Rival camps emerge with split USJ student election results across country

Fierce electoral battles vie for university faculties in campuses throughout Lebanon

Wassim Mroueh
Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: Both the March 14 coalition and the March 8 camp appeared to have split student representation at the 10 major faculties at the Universite Saint Joseph (USJ) after fierce electoral battles across the country.

The electoral race pitted the March 14 coalition, including the Lebanese Forces (LF), the Phalange and Future Movement, against the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Hezbollah, the Amal Movement and other March 8 forces.

The Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and the Progressive Socialist Party boycotted the polls.

Student supporters of the FPM and its allies won five of the university’s 10 faculties while the LF and its allies won four faculties while the student appeared split three ways with independents.

March 14 student candidates won the majority of the university’s smaller faculties and institutes.

The March 14 candidates won the faculty of business and management, the largest of USJ’s Huvelin campuses in the Mounat neighborhood of Beirut, which includes an estimated 2,500 students. It also won the faculties of economics, law and insurance at the same campus.

Meanwhile, March 8 candidates took over the engineering, medicine, pharmacy, dentistry and literature faculties at the Huvelin campus. The Faculty of Business saw the fiercest battle due to the presence of a considerable number of Hezbollah and Amal supporters.

Officials from rival sides traded accusations despite the calm atmosphere in which the elections were held.

Joe Awwad, an FPM official at the Faculty of Business, said the elections were held amid a calm atmosphere because “we’re mature people, who tolerate others,” adding that the electoral race was “political.”

“We are facing sectarian rhetoric that’s being adopted by the Lebanese Forces; they are trying to put sectarian barriers [between students] which we are trying to eliminate,” he told The Daily Star.

Awwad said he expected FPM candidates to win the elections, adding that his group “knows what resistance means – we used to resist in this university. Today we are resisting their [LF] dirty sectarian rhetoric.”

He warned that the FPM might launch legal proceedings against the Parliament over the LF’s use of sectarian tone in its speeches.

Chabib Eid, who heads the LF’s Student Department, dismissed the claims.

“We are telling the students that you are responsible for your country. Your vote will prove that you are with establishing the state and boosting its sovereignty along with restricting to it the acquisition of arms, and not with March 8 forces, who are against the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) and put forth the slogan ‘Thank You Syria,’” he told The Daily Star.

Eid vowed to hold a news conference after the elections to detail how FPM leader Michel Aoun and some MPs in his bloc personally intervened in polls at the USJ’s medical school campus.

He also attributed the intense competition at the Faculty of Business to the presence of “State electoral weight.”

“In this faculty, we have to mobilize up to 80 percent of the Christian votes to ensure victory,” he said.

Despite the quiet atmosphere, anti-police took positions outside the campus.

USJ’s student elections come as Lebanon witnesses mounting tension over the STL, established by the United Nations to try the assassins of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

The Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition slammed the tribunal as “an Israeli project” designed to spark civil strife in the country, stressing that members of the party would be targeted by an impending STL indictment.

On the other hand, March 14 parties have maintained that the STL represents the only opportunity to punish the criminals, voicing confidence that the Special Tribunal is not politicized.

Mohammad, a student majoring in business management, said he voted for the March 8 list out of political considerations and because it included some of his friends. “Political considerations are what matter, and the electoral program is secondary,” he said.

Karim Mounaf, a third-year business student who is also a Hezbollah candidate, said the LF was using the term “invasion, when they refer to our increasing number in the campus.”

As if we are not students [like others],” said Mounaf.

He said his main plans were to improve the university and organize a “decent prom party” for graduating business students along with traveling trips.

Rami Fawwaz, an LCP official, said his party decided to boycott the polls in order to express its opposition to the fact that the concerns of students were being ignored by rival candidates.

“The price of 1 credit in business courses has increased from $96 to $130, and sectarian mobilization is at peak at the campus,” he said, as he complained about being prevented by the university from circulating fliers that called for abandoning the race.

Rival March 14 and March 8 student candidates claimed victory Friday in Notre Dame University (NDU) student elections, while their rivals in the parliamentary opposition camps remained silent on the results.

The contest saw the March 14 coalition, including Lebanese Forces (LF), the Phalange Party and allies, against the rival March 8 coalition, including the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and its allies. The Progressive Socialist Party boycotted the polls.

A heated battle took place at the Linares campus, where two incidents of fistfights broke out between students waiting in line to cast their votes.

The Central News Agency (CNA) quoted NDU officials as saying Friday that the quarrels were caused by FPM students.

“They try to come up with problems to obstruct the electoral process and the work of LF students in universities,” said one source, adding that the disputes were resolved because the LF “abandoned the matter.”

The students competed for 13 posts representing the seven faculties of the campus, with each faculty having a separate election. Pro-March 14 media outlets claimed to have achieved victory, but the university has yet to post the official results.

A statement issued by NDU officials said the electoral process was supervised by Father Salim Raji, who heads the university’s student affairs office, assisted by deputy head Jad Fahd and a number of university staff and students.

After touring the university campus, Raji said the elections were held amid “a rational and democratic spirit,” adding that students were wise and responsible.

The CNA quoted Roy Hadad, who heads the LF student group at the campus, as saying that students supporting the LF and Phalange voted for the unified list formed by both sides, adding that FPM students “tried to drag us into many problems this morning, but we avoided them.”

Meanwhile, Jad Ghazne, the FPM official at the campus, said student participation was “very modest,” attributing it to “students’ despair in the university.”

MARCH 14 CANDIDATES CLAIM VICTORY IN NOTRE DAME UNIVERSITY STUDENT ELECTIONS

BEIRUT: March 14 coalition candidates claimed victory Friday in Notre Dame University (NDU) student elections, while their rivals in the parliamentary opposition camps remained silent on the results.

The contest saw the March 14 coalition, including Lebanese Forces (LF), the Phalange Party and allies, against the rival March 8 coalition, including the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and its allies. The Progressive Socialist Party boycotted the polls.

A heated battle took place at the Linares campus, where two incidents of fistfights broke out between students waiting in line to cast their votes.

The Central News Agency (CNA) quoted NDU officials as saying Friday that the quarrels were caused by FPM students.

“They try to come up with problems to obstruct the electoral process and the work of LF students in universities,” said one source, adding that the disputes were resolved because the LF “abandoned the matter.”

The students competed for 13 posts representing the seven faculties of the campus, with each faculty having a separate election. Pro-March 14 media outlets claimed to have achieved victory, but the university has yet to post the official results.

A statement issued by NDU officials said the electoral process was supervised by Father Salim Raji, who heads the university’s student affairs office, assisted by deputy head Jad Fahd and a number of university staff and students.

After touring the university campus, Raji said the elections were held amid “a rational and democratic spirit,” adding that students were wise and responsible.

The CNA quoted Roy Hadad, who heads the LF student group at the campus, as saying that students supporting the LF and Phalange voted for the unified list formed by both sides, adding that FPM students “tried to drag us into many problems this morning, but we avoided them.”

Meanwhile, Jad Ghazne, the FPM official at the campus, said student participation was “very modest,” attributing it to “students’ despair in the university.”

The Daily Star