (e.g., customs and excise) as opposed to direct taxes (e.g., income tax). Politically-backed smuggling networks through both the ports and land borders—not to mention official exemptions for politicians and their allies—also deprive the state of much of these (already insufficient) indirect taxes. More recently, the government has been unable to pay its bills for many of the privatized services such as traffic light administration and waste management, leading to breakdowns in service. The government has also delayed or failed to make payments to public and private hospitals it has contracts with, causing disruptions to the health care system.

This detailed description of the various crises faced in the country crystalizes the urgency and necessities for alternative political formations to mitigate suffering throughout the country. The political and legal means by which the Lebanese government has continued to promote and exploit the sectarian tensions in Lebanon has enabled mass-level corruption to continue uninterrupted for decades. The country's October Revolution operates as a point of departure for municipalism, and while we do see new forms of organizing and mutual-aid systems, the full potential for municipalist activity remains to be seen. For starters, the political elites in Lebanon are being understood to protect and operate as the vanguard of the Lebanese Civil War. Echoing throughout the streets of Lebanon since October are chants stating, "you are the people of the Civil War, we are the popular revolution" — signaling an end to the hegemonic order of sectarian ruling. The durability of such slogans must be attributed to the work of feminist activists and organizers who, every day since October 17th, have taken to the streets to ensure that the messaging remains inclusive. While, first, collaboration between peoples from various sects and regions in the country are taking place at the grassroots; second, feminist organizers — equally as important — are safeguarding the inclusivity of the revolution.

It is in this light that the potential for municipalist activity of the Egna Legna–kind increases by the day, and through the actions that have taken place in Lebanon since the October Revolution, is developing on a small scale. From coordinating cutting different roads, to protesting at police stations where protesters are held throughout the country, to mutual aid fundraisers seeking to help the most disenfranchised and impoverished, the decentralized nature of this revolution has set the foundation for alternative political formations. And in these withdrawal from "hegemonic circuits of self-reproduction" has provided the "basis of an actual oppositional power".[19] For example, in December 2019, protesters in Tripoli gathered in a tent to discuss food insecurity in their neighborhoods. With more than 150 attendees, protesters launched the Habaq Move-

---

19   Zechner, M., and Rübner Hansen, B. Ibid.

ment, where sustainable agricultural development was communally funded and implemented. Protesters reclaimed land in Al Koura, on the outskirts of Tripoli to begin planting and growing all sorts of fruits and vegetables for their communities. One activist states, "we don't want to depend on the state any more regarding everything related to food sovereignty." Activists and farmers in Tripoli have developed an alternative means through which food distribution can occur, and since Habaq's creation in Tripoli, it has expanded to include different Lebanese regions. Another activist states, "I call a Beqaa resident and say: 'I have radishes, what do you have? Do you want to trade?'"

This system replicates that which was seen in the various camps across the country at the start of the October Revolution. People donated food, coffee and beverages to protesters for free — "a kind of exchange system was created in the square that was very beautiful and very beneficial". The focus of the initiative is to "focus on how to build a people's network", and the promotion of activities that create a sustainable local economy. It is in this light that we see the launching and spreading throughout Lebanon of municipalist activity since the revolution. The camps set up in various squares and on various blocked roads across the country prompted an alternative means through which people can not only imagine, but enact, a shift in their day-to-day lives. Unlike electoral politics, the Lebanese government and elite cannot control the ways in which people support and network with each other. Here, shifting the understanding of proximity from that defined by municipal boundaries to that which entails mutual aid and sustenance marks the establishment of municipalism on a broader scale in Lebanon. When thinking more broadly about municipalist campaigns in the Global South, vis-à-vis the Global North, how can we bring into the conversation less well-publicized and less-privileged activity than Beirut Madinati? How does the Lebanese context expand our understanding of North-South solidarity? How can municipalist networks expand to be more inclusive of disenfranchised members of society?

Global municipalism: Understanding the challenges of municipalist activity in the Global South

Campaigns such as Beirut Madinati quickly received international acclaim among global municipalist projects. However given the legal and political composition of the Lebanese state, the campaign quickly proved to be partaking in municipal politics rather than municipalism. While municipal politics operates as a means through which political transformation can occur in the context of the Global North, the historical and political circumstances in Lebanon display the ways in which municipal politics and electoral politics inherently quell any potential for change because of the legal confines imposed on municipalities by the Act and colonial and imperial intervention. The 1977 Municipal Act, and the sectarianization of space, infrastructure and institutions necessitates alternative grassroots organizing to disrupt and resist the sectarian

hegemonic political order. As mentioned in this essay, initiatives such as Egna Legna and Habaq Movement highlight the ways in which municipalism operates in Lebanon, and displays the potential for municipalist movements that operate outside the confines of Lebanese state power. The alternative formations that rely on care, networking, mutual aid, and solidarity across municipal borders unsettle the very core of Lebanese state governance — or shifts the hegemonic order from the ground up. Beirut Madinati's attempt at unseating longstanding political elites from the municipality of Beirut energized people to see possibilities for an alternative future. However, the Act and the political grip of sectarian order limit the potential for such a campaign to succeed.

Municipalism in Lebanon has to be very different from the municipalist intervention in Spain carried out by the Commons, Podemos branches and others. In Lebanon, running in municipal elections inherently means working within an exclusionary and segregated regime. Not only are refugees and migrants wholly left out of the electoral process, but also Lebanese citizens from various religious backgrounds. It is within this framework that we must understand what can constitute municipalism in the Global South, and Lebanon specifically. Bridging the gap between the Global North and Global South must look to the most marginalized groups to understand how navigating a plethora of political circumstances operates. It is through Ethiopian domestic workers, through impoverished farmers outside Beirut, and activists and organizers collaborating in roadblocks and strikes, and feminist organizers working diligently on messaging, that we will develop municipalism in the Global South.

From municipalist campaigns in the Global North, we learn about the importance of "confluence" (convergence) from Vicente Rubio-Pueyo as "an organizing process … the confluences pay attention to the process itself, allowing them to stay open and in touch with their surroundings, so that ordinary citizens who may want to join can do so at any time. It is about organizing and planning specific goals and outcomes just as much as it is about allowing for the possibility of the unexpected — the overflow."[20] It is this logic of convergence (the broader goal being inclusion of diverse initiatives) that should be applied to international municipalist networks. If our specific "goals and outcomes" are to radically reshape the ways in which self-reproduction and power is enacted from the ground up through municipalist networks, then our comrades and colleagues in the Global North must consider existing political and structural limitations and expand who is involved in municipalist networking.

---

20   Rubio-Pueyo, V. (2017). Municipalism in Spain: From Barcelona to Madrid, and Beyond. Dec.

*** This article was written prior to the explosion that destroyed Beirut on 4 August 2020 due to negligence by the Lebanese government. After months of suffering from an economic crisis, COVID-19, and the latest explosion, the circumstances in Lebanon are getting more dire by the day. Migrant workers have been abandoned and left on the streets outside their respective embassies, unable to return home due to the cost of exit visas, flights, and the withholding of their passports. The rate of COVID-19 infections is increasing on a daily basis due to the destruction of many homes from the Ammonium Nitride explosion, which has left approximately 300,000 people homeless. In the aftermath of the explosion, the Lebanese government has further displayed its incompetence and continues to benefit from the destruction through corrupt practices. Government officials are rejecting an investigation into the explosion, and not one political representative or institution has offered any leadership or support in the aftermath of the catastrophe. Individuals have organized cleaning crews to pick up the glass and debris, while government officials scramble to find a new means by which they can legitimize their power.

This report was written at a moment when hope still remains, and perhaps it still does elsewhere. Despite the widespread destruction and collapse of the economy in Lebanon, solidarity networks continue to expand, as do municipalist interventions. It is in the rubble of Beirut that our hope lays. The ever-changing conditions have exhausted my ability to do justice to Lebanon through writing about the country. It is impossible to keep up; it is impossible to include all the tragedy that has plagued the residents of the country in a document, on a page, in an image, or video, or narrative. Yet it is my hope that this report pays homage to some of the revolutionaries who carry on despite all of the adversities they have encountered, who provide solidarity through whatever means they find feasible in the midst of the chaos. The migrant workers, the feminists, the LGBTQ community, and the farmers who always seem to carry on, despite feeling a fatigue that can be sensed across the oceans and seas, Thank you for offering us models of solidarity, action-oriented organizing, and steadfastness in the face of all that seeks to silence and destroy you.