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USJ polls blaze the proportional path

By The Daily Star

Editorial

It is often the case that the young have much to teach the old. The student council elections at Universite Saint Joseph (USJ) Tuesday implemented what Lebanon's politicians have long-discussed, and could produce a positive effect on our national electoral system. Students at the university chose for the first time to use a proportional representation system to elect representatives to their student body – a historic step for Lebanon that signals a growing movement in support for a new electoral system.

With prominent figures such as President Michel Sleiman and Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud lending their support for proportional representation, calls for reform have been growing in recent years. Fouad Boutros, who headed the Boutros Commission into electoral reform, also proposed that a proportional representation system be partially introduced for the 2013 elections, arguing that it would ease political polarization and give independent candidates a chance to be elected.

For years, politicians have told the Lebanese that such a system is too complicated, and that people would never understand it. Patronizing statements such as these from parties concerned only with preserving the status-quo, and with it their own power, reveal an outdated attitude that soon looks to change.

If the Lebanese can live with and understand the current system, which has been shown to be extremely proficient in fueling rifts, they should have no problem understanding one whereby a greater number are represented in the political system. In such a diverse nation with so many sects and minorities, a system that gives more groups a say would surely be the sensible choice.

The polls that took place at USJ represent a landmark in Lebanon's political development, and while no one expects perfection, they should at least teach us something. Universities could act as a testing ground for proportional representation; students have an opportunity to shape what may become the future political system of their country, and to champion what they have practiced when they leave education and enter society.

Lebanon's political class should watch with a careful eye the elections and their aftermath. If this experiment is successful, we could well see a knock-on effect with other university elections using the same system; beyond that, the effect of an increasing number of people embracing the notion of inclusion and rejecting sectarianism could reverberate throughout civil society.

The Lebanese Constitution and the Taif Accord both call for an end to the sectarian nature of Lebanese politics. Proportional representation offers a chance to honor these commitments, and to move toward a more contemporary and representative politics. The alternative is almost certain to be a repetition of the countless crises that have plagued Lebanon for too many years.

Landmark USJ polls characterized by proportional representation

MANY STUDENTS DECLARE ELECTION SYSTEM CONTRARY TO STUDENTS' WISHES

Farah-Silvana Kanaan
Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Proportional representation governed student elections for the first time at the Universite Saint Joseph on Tuesday, but appeared to have few enthusiasts in the ranks of March 14 and March 8 supporters on the Social Sciences campus in Achrafieh.

Cristelle Ramouz, a Business student at USJ and one of the students responsible for counting the votes, was enthusiastically supporting March 14, wearing a red T-shirt reading "Pour sauvegarder l'identité" (For safeguarding identity).

Ramouz expressed strong opposition to the new, "closed list" electoral system, which prevents voters from mixing and matching between rival lists.

"In the old system you could choose [names from] each list, whereas now you are forced to just choose one list."

Ramouz felt especially bitter because the university decided to implement the new electoral system without any input from the students.

"They organized a debate, where it became clear that many students opposed the new system, saying it was undemocratic, but the university implemented it regardless."

According to Ramouz, the main reason the university changed the voting system was to boost the likelihood of forming coalitions.

"I don't agree. This system is less democratic, as they are forcing coalitions that are unwanted," she said.

Joanna Fissai, a second-year law student and a Shiite campaigner for the March 8 alliance, said she considered the new electoral system 100 percent oppressive and anti-democratic, agreeing that USJ implemented proportional representation against the will of the majority of the students.

Fissai claimed USJ had an ulterior motive, in addition to avoiding a repeat of last year's elections, when fights and scuffles marred the proceedings.

"As a traditionally Christian university, USJ couldn't stomach March 8 winning so many faculties. For instance, at the Faculty of Law, March 8 has won for three consecutive years."

Business major and March 8 supporter Ayman Yassine was one of the many students from his camp who sported a T-shirt bearing the slogan "Be positive, think positive, vote positive."

However, Yassine was less than positive about the new voting system.

"You are basically forced to vote for one party. It's not a neutral system like before, with which you could divide your picks over several parties ... in case friends of yours are pitted against each other, you can't

vote for them separately anymore," he said.

Supporters of March 14 and March 8 were not only divided politically on the USJ campus, but also physically.

Apart from many supporters sporting their parties' colors and slogans and brandishing the hand signals of their respective parties, they were largely huddled together on different sides of the campus.

March 8 supporters could be heard chanting, "Allah, Nasrallah and all of Dahiyeh [the southern suburbs of Beirut]," after positive election results began to come in.

Economics student Karl Soued represented one of the few visible independent parties,

the Green Party, but expressed the same disappointment about the new election arrangements.

After a week of giving away apples and manifestos printed on recycled paper, he predicted that probably "no one" would vote for his party.

"This new electoral system is just really, really sad," he said. "It forces you to vote for one of the two big parties. There's too much pressure on the students as there are hundreds of thousands of dollars invested by March 8 and March 14 ... it is an excellent method to get an overview of who supports them."

Soued said he'd seen friends who usually don't even discuss elections or politics, suddenly turning against each other one

week before the elections.

"I've also heard stories of friends of mine who decided not to vote but were subsequently bribed and pressured into voting by their families."

Soued said student elections lead to frustration with politics at a student level, which spills over into becoming frustrated about politics in general.

While the polling remained calm throughout the day, reports of fights between students at the Faculty of Business began to surface early in the evening. While official results are expected on Wednesday, the rival camps' websites spent late Tuesday issuing conflicting versions of who actually won the day at the various faculties.



USJ students celebrate as their respective parties emerge victorious in the polls on Tuesday.

USJ students frustrated as political parties put their own spin on elections

Farah-Silvana Kanaan

Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Rival camps in student elections at Universite Saint Joseph (USJ) claimed victory Wednesday, as leading politicians put their own spin on the results.

While USJ failed to post the official results on its website, the newspaper *An-Nahar* claimed that March 14-affiliated students beat out the March 8 coalition in 15 faculties in "a landslide victory. The website of the Lebanese Forces (LF) posted detailed results Tuesday night, even though the official tally was far from being completed.

For its part, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), leading the ranks of the opposition, preferred to focus on results in 10 faculties with more than 250 students enrolled, where "the battle was purely political." The group claimed to have won in six out of these 10 faculties, in addition to five other faculties.

Many students were frustrated with the spin. Khouloud Nassabi, a Translation student who was one of the victorious candidates, said identifying student parties as exact fits with either camp were sometimes misleading. She said that while her student party, Univercion, was supported by March 14, many of its members weren't affiliated with the group.

"I have many friends who are wrong-

fully [linked] to one political party or another in the media. Just because some of these students chose not to run under the March 8 umbrella, it doesn't automatically imply they're March 14 supporters."

Meanwhile, LF leader Samir Geagea issued a statement in which he hailed the March 14 victory as "the torch of the future, despite all efforts to draw this country in total darkness," adding: "I hope we can say 'bye bye' to them [the opposition], just as you said to them at USJ."

FPM leader Michel Aoun stepped into the fray during a news conference later in the day, saying that Geagea's statement pointed to the LF leader's immaturity, adding it didn't deserve a response. Aoun offered one nonetheless, claiming that the opposition had won the majority of faculties and the popular vote, an echo of the opposition's rhetoric after June's parliamentary elections.

He also claimed "some" university officials had interfered in the polls.

Aoun also urged "those who are responsible" to clamp down on calls to free the university from Hizbullah and Shiites, which he said had led to tension.

"We will call upon the Higher Education Ministry and the university administration to assume responsibility regarding this issue and will take further steps toward putting an end to this policy of intimidation," he said.