USJ forms student consulting body in wake of recent political quarrels

By Wassim Mroueh
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Université St. Joseph announced Friday the establishment of a consultative body comprising student delegates and members of the administration, but some student representatives doubted the move would ease political tensions in the university.

The formation of the new body comes several weeks after quarrels between Hezbollah and Lebanese Forces students forced a temporary cancellation of classes at one of the university’s campuses.

The university said it had formed a general consultative council that would “make proposals, help make decisions and follow up on all issues related to various aspects of student life.”

Roger Haddad, from USJ’s Department of Publications and Communications, said the council aimed at guaranteeing better communication between all members of the university.

“It addresses all issues that concern students such as their relations with each other in the political, cultural and sports arenas and aims at facilitating ties between students and the administration,” Haddad added.

“We are experimenting.”

In November, several confrontations between Hezbollah and Lebanese Forces students temporarily shut down USJ’s Huvelin campus in Monnot, which remains heavily guarded.

The spark of the dispute appeared to be a graffiti of the name Habib Char- touni with a heart under it.

Chartouni assassinated President-elect Bashir Gemayel, the founder of the LF, on Sept. 14, 1982.

Gemayel went to the Huvelin campus which LF students call the “Cam pus of Bashir Gemayel.”

March 14 students blamed Hezbollah youth for the drawing, sparking a faceoff between Hezbollah student supporters and rival students from the LF.

The incident soon drew national attention, with leaders of some of the most powerful political parties trading blame and weighing in. Others have publicly decried the politicization of higher education in Lebanon.

Haddad said that the university has been mulling the idea of forming the body for a while, but sped up the step in wake of the recent quarrels.

The newly formed council is headed by the president of the university. It also includes deputies of the president, the university’s secretary-general, deans and others.

Student delegates in USJ campuses in Beirut elected four council representatives Saturday.

Three representatives from student councils at USJ campuses in Zahle, Sidon and Tripoli are also members of the council.

“In the past, the university used to call student representatives for meet ings, but no one showed up,” Haddad said. “But this time, this council will be meeting and discussing proposals.”

But Nadim Yazbek, the head of the LF Students League, ruled any possibility that the new council would help reduce tensions in the university.

“Once the university takes required measures against whoever undermined the university’s security, only this will defuse tensions,” Yazbek told The Daily Star.

He added that the measures should target anyone who commits acts against university regulations, whether from the March 8 or March 14 coalitions.

“Once the university begins taking these measures and appears to be serious, but things are moving slowly,” Yazbek said. In wake of the USJ brawl, the university’s administration suspended two students temporarily, one a Shiite from March 8 and the other a Christian from the LF.

But Yazbek said the LF student was only defending himself against the March 8 student who opened fire with a pistol near the university campus and “was committing thuggish acts” inside.

Yazbek voiced regret that the LF student received the same punishment in the name of what he called “sectarian balance.”

However, Yazbek said he believed the council would reflect positively on the academic needs of the students.

When contacted by The Daily Star, Youssef Bassam, Hezbollah’s head of student affairs, said he needed to examine the details of the newly formed body before he could comment.