AS UNCOLLECTED GARBAGE FESTERED on the streets of Beirut in summer 2015, the Lebanese government seemed unwilling and unable to handle the situation. Building a new landfill would have offered a quick remedy, but logical executive decisions are never a simple task for those with political power in Lebanon. The state's confessional political system has institutionalized sectarianism while regional hegemons aggravate the delicate balance by propping up opposing political factions. Thus, political paralysis and corruption have become trademarks in Lebanon. The government’s staggering impotence in response to the garbage crisis should not have come as a surprise. Yet the popular response and ensuing local political developments have disrupted Lebanon’s politics posing a direct challenge to the status quo.

Emerging from the garbage fumes, the aptly named “You Stink” movement successfully organized 100,000 demonstrators across sectarian divides in downtown Beirut to protest endemic corruption and incompetence. Despite its grassroots tactics and popular anti-establishment message, the movement’s influence was short-lived as it failed to articulate solutions to systemic problems. Nevertheless, You Stink’s ephemeral success gave way to a more durable alternative.

In the aftermath of the 2015 protests, a group of academics from the American University of Beirut launched a political movement known as “Beirut Madinati” (Beirut Is My City). From its inception, the group could have been easily mistaken for one of the many NGOs that dot Beirut’s landscape. Beirut Madinati’s motley mix of technocrats and activists devoid of any formal political experience clearly distinguished it from traditional Lebanese political parties. The organization’s initiative to foster town hall-style discussions in public spaces, its use of social media, and its dependence on volunteers certainly resembled the tactics employed by civil society organizations and protest movements. Yet despite its grassroots tactics, Beirut Madinati was not a new iteration of You Stink.

Unlike other groups that sprung up in the summer of 2015, Beirut Madinati established clear political objectives as it prepared to campaign for the spring 2016 municipal elections. Driven by its technocratic brass, Beirut Madinati developed a 10-point program advocating improvements to Beirut’s crumbling infrastructure. From redeveloping waste management services to increasing the city’s public green space, to funding affordable housing, the group placed tangible goals at the forefront of its mission. As a secular group reaching out across conventional sectarian lines, this apolitical strategy was pragmatic.

Although infrastructure dominated Beirut Madinati’s agenda, issues of
The government’s staggering impotence in response to the garbage crisis should not have come as a surprise. Yet the popular response and ensuing local political developments have disrupted Lebanon’s politics posing a direct challenge to the status quo.

Offering a credible alternative in Lebanese politics, however, requires more than a concrete political program and an enthusiastic cadre of volunteers. Even at municipal levels, Lebanon is paralyzed by a system of sectarian patronage that rewards loyalty above all to a za’im (local leader). So prevalent is the sway of sectarian patronage that the ostensibly nonsectarian You Stink movement fell prey to diverging sectarian interests as opportunistic politicians were able to exploit the collective sense of frustration. Beirut Madinati risked the same fate.

It would be an understatement to say that Beirut Madinati faced unfavorable odds heading into the May 8, 2016, municipal election. As a nascent political movement that did not hold its first public campaign rally until three months prior to the elections, it certainly lacked the political cachet to compete with the traditional Lebanese parties. Nevertheless, Beirut’s established political class was clearly concerned by Beirut Madinati’s growing prominence and appeal. Two-time Prime Minister Saad Hariri, backed by Lebanese powerbrokers, responded by forming the Beirutis’ List, an unprecedented alliance between the country’s ruling March 8 and March 14 coalitions. Even more challenging were Lebanon’s archaic voter laws that effectively restrict half the city from voting in municipal elections. Traditionally low voter turnout coupled with the apathy of young Lebanese further diminished Beirut Madinati’s potential voter base.

When the election results came in, the outcome surprised few. Mired by 20 percent voter turnout and allegations of vote buying and voter intimidation, the election represented a less than convincing win for the Beiruti’s list. Hariri’s coalition did not even manage to win an absolute majority. Beirut Madinati took a respectable 30 percent of the vote, and in the more affluent eastern Beirut neighborhoods, it garnered over 60 percent. The movement had managed to disrupt political patronage networks, but it failed to produce any tangible political success.
Since the 2016 municipal elections, Beirut Madinati has remained active as a civil society organization. In March 2017, the movement came back into the national spotlight as it helped coordinate protests against Lebanon’s controversial new budget. A month later Beirut Madinati saw its first success at the ballot box as its candidate, Jad Tabet, was elected head of the Beirut Order of Engineers. While its leaders narrowly voted to abstain from national politics, the organization remains a vigilant watchdog continuing to challenge an increasingly opaque Beirut municipality.\(^\text{11}\)

In fact, Beirut Madinati’s success has provoked a rebellion of sorts in local Lebanese politics. The 2016 municipal election in Tripoli, Lebanon’s second-largest city, witnessed a fledgling political party topple a coalition backed by prominent Sunni billionaires. In the predominantly Shia areas of southern and eastern Lebanon, the traditional alliance of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement faced unexpected challenges from a collection of unorthodox Lebanese parties based on political ideology instead of creed.\(^\text{12}\) Arguably most indicative of Beirut Madinati’s dangerous potential was the Beiruts’ List nominal political platform, which eerily began to mimic Beirut Madinati’s program.\(^\text{13}\) Even at a national level, politicians are adopting an anti-establishment tone. The Kataeb, a traditional right-wing Maronite Christian party now part of the self-proclaimed political opposition, has curiously taken up a pro-environment and anticorruption stance. If imitation is the highest form of flattery, then Beirut Madinati has already demonstrated its impact on the Lebanese political scene.

Legitimate questions remain about Beirut Madinati’s viability in a notoriously corrupt political landscape. It remains to be seen if the movement can truly succeed if it refuses to tangle with the deeply entrenched political class. Also, while Beirut Madinati staunchly rejected sectarian rhetoric and ran a financially transparent campaign, there remain issues with the movement’s approach. For instance, Beirut Madinati has been criticized as an inherently elitist movement. Indeed, with a focus on niche issues like green space and environmental sustainability, its political program reflects the concerns of its upper-middle-class base. Despite the movement’s anti-establishment overtones and grassroots network, its message failed to resonate with Beirut’s lower-income residents. It is no coincidence that the working lower-class demographic most depends on traditional patronage networks. For Beirut Madinati to win over these potential voters, it would have to directly confront the local political bosses who sustain these feudal practices. So far, Beirut Madinati has been disinclined to do so.

Moving forward, Beirut Madinati should be able to capitalize on the infighting and general impotence of Lebanon’s divided government. As political elites continue to bicker over a new parliamentary electoral law, Lebanon’s parliament seems less concerned with a democratic process than extending its own mandate. Maintaining the status quo, however, will be increasingly difficult as a growing secular population comes of age.\(^\text{14}\) Conditions are ripe for the rise of Beirut

---

11. Since the 2016 municipal elections, Beirut Madinati has remained active as a civil society organization. In March 2017, the movement came back into the national spotlight as it helped coordinate protests against Lebanon's controversial new budget. A month later Beirut Madinati saw its first success at the ballot box as its candidate, Jad Tabet, was elected head of the Beirut Order of Engineers. While its leaders narrowly voted to abstain from national politics, the organization remains a vigilant watchdog continuing to challenge an increasingly opaque Beirut municipality.

12. In fact, Beirut Madinati’s success has provoked a rebellion of sorts in local Lebanese politics. The 2016 municipal election in Tripoli, Lebanon’s second-largest city, witnessed a fledgling political party topple a coalition backed by prominent Sunni billionaires. In the predominantly Shia areas of southern and eastern Lebanon, the traditional alliance of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement faced unexpected challenges from a collection of unorthodox Lebanese parties based on political ideology instead of creed. Arguably most indicative of Beirut Madinati’s dangerous potential was the Beiruts’ List nominal political platform, which eerily began to mimic Beirut Madinati’s program. Even at a national level, politicians are adopting an anti-establishment tone. The Kataeb, a traditional right-wing Maronite Christian party now part of the self-proclaimed political opposition, has curiously taken up a pro-environment and anticorruption stance. If imitation is the highest form of flattery, then Beirut Madinati has already demonstrated its impact on the Lebanese political scene.

13. Legitimate questions remain about Beirut Madinati’s viability in a notoriously corrupt political landscape. It remains to be seen if the movement can truly succeed if it refuses to tangle with the deeply entrenched political class. Also, while Beirut Madinati staunchly rejected sectarian rhetoric and ran a financially transparent campaign, there remain issues with the movement’s approach. For instance, Beirut Madinati has been criticized as an inherently elitist movement. Indeed, with a focus on niche issues like green space and environmental sustainability, its political program reflects the concerns of its upper-middle-class base. Despite the movement’s anti-establishment overtones and grassroots network, its message failed to resonate with Beirut’s lower-income residents. It is no coincidence that the working lower-class demographic most depends on traditional patronage networks. For Beirut Madinati to win over these potential voters, it would have to directly confront the local political bosses who sustain these feudal practices. So far, Beirut Madinati has been disinclined to do so.

14. Moving forward, Beirut Madinati should be able to capitalize on the infighting and general impotence of Lebanon’s divided government. As political elites continue to bicker over a new parliamentary electoral law, Lebanon’s parliament seems less concerned with a democratic process than extending its own mandate. Maintaining the status quo, however, will be increasingly difficult as a growing secular population comes of age. Conditions are ripe for the rise of Beirut.
Madinati and other grassroots movements, but they have yet to establish themselves as a viable alternative. Nonetheless, nonaligned movements like Beirut Madinati have generated enthusiasm for genuine governance reforms. If such enthusiasm can be sustained, then perhaps they can set a standard across the region.

*Timothy Louthan was an intern with the Middle East Program at CSIS.*
FROM GARBAGE TO GREEN SPACE: THE RISE OF BEIRUT MADINATI