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Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Case Study #6

Country Lebanon

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LEBANESE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A NEW PUBLIC WAGE SCALE

| Alexi Touma |

The involvement, strategies and challenges that faced Lebanese public and private school teachers and public employees in securing the adoption and implementation of a new public wage scale

BACKGROUND

The 2017-2012 period was a critical time for Lebanon, defined by numerous strikes and acts of civil disobedience, peaking between the years 2014-2013 at the hands of teachers and public sector employees, under the umbrella of the Union Coordination Committee (UCC)¹. It was also during this time that Lebanon witnessed a period of precarious political and security instability; much of it without a functioning government or president, with a war in Syria right next door. Prior to 2012, the Lebanese government last adjusted the wage scale for public employees, including teachers, in 1996 after a series of protests not dissimilar from those in 2012. In 2012², the government issued Decree No. 7426, passed to increase the monthly minimum wage from 333\$ USD to 450\$ USD and began discussions to revise the public wage scale for public sector employees, including teachers, in parliament. In 2017, parliament passed Law 46 and finalized the new public wage scale; yet, implementation has been selective, with private schools the most negatively impacted³ (Bou Khater, 2018).

The UCC was at the forefront of protests and negotiations with the government following the decision to increase wages for university professors in 2011 that unbalanced the historic six-scale wage difference between them and secondary school teachers⁴ and the unsatisfactory wage scale proposed by former minister of finance, Mohammad Safadi⁵.

These factors, coupled with the lack of solidarity and support from the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers⁶ triggered five years of protests, sit-ins, negotiations, political disputes, and the closure of schools in order to secure a new public wage scale. While the UCC was made up of several leagues and syndicates, its main figureheads were Hanna Gharib, Nehme Mahfoud, and Mahmoud Haidar who headed the secondary school teachers league, private school teachers syndicate, and league of public sector employees, respectively. This case study will focus more on Hanna Gharib and Nehme Mahfoud, the influence they had on the public and private sector teachers, the dynamic between the two, and their dealings with the government.

¹ A collective of public sector employees, and private and public teachers. The UCC consists of the following organizations: Teachers Syndicate of Lebanon (TSL), Public Primary School Teachers League, Public Secondary School Teachers League, Retired Public Secondary School Teachers League, Vocational Teachers League, and public sector employees.

² According to the Consultation and Research Institute, prices in Lebanon increased by 100 percent between 1996 and 2011. Between 2012 and 2017, prices in Lebanon increased 4.99 percent according to the Central Administration of Statistics (Bou Khater, ³. (2018) From the interviews conducted during the fieldwork with the unemployed groups.

³ Rodolphe Aboud. Personal interview.

⁴ Secondary school teachers are considered to be the backbone of the UCC and was headed by then-UCC leader Hanna Gharib.

⁵ According to Nehme Mahfoud, the minister proposed a new wage scale to the UCC immediately following the minimum wage hike decree. The UCC claimed the law did not adequately address their needs.

⁶ The General Confederation of Lebanese Workers was emaciated by post-war governments during the 1990's, in conjunction with Syrian influence, to limit opposition to government-led economic initiatives.

The sheer scale of the movement, dubbed the teachers movement, and its sustainability throughout the period united opposing political parties against it. Initially, parties were split in their public support of a new wage scale. The Future Movement and Progressive Socialist Party were joined by March 8's Free Patriotic Movement against the discourse of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah that were claiming to be in support of the increase and teachers' rights; however, it was made clear that all sides opposed the UCC's desired wage scale. As the movement grew, both political camps united in what they perceived as a threat to their authority and influence and sought to emaciate the UCC⁷. In this regard, the ascendance of Elias Bou Saab to the Ministry of Education played a pivotal role in conjunction with the speaker of parliament and head of Amal Movement, Nabih Berri, in the government's dealings with the UCC⁸.

THE UCC

The major actors involved by the public sector wage hike were those immediately affected, namely those encompassing the UCC. Of all actors involved in the UCC, the Public Secondary Teachers League has historically made up the backbone and driving force. Unlike most unions, membership in the UCC is automatic. According to data as recent as 2013, the UCC represented 15,554 public sector employees, 92,900 public and private school teachers, and 82,300 public sector retirees (Bou Khater, 2015). Thus, the UCC was considered to be one of the largest associations of Lebanese workers in the country. As a result, it was composed of members from various demographic and political backgrounds.

Prior to 2012, the leagues and syndicates would operate independently until uniting under the UCC for a common demand, namely a new wage scale⁹. Teachers have a long history of mobilization and were joined by public sector employees. Private school teachers united with public school teachers due to a precedent that entailed any increase in wages for public school teachers would also apply to those of the private sector¹⁰.

The UCC decision-making processes are governed by consensus with each of its members retaining the right of veto. Each league within the UCC carries out its own internal vote on issues such as strikes and boycotts. Elections were consistently held every two years for groups such as the Public Secondary School Teachers League and the Teachers Syndicate of Lebanon, which gave its leaders further legitimacy¹¹. Secondary school teachers reelected Hanna Gharib as their leader until 2015 while the teachers syndicate reelected Nehme Mahfoud until 2017.

During the UCC's peak years, several civil society organizations (CSOs) and their coalitions¹² approached the UCC to form an even larger coalition to address not only the wage hike, but also political instability and rampant corruption among other national concerns. The aim was to create an even larger scale coalition that would have, in theory, formed one of the largest social movements in the country's history. However, disagreements¹³ between CSOs and the UCC coupled with internal disputes within the latter prevented this coalition from becoming a reality¹⁴.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

The UCC capitalized on its size and began mobilizing in 2012 through various means and levels of intensity as leverage in negotiations in order to secure a new wage scale.



Its members protested in Riad El-Solh square, in front of the presidential palace, Ministry of Education, the airport, and the port of Beirut. Teachers abstained from initially monitoring and, later, correcting official exams for students. They also boycotted the academic year, forcing schools to close. At one point, those strikes lasted 33 consecutive days¹⁵.

The UCC negotiated frequently with government officials. Delegations headed by Hanna Gharib would sit with then-minister of education, Elias Bou Saab, to discuss the monitoring and correction of official exams (Dakroub, 2014). Negotiations were also held with Nabih Berri on the wage scale law and the factors affecting its debate in parliament (LBC, 2014). The discussions and negotiations were tense and often led to further mobilization by the UCC.

Despite differences and disagreements within the UCC, members imposed themselves with sheer will and determination for several years with a unique unity and coordination.

INFLUENCING FACTORS, TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS, AND 'POLICY WINDOWS'

In order to adequately understand the events that took place and the outcomes following the mobilization, it is important to assess the internal dynamics of UCC members, the characteristics and the relationship between Hanna Gharib and Nehme Mahfoud, and the role of the government and its actors.

It is important to recall that the UCC is made of numerous leagues and syndicates representing different scopes of profession, but also that the individual members have various political affiliations. At the organizational level, members often maintained conflicting demands and agendas which led to tension¹⁶. For instance, public sector employees demanded that their wage scale be equal to that of secondary school teachers, but this idea was rejected by Hanna Gharib on the grounds that historical precedent must be maintained¹⁷. Public school teachers and private school teachers disagreed over methods of protests, since private school teachers were at a higher risk of losing their jobs by going on strike¹⁸.

⁷ Faten El Hajj. Personal interview.

⁸ Faten El Hajj. Personal interview.

⁹ Nehme Mahfoud. Personal interview.

¹⁰ The initial wage scale proposed by the government wanted to annul this precedent and grant only public sector teachers and employees this scale.

¹¹ Nehme Mahfoud. Personal interview.

¹² CSOs consisted of various professional syndicates and unions, among others

¹³ The different actors involved could not agree on a common strategy and agenda, while some groups opposed working with others.¹⁴ Nehme Mahfoud. Personal interview.

¹⁴ Nehme Mahfoud. Personal interview.

¹⁵ Faten El Hajj. Personal interview.

¹⁶ Nehme Mahfoud. Personal interview.

¹⁷ Similar to the precedent of university professors and secondary school teachers, the latter historically enjoyed higher salaries than public sector employees.

¹⁸ According to Nehme Mahfoud, private schools have greater freedom in terminating employment than public schools.

The political affiliations of each individual member played a significant role in derailing CSO efforts to unite with the UCC. The UCC remained united despite their differences for the purpose of securing a new wage scale for all, but they were not in favor of creating a larger movement in challenging the government and their respective political leaders.

Hanna Gharib, in his role as a UCC leader, did not want to jeopardize the unity of the UCC; he insisted the agenda should focus on people's wages. Unlike many members, Gharib was not affiliated with a party in government but Nehme Mahfoud has long been a member of March 14. Mahfoud would use his affiliation to convince members of government to give private school teachers the same wage scale as those of the public schools. Mahfoud was more lenient in negotiations, willing to accept concessions from the government whereas Gharib insisted on improved terms. Gharib adopted a staunch approach and was reluctant to cooperate with government officials to end the mobilization¹⁹.

Governmental blocs united against the wage hike and the mobilization and as a result gave Elias Bou Saab a green light to act on their behalf²⁰. When teachers abstained from correcting official exams, Bou Saab issued passing certificates for all students and robbed the UCC from its major bargaining tool²¹. Internal squabbles within Bou Saab's own party derailed and prolonged parliament's handling of the law²². Nabih Berri's influence was instrumental as his bloc worked closely with Bou Saab in negotiating with the UCC. Berri set the wage scale law as a priority in parliament²³. The government agreed to work on the desired wage scale in exchange for an apology from the UCC leadership, and they received it.

Despite Gharib and Mahfoud's continuous reelections and popularity, political blocs were successful in putting together a victorious joint list during syndicate and league elections. In 2015 a list backed by political parties won the majority of seats in the public secondary school teachers' league election, reducing Gharib's usual five seats to two. As a result, Gharib left²⁴ the UCC. In 2017, Mahfoud was dealt the same blow in the teachers' syndicate. The events were described as a political takeover, stripping the UCC of the bulwark that guided it throughout its years²⁵.

Traditional media heavily covered UCC actions and demonstrations were a common sight on most television stations during the peak years. The issue received heavy attention on print media outlets such as Al-Akhbar, An-Nahar and Al-Safir, among others. Television stations covered the issue to a lesser extent, with Al-Jadeed being the most prominent of them. Popular support for the movement reached its peak in 2014 at which point popular opinion turned against the teachers due to their boycotting of the academic year²⁶. This portrayed them as using students as a tool in securing their wages.

POLICY OUTCOME

Despite the eventual emaciation of the UCC, a new wage scale was eventually approved by parliament in the form of Law 46 in 2017. Once passed to parliament, the proposed bill faced staunch debate over its financing and was used as a tool for political infighting until its adoption. The new wage scale was the product of rigorous advocacy for over five years. In the end, the scale was adopted but without complete implementation. Till this day, members of government still claim that they are unable to finance it and that total implementation will lead to the collapse of the economy²⁷.

The biggest winners are the private schools. Private schools have been increasing tuition annually since 2012 under the pretext of eventually increasing teachers' wages. This contributed to anti-teacher sentiment among parents. Many schools refrained from increasing the wages of their teachers and if increased, were denied their longstanding benefits and supplements²⁸. In the end, the law was implemented disproportionately among public school teachers and employees, and seldomly in its intended form to private school teachers, if at all²⁹.

¹⁹ Nehme Mahfoud. Personal interview.

²⁰ Faten El Hajj. Personal interview.

²¹ Throughout history, teachers used official exams as leverage in persuading governments to increase their wages.

²² Tensions between Elias Bou Saab and MP Ibrahim Kanaan obstructed Kanaan's committee efforts in studying the law.

²³ This resulted from UCC pressure but also as leverage to placate the movement.

²⁴ He would move on to head the Lebanese Communist Party.

²⁵ Faten El Hajj. Personal interview.

²⁶ Faten El Hajj. Personal interview.

¹⁹ Nehme Mahfoud. Personal interview.

²⁰ Faten El Hajj. Personal interview.

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²⁵ Faten El Hajj. Personal interview.

²⁶ Faten El Hajj. Personal interview.

²⁷ Kawthar Darra. Personal interview.

²⁸ Rodolphe Abboud. Personal interview.

²⁹ Rodolphe Abboud. Personal interview.



LESSONS LEARNED

- Large scale and intimidating strategies of advocacy in the form of consistent strikes, boycotts, and protests continuously, over several years, proved effective in pressuring the government to designate the wage scale as a national priority and to the successive issuance and adoption of Law 46.
- The aspirations of UCC members for improved wages were greater than their political affiliations and created a unity among advocates in ensuring a mass collective approach against the government in order to secure their collective interests.
- The size of the movement was a leading factor that contributed to their success, but was also an obstacle. The UCC's size allowed them to resist political maneuvering for years, operating outside their control while pushing them to the negotiating table. However, disagreements, competing ideologies and conflicting agendas were a result of the members' diverse background and would make common strategies difficult to achieve, such as the refusal to unite with CSOs.

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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid- 2018, the “Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World” program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project “Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making”. This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project’s goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.








THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media’s expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) is an independent, research-based, policy oriented institute. It aims to initiate and develop policy-relevant research in and about the Arab region. The Institute is committed to expanding and deepening knowledge production and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society actors, and policy makers.

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
American University of Beirut
P.O.Box 11-0236

 Riad El-Solh / Beirut 1107 2020 Lebanon
 961-1-350000 ext. 4150 / Fax: +961-1-737627
 ifi.comms@aub.edu.lb
 www.aub.edu.lb
 aub.ifi
 @ifi_aub
 @ifi_aub

