

# USJ student elections make no attempt to disguise political parties

By Ilija Trojanovic  
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Students of the Universite St. Joseph will face off at the polls Thursday to see who will rule USJ's student government in a blatantly political contest between the major national parties.

Unlike its Anglophone counterparts, the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University, USJ dispenses with the pretense of student clubs that represent external political parties on campus.

"There are no clubs," said Tarek Moughabghab, a campaigner for the Lebanese Forces.

"Here it's just politics."

Even some partisans lamented the dearth of student issues in the candidates' platforms.

"We don't even think about discussing the tuition [with the administration]; they simply aren't responsive," said Mohammad Ali Serhan, a March 8 supporter.

While Moughabghab said the LF students were running to oppose Syrian influence in Lebanon, Patrice Noujaim, an LF candidate, insisted that external politics were secondary. Noujaim focused instead on the failures of last year's council.

"Yes, they were March 8th, but that isn't the issue – 68 percent of the plans they promised never happened," Nou-

jaim said.

Noujaim said he was running on bringing back the Virtual Stock Exchange competition and organizing more student events such as a gala dinner for graduates.

Marwan Maalouf, a USJ alumni and former law school president who graduated in 2005, said student elections were not always so politicized.

"People were into general politics, like personal freedoms and economic reforms," he recalled. "Back then, political groups wouldn't dare set foot in universities or bring their flags with them. Now they do, and it brings with it a militant vibe."

Maalouf said changes to the voting system that favored large blocs were partly to blame, adding that students were no longer allowed to elect their president and other officials directly.

"When I was president not only people from my year would vote for me but people from every year," he said. "That's the complete voice of the people. It's not fully representative now."

USJ is divided into several campuses between Beirut and Mkalles.

While the political balance varies at each, students agreed the main battle would be fought and won on Huvelin Street in Monnot, where the law and business schools are located.

Voters are divided by major and year. Each grade then votes for lists, which include three candidates. The number of candidates from the list

who win a seat is determined by the percentage of votes it receives. The total number of student representatives tops 200.

"The ordering of the names on the list is very important," remarked Noujaim, who enjoys the top spot on the LF list for third-year economics students.

While most students interviewed by The Daily Star laughed at the mention of independent candidates, a small but passionate movement is fighting for a third option.

"We're taking our cue from the Secular Club at AUB," said Serge Sassine, who is running in the school of medicine and nursing. "We're designed around the idea that externalized politics remain outside USJ's campus."

Independent supporter Stephanie Howayek said they were "receiving a lot of praise" for their efforts.

"For this to be a success we hope to see a lot of blank votes," she said.

"It'll be an indicator of student frustration at the current state of university elections," she added.

Some students choose not to involve themselves, citing the militant polarization and lack of results.

"I used to be involved in politics three years ago, and I won in my first year, but I realized it's for nothing because you end up working for people who essentially don't give a damn about you," Omar Mousally said.

"It only creates divisions with people who are friends."

# Lebanese Forces, allies win USJ polls

By Ilija Trojanovic

The Daily Star

BEIRUT: After a tense day of voting that nearly veered into violence, March 14, led by the Lebanese Forces, emerged the victors at the Universite Saint Joseph student elections Thursday for a second year in a row.

March 14 won 130 out of over 200 seats in the student council and dominated the largest faculty, the Campus of Social Sciences on Huvelin Street, the most important electoral battle. March 8 won 93 seats, and independent candidates took 12.

Ecstatic Lebanese Forces students headed to Harissa for Samir Geagea's blessing after winning nine seats to Hezbollah's six in the business school, and sweeping the 11 law school seats where they ran unopposed. The law and business faculties are considered the prizes of the elections.

"I congratulate all of you who worked hard for what you believe in," Fadi Nicolas, a USJ administrator overseeing the elections, told anxious

crowds of students just moments before the results were announced at the Huvelin campus. "Today is a day for democracy. There will be winners and losers, and like in years past, we would like the losing bloc to peacefully leave the premises before the winners."

When it became clear that the LF had emerged victorious, the winners began cheering and raising the triangle salute of the party with their hands. The losing side departed for the adjacent parking lot, where they began waving Hezbollah flags and chanting. After a moment of tension, the sky above campus was lit up with fireworks and students from both blocs appeared to lose their cares.

The results were announced amid a heavy security presence after some light shoving between a Hezbollah supporter and a Future Movement partisan earlier in the day nearly escalated into a full-fledged fight. Some students began to panic when, shortly after the losing bloc departed, police in heavy riot gear briefly blocked the entrance.

Student campaigners from both sides were working hard all day to ensure their bloc's victory. Lebanese Forces

supporters wore red T-shirts with "Committed to be 1" emblazoned on their shirts, with Youssef Jallad, a March 14 campaigner, explaining that it means commitment to being No. 1 at Huvelin.

Their March 8 rivals, draped in darker navy and black shirts, named their campaign *Changeons le Rituel* (Change the Ritual).

"We want to change the sectarian tradition of supporting someone just because they're of the same faith as you," said Elie Awwad, a supporter of Aoun. "Our campaign name is meant to highlight the aspiration for change."

Voting throughout the day went by very smoothly, Hilda Bairamian, a marketing and management professor in charge of the second year candidates, told The Daily Star. She credited the online voting system which was introduced two years ago.

Bairamian dismissed the tensions between students as a healthy competitive spirit.

"It's a normal situation in a democracy where students don't always have the same belief, which obviously shows their differences," she said.



Riot police stand guard outside the Universite St. Joseph gate in Monnot.

The Daily Star/Hasan Shaaban

## Army, ISF defuse sectarian standoff at university in Beirut

**By Rayane Abou Jaoude and Ilija Trojanovic**

The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The Army and Internal Security Forces defused Monday a sectarian standoff between students affiliated with the rival March 8 and March 14 parties at the Université Saint Joseph after tensions on campus drew calls for intervention and condemnation from political officials.

The incident appears to have been sparked by some students graffitiing the name of Habib Chartouni, the assassin of President-elect Bashir Gemayel, with a heart under it. March 14 students blamed Hezbollah students for the graffiti, prompting a minor scuffle between a Hezbollah supporter and a Future Movement partisan.

According to third-year student Adib Boustany, a Kataeb supporter, a brawl ensued between a student belonging to the Hezbollah party and another youth affiliated with the Lebanese Forces. The former challenged the latter to “take it outside,” Boustany said.

Dozens of other Hezbollah-affiliated students rallied outside the university’s main gate on Huvelain Street in Beirut’s Monnot to watch the fight.

Many of them were not university students, Boustany claimed. Media reports said several came from the Beirut neighborhood of Al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq and other nearby areas.

The incident follows tensions over the results of last week’s student elections, in which the March 14 student coalition, led by the Lebanese Forces, emerged as victors.

The coalition won 130 out of more than 200 seats in the student council and dominated the largest faculty, the

Campus of Social Sciences. March 8 won 93 seats, while independent candidates took 12.

The crowds of angered outside the university people prompted the Army and the Internal Security Forces to deploy units.

According to March 14 members,

Hezbollah members also yelled profanities during the protest.

Kataeb MP Sami Gemayel contacted both university President Father Salim Daccache and Army commander Gen. Jean Kahwagi, asking them to take full responsibility and contain the situation.

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The Lebanese Army intervened to quell tensions outside the university.

The Daily Star/Mohammad Azakir

## Army, ISF defuse sectarian standoff

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Student Boustany said he thought the graffiti was “disrespectful.”

“They [Hezbollah] can’t enter Ashrafieh and do this, if we did the same thing about [Sayyed Hassan] Nasrallah in their neighborhood things would be different,” he said.

No incidents of physical violence were reported outside the university, as the Army attempted to quell the situation. The Internal Security Forces were also deployed soon afterward, putting the university on lockdown. Students could not leave campus until the situation was stabilized in the afternoon.

The university released a statement saying it would not hold classes at its Campus of Social Sciences Tuesday, taking full responsibility for the incident and adding that it was important to “renew its commitment to the historical adages of its charter, and its commitment to the application of these principles to be a university for all of Lebanon and all Lebanese across sects and political affiliations.”

MP Sami Gemayel said at a news conference that the spat was part of an ongoing series of provocations being carried out by Hezbollah.

According to Gemayel, the Army and the Internal Security Forces were slow to assemble at the university.

“We contacted all the security officials and nobody intervened, this is proof that the Lebanese government does not act on its own, and we have promised that we will not keep silent about such provocations,” he said.

Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea also condemned the Internal Security Forces, saying they were mostly passive during the protest, and complaining that students were prevented from leaving the university campus for hours.

“This situation is unacceptable,” Geagea said at a news conference, saying members of Hezbollah were dispersed around the university after the protest ended.

“I hope the university administration will open an investigation into the Hezbollah-affiliated students,” the LF leader said.

Geagea said that approximately 150 Hezbollah members had surrounded the university, many of whom were “thugs” not enrolled at the college.

The Army released a statement defending its response, saying the protest at the university was not a security transgression and therefore did not require the its intervention, adding that the altercations were a result of political differences.

Nevertheless, the statement said, the military decided to deploy.

The Future Movement also released a statement condemning the events, calling on students “to be aware of the seriousness of being dragged into provocations” and “maintain their university’s reputation for democracy and tolerance.”

Students from the National Liberal Party’s circle of Francophone Universities released a statement Monday stressing that such altercations were not welcome and vowing to “stand in the face” of similar incidents.

A Hezbollah-affiliated student who requested anonymity told The Daily Star that the March 14 students were to blame for the brawl.

He said university students often discriminated against Hezbollah members, telling them “this is a Christian university,” and that it was Bashir Gemayel’s alma mater, implying that they were not welcome.

“We understand it’s a Christian university, but we pay the same tuition and we attend the same courses, so why should we be singled out?” he asked.

In a statement, March 8-affiliated Free Patriotic Movement’s youth bloc “strongly condemned” the graffiti meant to insult Bashir Gemayel.

It called on the university’s administration to investigate the issue and punish the perpetrators “no matter which party they belong to.”

President Michel Sleiman telephoned caretaker Interior Minister Marwan Charbel, as well as Daccache and Kahwagi, about the incident, stressing that students should practice “sportsmanship” in elections.

## Fadlallah calls for cooler heads at USJ, slams Geagea

BEIRUT: Hezbollah MP Hasan Fadlallah played down Tuesday a sectarian standoff between students at a Beirut university and slammed some rivals in the March 14 political camp for being “racists” and “fascists.”

“This is an incident that [could] happen at any university and there is no need for political intervention,” he told a news conference at the Parliament Tuesday.

“The brawl has been exaggerated,” he said, accusing March 14 of inciting and promoting hatred among students of Université Saint Joseph.

“What happened [Monday] came after some [politicians] incited students against each other,” Fadlallah said.

“Sectarianism or fascism – the ideology of rejecting the other for belonging to a different sect or for political disagreements – is unacceptable,” he warned his March 14 rivals.

USJ, which canceled its classes Tuesday, “is for all the Lebanese,” Fadlallah insisted. “No one can usurp this university that we highly respect.”

Fadlallah also slammed Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea without naming him.

“No politician can call students ‘thugs,’” Fadlallah said, referring to Geagea’s remarks Monday.

Geagea had condemned the early afternoon face-off between students affiliated with the Hezbollah-led March 8 and Future Movement-led March 14 coalitions at USJ.

He said that approximately 150 Hezbollah members had surrounded the university, many of whom were “thugs” not enrolled at the college.

The Lebanese Army and policemen from the Internal Security Forces stepped in after tensions on campus drew calls for intervention and condemnation from political officials.

The argument appears to have been sparked when some students’ drew graffiti of the name of Habib Chartouni, the assassin of President-elect Bashir Gemayel, with a heart under it. March 14 students blamed Hezbollah students for the drawing, prompting a minor scuffle between a Hezbollah supporter and a Lebanese Forces partisan.

Fadlallah called on university students across Lebanon to handle conflicts in a civilized manner.

“You are the elites of Lebanon. Solve your problems in a civil manner.”

“Leave political differences aside, compete with high spirits, and solve disputes through dialogue,” he said. – *The Daily Star*

## Fresh tension prompts closure of USJ campus

**By Rayane Abou Jaoude**

The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Tensions at Université St. Joseph threaten to boil over amid rising sectarian sentiment and concerns that recent spats between rival political groups at the university could escalate if the administration does not move to contain the situation.

USJ's business faculty at its Huvelin campus in Monnot closed Wednesday for the second time this week after students affiliated with Hezbollah and the Lebanese Forces traded insults near the smoking area outside the building, according to a third-year business student who asked to remain anonymous.

The Army soon deployed its units at the campus and along the narrow streets of Monnot, as Internal Security Forces and police in civilian cloth-

ing were stationed outside the university's main gate, where white metal barriers have surrounded the campus since Monday.

Security sources said USJ sent text messages to business school students informing them of the one-day suspension of classes at Huvelin campus. Reports of a meeting between the parties involved mediated by the administration could not be confirmed.

Maher Dibe, a second-year business student affiliated with the March 14 National Liberal Party, said tensions had been high since last week's student elections, in which Lebanese Forces emerged victorious, an outcome he said Hezbollah students "did not approve of."

He accused Hezbollah students of wanting to "bring the university down."

However, a Hezbollah-affiliated student had told The Daily Star Monday that university students often dis-

criminated against Shiite students, telling them "this is a Christian university" and that it was Bashir Gemayel's alma mater, implying that they were not welcome.

Wednesday's confrontation came after a previous spat Monday, one that quickly drew condemnation from political forces, with Kataeb MP Sami Gemayel, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Hezbollah's MP Hasan Fadlallah trading blame.

The scuffle appeared to have been sparked when some students drew the name of Habib Chartouni, the assassin of President-elect Bashir Gemayel, with a heart under it. March 14 students blamed Hezbollah students for the drawing, sparking a faceoff between a Hezbollah supporter and a member of the Lebanese Forces.

The security sources said the university launched an investigation into Monday's incident, including a video

that appears to show two students allegedly affiliated with Hezbollah firing shots into the air close to the university. The video was reportedly taken Monday.

"The residue from political speeches, and their rhetoric, has been resonating [among students], which has led to dangerous student confrontations," said Imad Salameh, political science professor at the Lebanese American University. "Sectarianism will eventually manifest within universities."

"These are times of sensitivity; the whole situation is a reflection of the situation in the country," he said.

Salameh said USJ had to take strict measures to ensure that verbal fights did not result in bloodshed. He emphasized that both sides were at fault.

Salameh said that tensions were unfortunately bound to emerge as a result of the changing demographics at

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the majority Catholic university, causing both Shiite and Christian students to feel threatened.

While he said the future was unknown and didn't necessarily involve more scuffles, he also said the situation could escalate and "get out of hand very quickly."

Salameh said "close reminders of the divisions in the country" echoed with the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party claiming the university was a Christian area and Hezbollah claiming their freedom of expression was being attacked.

Talal Nezameddin, political sciences professor at the American University of Beirut, said the situation could escalate if the university does not implement appropriate measures and "nip it in the bud." He believes this can be done by strengthening security forces.

He said shutting down classes unfairly punished students who were not involved.

"If the matter is quickly wrapped up, it will be the end of it," he said. "There was a political decision not to back down, but to create conflict. ... It reflects the hot-bloodedness that followed the elections."

"Sectarianism has always existed in Lebanon, it is nothing new or unusual," he said. "Today, less people are sectarian-minded, but those sectarian-minded are more entrenched and more frightening."

Hilal Khashan, professor of political sciences at the American University of Beirut, said that the spats had been taken seriously because they involved different sects.

However, Khashan thought the impact of the altercations would be short-lived and "doubted very much" it was a precursor to any more strife.

"It is a matter of indecency," he said of the students' behavior, adding that it was a "localized event" unlikely to affect other universities.

# Students of rival camps suspended over USJ fights

**By Ilija Trojanovic**

The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Students had mixed reactions Friday to the Université St. Joseph's decision to suspend two students over fights earlier this week that took on sectarian and political overtones.

The two students, Karim Mustapha and Marc Moussallem – who belong to the rival Hezbollah and Lebanese Forces parties respectively – will face a disciplinary hearing in the coming days, Dean Tony Gibeily told The Daily Star. If found guilty, the students could face expulsion.

USJ drew national attention this week following a confrontation Monday between Hezbollah and Lebanese Forces students, with the situation threatening to spin out of control as party officials traded insults over the event.

Most students say tensions have been high since the Lebanese Forces and their allies dominated the student elections earlier this month, but Hezbollah and March 8 students complain of rampant discrimination within the Catholic institution.

At the Huvelin campus in Monnot, where the incidents took place, the

security forces outside the gate outnumbered the students inside Friday, creating a gloomy atmosphere.

“Look how securitized our campus has become,” said law student Kevin Massaad, pointing at a row of more than a dozen armed security personnel. “Yesterday a tank even drove by the main gate!”

Massaad said the university was not going far enough with its disciplinary actions: “I think they [the students] are treated too nicely to be honest.”

Other students had a different view.

Claudia Louka said the two should be punished, but “to expel them indefinitely would be too harsh.”

Ribal Stephan, a master's student at USJ, said: “Both sides are to blame, but one side took it too far.” He went on to say that Hezbollah-supporting students, presumably Shiites, should respect the Christian history and character of the university.

“We all know where USJ is located, in which area, and some people must simply respect the area it's in,” he said. “If I'm even in a Muslim neighborhood, I tuck my cross in my shirt. I respect other people's religious beliefs and they should respect mine and know their limits.”