

FPM, allies triumph in USJ elections

March 8 narrowly takes largest faculty at Beirut campus, March 14 prevails in Sidon

By Wassim Mroueh
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Student supporters of Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and its allies triumphed in student elections in most faculties of Université Saint Joseph Thursday.

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

At the Campus of Human Sciences in Huvelin Street in Beirut, student supporters of the FPM and its allies took over the Faculty of Business and management, the largest in the campus, from the March 14 coalition.

The March 8 coalition clinched eight seats while their rivals won seven in the faculty where Hezbollah and Amal have a significant presence.

In the same campus, the March 8 and March 14 candidate slates each picked up five seats in the Faculty of Law, while another seat was won by an independent candidate.

March 14 student candidates won unopposed in the Faculty of Insurance.

In other campuses, student candidates from the FPM and its allies won in the Faculty of Engineering, clinching eight seats while their rivals got seven.

The FPM and its allies emerged victorious in the faculties of Economics, Pharmacy, Dentistry and Medicine.

March 14 triumphed in the faculties of Nursing and Enterprise Management, while student supporters of the coalition won in USJ's Sidon campus.

At the Huvelin campus, elections ran smoothly except for a small scuffle that pitted pro-Hezbollah and Amal students versus supporters of the LF students in the Faculty of Business and Management in the morning.

During the day, both camps strived to secure votes, with political affiliations being the key determinant of voters' choices.

"I voted for March 14 because they represent Lebanon's freedom, the real independence from Syria," Chawqi, a student in the Faculty of Business and Management told The Daily Star. "They call for real democracy, and do not support the use of weapons in politics."

Chawqi said that student elections in Huvelin were "75 percent political and 25 percent to do with the program [of the lists]."

But Rana, who's now pursuing her



Supporters of the Free Patriotic Movement flash their movement's sign and celebrate victory.

second degree at USJ, where she's been a student for seven years, said that she has lost faith in student elections.

"I voted until last year, but I will not this year," she said.

"Once elected, it is always your political stance which prevails. Moreover, the programs are just absurd," she added.

But besides politics, each of the competing groups said that it was running for the benefit of students.

Fawzi Haddad, the FPM candidate for the post of the president of the student council at the Faculty of Business and Management, said that his program covered social as well as academic issues, which he accused the March 14 candidates of neglecting. Haddad said that his list adopted the slogan of "partnership and love," which was put forward by Maronite Patriarch Beshara Rai.

"We want to be friends with everybody, without sectarianism, while the other side incites students against each other based on sectarianism," he said.

On Haddad's agenda is a request to the university to allow students to open an on-campus office for academic guidance along with establishing an

SMS-text message system to inform students, especially those coming from faraway places, of urgent news such as the absence of professors.

But Gilbert Ashqar, the representative of LF students at Huvelin, said that the March 14 list had a "comprehensive" program touching on academics along with social events.

"We promised to work on academic reform ... and we will be helping students with issues such as changing professors or taking credits that they are not allowed to take," he said, acknowledging that it was difficult to work on demands such as reducing tuition fees.

Ashqar is a student at the Faculty of Insurance, whose seats were won by the March 14 coalition last year as well.

"Academic-wise, students had no demands last year, the administration was good, but we held social events on all occasions."

Ashqar said that the contest was "highly" political. "I don't think that both sides focus on the programs."

The LF student said that the FPM was exploiting the Maronite patriarchate for electoral aims.

"They used the slogan to attract votes of Christians, but let's not

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION EXISTS – AT USJ

BEIRUT: As the debate over adopting a proportional representation system in parliamentary polls in Lebanon intensifies, Université Saint Joseph has begun using the system in student elections. According to the system in use by the university, any group that picks up at least 25 percent of the votes is allocated one delegate seat out of three delegate seats representing each class. The guaranteed threshold of representation is the opposite of Lebanon's current winner-take-all system in parliamentary elections, where a candidate list that obtains just under 50 percent support can still fail to gain a single seat in a district. A committee chaired by Interior Minister Marwan Charbel has drafted an electoral law for the 2013 parliamentary elections based on proportional representation. However, adopting the mechanism in a system that allocates seats to certain sects, according to some experts, is difficult to implement.

Some parties have cautiously supported the idea, while awaiting further details. – *The Daily Star*

exploit the patriarchate for political reasons," he said. But, he added, "I have no problem in this slogan if they really implement it."

Ashqar dismissed claims by rival groups that the LF was playing on sectarian feelings.

But despite this acute polarization at Huvelin, the independent "Linkage" list triumphed at the Faculty of Political Science.

"Inside the university, we have nothing to do with politics and we are not close to any party, we work for the

university only," Laurent Zaloum, a member of the list told The Daily Star.

"We are gradually trying to get the university out of this political thinking," he added.

Tamim Abu Karroum, a Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections member who supervised the elections in the campus, told The Daily Star that elections were "quiet and organized by the administration."

The Progressive Socialist Party boycotted the polls. – *With additional reporting by Enora Castagne*