

March 14 victors in USJ student elections

Sectarianism remains a prominent element as polls held for first time in two years

By Nazih Osseiran
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: March 14 candidates won a majority of faculties in Université Saint-Joseph nationwide student elections Monday, in the first polls to be held at the university in two years.

In the Huvelin campus in Beirut student candidates from the Lebanese Forces and their allies clinched all five seats at the faculty of business and management, the largest in the campus.

In the same campus, they won all the eleven seats of the faculty of insurance and eight out of 12 seats at the faculty of law.

March 14 student candidates also won a majority in the faculties of economics and pharmacy

Rival students affiliated with the March 8 coalition won a majority of seats in the faculties of sciences, dentistry and engineering.

Elsewhere in Lebanon, March 14 student candidates clinched 13 out of 14 seats at the Zahle campus, while March 8 rivals won the majority of seats at the Abra campus, east of Sidon.

The electoral process went smooth in general.

At USJ's faculty of medicine in Beirut, the administration placed restrictions on journalists.

Reporters were escorted from the main gate into a conference room. Two faculty members awaited The Daily Star reporter. One scoured the campus earmarking students deemed appropriate for interviews, while the other ensured reporters did not wander about and initiate their own inquiries.

"This is not a democratic issue, it's an organizational issue," one faculty member told The Daily Star. "Students are forbidden from issuing statements to the press without the university's permission, as are



The nonviolent elections were marred by apathy.

members of the press forbidden from asking students before consulting with us first."

One of the students deemed fit for interview was Cynthia Raffi, a previous Free Patriotic Movement candidate and current supporter.

"I ran with the FPM because they are cool people and very open, and I found them more welcoming."

Cynthia assured The Daily Star that she would be voting for FPM candidates, yet was completely oblivious of their platforms. She insisted that the FPM threw better parties than other groups, and were all around a fun bunch, deserving of everyone's vote.

An FPM candidate said she need-

ed to assess the situation before improving it.

Her platform revolved around improving academics and instituting a more open culture, so that future doctors could interact with individuals from different segments of society.

"The FPM has faults ... no one is perfect, but we are aiming to instill a culture of dialogue and democracy," the candidate said.

Christian Mouawad, an activist with the Kataeb Party, said that there was no March 14 representation in the faculty of medicine student elections. "It is not about politics but the quality of work," he said.

Opposing the FPM was a group

of so-called independents. "They come from diverse political backgrounds including the FPM, the Lebanese Forces, the communists, and Hezbollah" Mouawad said. "They gave up their political affiliations for the sake of the university."

Independent candidates won most of the election seats at the faculty of medicine.

"The elections were calm and integrity was maintained ... no one was pressured, and there were no electoral advertisements at the voting booths," an observer from the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections told The Daily Star.

"We didn't vote because we are confused," Fadi, who preferred to

be identified by his first name, told The Daily Star. Standing in front of the faculty of medicine's gate, far from the reach of the administration, he was able to speak freely. "These people are saying that they gave up their political allegiances and are now independents ... to be honest that is very hard to believe."

"I used to vote for the Lebanese Forces because my friends would," an LF activist, who preferred to remain anonymous, told The Daily Star. "There are sacred institutions we need to protect," he added, while standing just outside the gates of the Huvelin campus.

The student claimed that March 8 supporters had been itching for a

fight since it became apparent that they would lose the elections.

"A while ago they cornered one of the candidates for March 14 and started screaming at him ... they want to start a fight so that the elections are cancelled and they are not embarrassed," the student told The Daily Star.

"I will be voting for the LF because they throw better parties than the FPM," the same student said. "Oh also because of academics ... they have good academics," he added after a brief pause.

"The LF supporters are very sectarian," Simon Zwein said. "They came to us knowing that we are Christian and said, 'Look, the Shiites are taking over the country so you need to vote for us so that doesn't happen,'" he added. Zwein said that was when he decided to join the Free Patriotic Movement.

"We study together, eat and go out together ... some of us even live together in the dorms," his friend Christie Mourani chimed in. "It is unacceptable that they use sectarian rhetoric to separate us ... we all live in this country together."

Both told The Daily Star that after they made the decision to join the Free Patriotic Movement, they were shunned by their peers.

"We don't care about the elections ... it is all sectarian politics," another student, who preferred to remain anonymous, told The Daily Star. "I didn't vote because they are all power-hungry and care nothing for students and campus life."

Wael Haydar voiced similar concerns. "I voted for friends as a favor ... I know they won't change anything, and anyway, us as Druze have no presence here, so I don't think anyone represents me," he said.

Other students were afraid that if they voted it might be detrimental to their social life.

"Everyone knows that the ballots are not secretive," a student, who preferred to remain anonymous, told The Daily Star.

"I don't want to vote for this group and offend my friends who were candidates for another group."

The Daily Star/Hasan Shaaban

USJ to hold first student elections in two years

BEIRUT: Universite Saint-Joseph will hold its first student elections in two years Monday, as nationwide political tensions simmer down and pave the way for student-oriented political expression.

Fouad Maroun, USJ's secretary-general, seemed optimistic regarding the upcoming elections, as he elaborated on the procedures the administration had set up to ensure a peaceful democratic process. "The administration will be on the ground and will be keen on ensuring a civil process ... outside observers will also be joining us to ensure transparency," he told *The Daily Star*.

"We see that the situation is calmer this year," he explained. "Last year we had a number of drastic political incidents in the weeks leading up to the election ... we feared that might spill over onto campus so we decided to cancel it."

The contest will pit March 8 student candidates against rival students affiliated with the March 14 alliance, but under a calmer atmosphere.

Recently, rival political parties have been meeting at national dialogue sessions chaired by Speaker Nabih Berri in order to bring an end to the political impasse that has been plaguing Lebanon.

For their part, the Lebanese Forces and the Free Patriotic Movement, which are influential at USJ, announced a declaration of intent in June to further diffuse tensions in their longtime rivalry.

The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections will be sending representatives to the campus on the day of elections. Affiliates with LADE will assess the transparency of

the procedures, and publish a report showcasing the election's shortcomings and accomplishments.

Independent students will be performing the role of mediators. Spread around campus, the mediators will attempt to calm the situation in case a dispute erupts, and will act as liaisons between opposing parties. "Of course this is all in addition to disciplinary measures, which will punish any instigators of trouble," Maroun said.

The Interior Ministry was also notified of the elections, and will take the appropriate security measures. Maroun expects that the Internal Security Forces to be stationed along the key entry points to Monnot Street, where the USJ's Huvelin Campus is located. Major fighting incidents have occurred on that campus in the past.

"These are all complimentary producers ... what is essential is that each party accepts different opinions and acquiesces to the results of the elections," Ahmad Mhanna, head of Hezbollah's Youth Department, told *The Daily Star*.

He said it was important that the university had reinstated the student elections. "We need new blood in politics to reinvigorate political life."

Mhanna claimed that this realization spawned a gentleman's agreement between the competing blocs to ensure peaceful, civil and democratic student elections. The representatives of the blocs came together and agreed to mitigate any confrontational or sectarian rhetoric that might be used during the course of the elections.

The different political blocs at USJ have clashed frequently in the past. One altercation between the Lebanese Forces and Hezbollah evolved into a full-blown fistfight, necessitating intervention by the ISF.

"Ahmad Mhanna is my friend ... if anything were to happen we would coordinate among ourselves and put an immediate end to it," Lebanese Forces head of student affairs Jad Denyan told *The Daily Star*.

Denyan stressed that this year will be different than previous years due to the communication and coordination taking place between political rivals. He alleged that previous altercations occurred after certain parties insulted one of the university's symbols, namely assassinated President-elect Bachir Gemayel.

Yet Denyan seemed confident that no such insults would occur in the upcoming elections. "We will try to handle everything positively ... and have employed level-headed organizers to ensure that no violence will ever take place," he said.

Antoun Soueid, Free Patriotic Movement president, also voiced hope that this year's elections will be different. "It will be different this time around ... it will be a democratic exercise par excellence," he told *The Daily Star*.

Soueid confirmed what his peers had said, stressing that the communication between opposing factions has been unprecedented.

"We are making sure that we all agree on the type of language we use," Soueid said. "All of us are making sure to stay away from any form of escalatory speech or circular, particularly those that might be perceived as sectarian enticement."
— N.O., *The Daily Star*