

# Independent defeats political class in Beirut Bar elections

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BEIRUT: Melhem Khalaf was voted the new president of the Beirut Bar Association Sunday, claiming victory over a candidate endorsed by Lebanon's ruling class.

Khalaf, an independent and law professor at Saint Joseph University, won with 2,341 votes against Nader Gaspard. While also an independent, Gaspard was backed by the Free Patriotic Movement, the Lebanese Forces, the Progressive Socialist Party and the Future Movement following the withdrawal of their candidates.

Gaspard scored 1,532 votes.

As an independent candidate with no clear backing from a political party, Khalaf's victory was poignant as nationwide protests demand the removal of the entire political class.

Hundreds of lawyers gathered in the Justice Palace elections day.

When the results were announced, the scene of lawyers pumping their fists in the air cheering and chanting, "Revolution," was reminiscent of protesters who have gathered in squares across Lebanon since Oct. 17. "We have a responsibility ... and we have to protect this responsibility," Khalaf told The Daily Star after winning.

When asked what would change under his leadership, Khalaf said that the association "was not trying to change ... we are trying to progress."

"The main role of a lawyer is to defend any individual who might be vulnerable or imprisoned," he said.



Khalaf, an independent and law professor at Saint Joseph University, won with 2,341 votes against Nader Gaspard.

"In any circumstance where someone feels they are in need of a lawyer, we will be there."

Khalaf thanked Speaker Nabih Berri in a phonecall for the Amal Movement affiliated lawyers' support, according to local TV LBCI.

The election of Khalaf marks a significant departure from the outgoing head of the association, Andre Chidiac, whose leadership has been criticized by many lawyers especially for not taking a clear stand during recent events.

Chidiac was elected in 2017 and is reportedly close to the Free Patri-

otic Movement and was backed by several political parties during the previous elections.

During the protests, Chidiac had enforced a rule barring lawyers from wearing their robes during protests without permission. "I didn't ban them ... I just enforced the rules," he told The Daily Star.

The Beirut Bar Association said that lawyers cannot participate in any movement wearing their robes unless it is something related to or approved by the association.

"The job of the Beirut Bar Association should be to lead, guide and

protect lawyers. This has not been the case," Dina Abou Zour, a lawyer, said during the elections.

Abou Zour explained that only one statement, on Oct. 23, had been released by the association during the monthlong uprising in which dozens of protesters have been detained without explanation. She said the statement made no real mention of the association's stance on the demonstrations and whether they would support protesters.

"It is our job to defend those who are vulnerable and don't have access to a defense. It is terrible for

such an association to stay silent and do nothing about it," she said, referencing cases where protesters had been illegally beaten while detained by security forces.

Because of this, lawyers have taken personal initiative to defend protesters. For example, groups of lawyers have set up tents in Riad al-Solh Square and Martyrs' Square to ensure that Lebanese have access to legal consultation. Abou Zour is cautiously optimistic. "Maybe [Khalaf] can't do everything, but this is the first step, to get rid of the sectarian influence, we hope." In the first round to elect council members, Khalaf won with 2,062 votes. Seventeen candidates competed for five positions.

Pierre Hanna, who was backed by the LF, the PSP and the Future Movement for the presidency, won 1,703 votes, securing his spot on the council. But Hanna then withdrew from the presidential race and supported Gaspard instead. Gaspard won 1,681 votes in the council member vote, also securing a seat.

Saadeddine al-Khatib, backed by the Future Movement, won a council seat with 1,699.

Exceptionally, a vote was held to fill a seat left vacant by the resignation of a council member. Ibrahim Mousallem, who won with 1,480 votes, will fill the vacant seat for one year only. The FPM's candidate, George Nakhleh, withdrew from the race Saturday night.

Nakhleh threw his support behind Ali Abdallah, who was reportedly backed by the Amal Movement, for a council member position. Abdallah won 1,036 votes, failing to secure a seat on the council.