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Entering the Lion's Den

Lebanon's "Change MPs" in Parliament

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Entering the Lion's Den: Lebanon's "Change MP's" in Parliament

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Executive summary Building on prior TPI research about alternative political groups in Lebanon, this report examines challenges that "Change MPs" faced during their first 18 months in office. Drawing on eight original interviews with Change MPs, the report is divided into four sections that examine their legislative performance, oversight duties, parliamentary alliances, and political outlooks. It also examines how sectarian parties have paralyzed the parliament to protect their interests – from avoiding accountability and delaying reforms to sabotaging legislation and bullying opponents – by recounting specific legislative battles waged by Change MPs. Moreover, the report shows how parliamentarians who attempt to engage in oversight have been systematically ignored, dismissed, or attacked, leading them to rely on non-traditional oversight tools such as cultivating relationships with low-level public employees or exerting pressure on ministries through the media. Lastly, the study examines the different strategic approaches and ideological dispositions of Change MPs, revealing organizational tensions between "pragmatic" and "principled" members of the nascent opposition bloc, which have thus far prevented the formation of a robust opposition front with a clear programmatic agenda.

Introduction Four years on from Lebanon's October 2019 uprising, many supporters of the nationwide and cross-confessional protest movement have thrown their support behind "Change" candidates. Characterized by its revolutionary fervor and class-based rhetoric, the 2019 uprising aimed to uproot entrenched political interests and pressure legacy politicians to support systemic and structural changes to the Lebanese state. Violent repression by state and non-state actors – coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic and Beirut port explosion – ended street mobilizations but many of the groups active in the uprising then turned their attention to the 2022 parliamentary election. Despite their varied political outlooks, strategic approaches, and policy stances, opposition candidates sought to collectively represent the October uprising in the parliament. Twelve such Change candidates ultimately emerged victorious, setting the stage for renewed confrontation with the ruling establishment as the country's socioeconomic collapse continued.

Since the start of the crisis in 2019, Lebanon's annual GDP has been slashed by more than half and continues to drop. The poverty rate has soared, the local currency has lost more than 95% of its value, and inequality has increased as government inaction persists in the midst of presidential gridlock.

In this context, Change MPs have been vocal and active in the parliament during their first 16 months in office, including uncovering corruption and clientelism in government institutions, preventing further state expropriation by blocking illegal procurement contracts, obstructing the election of Hezbollah's preferred presidential candidate, and, despite a range of obstacles, diligently pushing for laws and reforms that address the structural causes of Lebanon's socioeconomic collapse.

Building on TPI's prior research on anti-establishment groups, this study aims to provide the wider public with insights into the day-to-day realities and experiences of Change MPs. In the process, it sheds light on the inner workings of the parliament, addressing matters related to legislative activities, oversight practices, as well as electoral duties. By offering an insider view of Change MPs' campaigning, strategizing, and decision making, the study also raises questions about prospects for change from within the state, scrutinizes existing

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strategies for political transformation, sheds light on successful practices and small victories by Change MPs, and presents potential opportunities for opposition movements and politicians.

The study also contributes to growing research on Lebanon's evolving opposition. In a report and interactive database published prior to the 2022 election, TPI delved into the different organizational structures, programmatic stances, strategies, and alliances of new opposition groups.¹ Findings revealed that anti-establishment groups have contrasting leadership structures, uneven checks and balances on power, varying strategic approaches, progressive stances on most social issues, and notable differences on economic matters. Many of these themes are addressed in this report, by focusing on issues that have caused rifts among Change actors.

Based largely on in-depth interviews conducted between August and October 2023 with eight of the twelve Change MPs, this report is divided into four sections that examine their legislative practices, oversight duties, relations with fellow Change MPs, and outlook on political change. TPI interviewed the following Change MPs: Mark Daou (Mount Lebanon 4), Michel Douaihy (North 3), Firas Hamdan (South 3), Elias Jarade (South 3), Halime El Kaakour (Mount Lebanon 4), Ibrahim Mneimneh (Beirut 2), Waddah Sadek (Beirut 2), and Paula Yacoubian (Beirut 1).

Table 1: Political party, electoral district, confession, and number of votes of interviewed Change MPs

MP	Party	District	Sect	Preferential Votes
Mark Daou	Taqaddom	Aley	Druze	11,656
Michel Douaihy	None	Zgharta	Maronite	1,768
Firas Hamdan	N/A	Marjaayoun-Hasbaya	Druze	4,859
Elias Jarade	N/A	Marjaayoun-Hasbaya	Greek Orthodox	9,218
Halime El Kaakour	Lana	Chouf	Sunni	6,684
Ibrahim Mneimneh	N/A	Beirut 2	Sunni	13,281
Waddah Sadek	Khat Ahmar	Beirut 2	Sunni	3,760
Paula Yacoubian	Tahalof Watani	Beirut 1	Armenian Orthodox	3,524

¹ El Kak, N. and Atallah, S. "Lebanon's Political Alternatives", TPI report, April 26, 2022. Lebanon's alternative political groups dashboard: <https://politicalgroups.thepolicyinitiative.org/>

1. The Lebanese Parliament: Where meaningful legislation is buried

According to Articles 16 and 18 of the Lebanese Constitution, the parliament solely wields legislative power and has the right and duty to propose laws. Amid Lebanon's ongoing financial collapse, an MP's primary responsibility should be the formulation and implementation of effective legislation that serves the public interest while establishing a solid socioeconomic foundation for just and sustainable recovery. This entails formulating and advocating for the passage of legislation prioritizing social welfare, healthcare, education, and public services to alleviate the effects of the crisis. Legislation should also implement sweeping reforms such as financial and public sector restructuring, strengthening judicial independence, and combatting corruption across state institutions.

This section examines Change MPs' experiences and expectations, as well as challenges they faced upon entering the parliament. It begins by tracing the journey of the new opposition movement from its emergence in 2011, through its strategic shift from revolutionary politics toward state-led electoral change. This section also examines the inner workings of the parliament and specific legislative battles waged by Change MPs, including efforts by established political parties to protect their interests and stymie reforms.

The road to Parliament

Change MPs' victories are largely attributed to them taking on leadership roles during and following the October 2019 uprising, when they called for improved political representation, socioeconomic justice, and Lebanon to assert its sovereignty. However, the political journeys of most Change MPs predate October 2019. Lebanon's new anti-establishment movement emerged in 2011, when the first wave of Arab uprisings swept across the MENA region. While a nation-wide uprising did not manifest in Lebanon at the time, thousands protested and called for the downfall of Lebanon's confessional system.

In the years that followed, a new generation of activists mobilized around a range of social justice issues including a teacher-led [public sector movement](#); the "Take Back Parliament" movement, which sought to [participate](#) in the postponed 2013 elections; and a 2015 waste management crisis that led to the "[You Stink!](#)" movement calling for political reforms and accountability.

Repression and/or co-optation ultimately weakened these movements, but they contributed to reigniting an anti-establishment culture and boosting the electoral profile of opposition candidates who performed surprisingly well against established parties in the 2016 municipal elections. Current Change MPs Ibrahim Mneimneh and Michel Douaihy entered politics during these local elections. Beirut Madinati's list – headed by Mneimneh – amassed more than one-third of votes cast in municipal Beirut, while Douaihy's list obtained about 25% of the votes in Zgharta.

In the 2018 general elections, Mneimneh ran again in Beirut, while fellow Change MPs Daou and Yacoubian also ran on different anti-establishment lists.² Yacoubian was the sole anti-establishment candidate elected to the parliament, in what proved to be a disappointing result for the nascent opposition. Nonetheless, Yacoubian recalled her dedication and motivation when she entered the parliament at the time:

² While Yacoubian ran as part of the "Kuluna Watani" coalition of 65 opposition candidates, Daou and Mneimneh opted against joining the coalition and instead ran on independent lists.

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"Nothing would stop me when I first entered parliament in 2018. I was the MP who presented the most laws between 2018 and 2022... thanks to the help of a team of lawyers and civil society organizations. But we quickly found out that, in practice, you cannot legislate in the Lebanese Parliament unless the mafia likes you."

That parliament's tenure would also be marked by the onset of Lebanon's financial collapse and October 2019 uprising. Efforts directed at effecting political change quickly shifted from elections and the parliament onto the streets, as protesters called for radical changes in political leadership and sweeping structural reforms. Opposition figures, most of whom did not fare well in the 2018 elections, were rejuvenated, and the ranks of the opposition grew as a new generation of youth became more invested in politics. The uprising lasted for months, until it was swept aside by the combination of violent repression, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut Port explosion. As Sadek noted:



"The revolution that wanted to overthrow the regime collapsed after three to four months. We then turned into an opposition movement that is working more through formal politics and media. The only way to effect changes at this point is from within the system through elections. It is like going up against a massive wall with cracks that you need to demolish brick by brick."

Even though some rejected calls to run in parliamentary elections, most anti-establishment groups and voters ultimately deemed it a political battle worth waging. Mneimneh's stance on participating in the election captures the nuances that pushed many opposition groups to run:



"We knew that the parliament, with all its corruption and violations, might not be the most effective arena to show the right way to practice politics, but you can still do your best by showing a different approach that an MP can adopt. We were very honest that change will be hard and slow to come by, but the electoral competition was a battle that had to be waged to show that we exist, we have supporters, and we are organized on the ground."

Despite notable programmatic and strategic differences between opposition candidates, opposition groups formed electoral alliances and competitive lists across different districts.³ This ultimately led to the election of 13 MPs Change candidates, though Rami Fanj lost his seat to MP Faisal Karamah six months after the election, following a successful appeal to the Constitutional Council. The 12 remaining MPs faced numerous challenges upon entering the parliament, as they attempted to implement their legislative agenda.

Priorities and expectations

Despite their differences, Change MPs entered the parliament with a common understanding that corrupt practices are pervasive throughout Lebanon's weak state structures, but also that reform initiatives should be spearheaded through the state, despite its deficiencies. Moreover, as highlighted by Daou, most Change MPs recognized that political transformation could not be realized solely through the parliament, as such a transformation requires a holistic and wide-ranging approach that advocates for change at the municipal level, in syndicates and workers' unions, and at universities.

³ MPs Ibrahim Mneimneh, Waddah Sadek, and Melhem Khalaf were all elected from the same list in Beirut 2, while Mark Daou, Najat Aoun Saliba, and Halime El Kaakour won three seats in Chouf-Aley. Firas Hamdan and Elias Jarade won two seats in South 3.

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All interviewed MPs noted that their priorities centered on financial recovery, socioeconomic justice, judicial independence, civil liberties, and reclaiming state sovereignty. Upon entering the parliament, they quickly realized that implementing their wide-ranging agendas would be difficult and, in some cases, nearly impossible as Hamdan explains:



"The urgency of the crisis does not allow a regular programmatic agenda to be set – it is about putting out the fire with regards to basic public services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure."

Many other MPs echoed those sentiments, with Mneimneh stating that he had to prioritize certain issues on his agenda, such as passing International Monetary Fund (IMF)-mandated reforms and improving public works, while also relying on other Change MPs to focus on several key issues in their respective parliamentary committees.

Douaihy also acknowledged that, in light of state deficiencies, he helps struggling constituents access basic services such as healthcare, saying, "If my phone call can save a life, I will do it." Sadek said that while he helps individual citizens in need, it is too time consuming, and he has appointed specific members of his team to handle constituent requests.

Moreover, Sadek recounted that Change MPs were not offered guidance or orientation sessions regarding how the parliament operates:



"[Sectarian parties] want you to be lost, so the first priority was simply understanding how the Lebanese Parliament functions. During the first two to three months in office, we were essentially drawing a map and I was relying on personal connections with state officials to understand how things work."

Change MPs lacked the legal knowledge, data, and organizational structures to efficiently study, draft, and amend legislation. In fact, most interviewed MPs have relied on pro-bono services from volunteers, legal experts, and local research centers to carry out their legislative responsibilities. As Hamdan stated:



"Our legislative work is disorganized, with no clear role and responsibilities for each person within my team, but that voluntary work is essential in helping us study all the documents and violations that we are identifying."

Mneimneh corroborated this, adding that it is both difficult and costly to secure the services of qualified lawyers to draft legislation in favor of the public good. Douaihy said that this is particularly frustrating because sectarian parties have greater organizational and financial capabilities. Sadek and Daou appear to be the sole exceptions among Change MPs, as they managed to hire lawyers on a full-time basis to assist their respective teams in the legislative process.

Beyond those financial hurdles, Change MPs also face administrative obstacles, particularly in accessing data and information from ministries. El Kaakour stressed that ministries do not provide many of the documents that legislators require to draft effective laws or they are forwarded incomplete documentation. This is a direct violation of the Access to Information Law, which was passed in 2017, but is not being applied due to a legislative loophole involving implementing decrees.

Another clear obstacle is the presidential gridlock and caretaker government status, which ruling parties are selectively using to boycott parliamentary sessions that involve debating and voting on laws. Even when sessions are held to pass what the speaker of parliament deems "urgent" legislation, Change MPs find themselves in the speaker's "personal playground" according to Yacoubian, as he decides whether a law passes through a show of hands rather than transparent electronic voting.

Legislative battles To pass any draft law in the parliament, MPs must complete a detailed legislative process. Typically, this process begins by examining a draft law, requiring the participation of lawyers and/or policy experts who assist an MP in drafting legislation while also providing the historical, legal, and political context needed to understand its ramifications. If a draft law comprises a single article, it can be presented to the parliament as an "accelerated law" and voted on if the speaker of parliament places it on the parliamentary session's agenda. If it comprises more than one article, the head of the concerned parliamentary committee is consulted, and the draft law is sent to the Board of Parliament, which then transfers the proposal back to the committees to study it. After presenting a draft law to the public through the media, other MPs are typically lobbied to endorse a draft law as it goes through joint committees. Finally, the speaker of parliament must place it on the legislative agenda to be voted on during a parliamentary session.

Interviewed MPs all asserted that ruling parties have different ways of delaying and sabotaging proposals at various points in the legislative process. Yacoubian said that when she attempted to circumvent these hurdles by introducing an accelerated draft law, the speaker refused to put it on the legislative agenda, changing it from an "accelerated" proposal to one which must pass through the tortuous legislative process.

Daou said that lobbying typically begins by consulting with MPs with whom one has personal ties, followed by politically aligned MPs. He added that, depending on the draft law in question, some MPs can better influence the process better than others because they are regarded as experts on certain matters. These MPs are particularly important to lobby because it is necessary to determine what opposing blocs want in return for their endorsement. These negotiations are usually prolonged and frequently cause legislative gridlocks.

Despite these challenges, Change MPs have worked on several draft laws and reforms in the interest of the public good. One of the most important pieces of legislation on their agenda focuses on judicial independence. Its journey along the legislative track is telling of how the Lebanese Parliament really functions. The draft law was prepared by Legal Agenda - a local civil society organization - and has been stuck in the parliament since September 2018. Yacoubian, who was an MP at the time, recounted how the draft law was transferred to the head of the Administration and Justice Committee, George Adwan (Lebanese Forces), who refused to put it on the agenda. Adwan and the Lebanese Forces were finally pressured - in part by sustained street action - into putting the law on the parliamentary agenda. A committee was formed to study the draft law, in which each article was debated for hours, signaling to Yacoubian that the objective was to delay the proposal. "Committees are the graveyard of laws" is a phrase often reiterated by MPs.

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Once the 2022 national elections approached, the Lebanese Forces relieved Adwan of his duties as head of the Administration and Justice Committee and the draft law was sent to the Board of Parliament, yet the speaker of parliament refused to place it on the agenda. After the 2022 elections, Minister of Justice Henry Khoury (Free Patriotic Movement) said he wanted to study the draft law before it progressed through the legislative process. Khoury claimed that he was waiting for comments about the draft from the Venice Commission.⁴ The commission's comments have long since been received but the legislation remains in limbo according to Yacoubian:



"It was clear that a majority of parties do not want this law because it affects sectarian appointments in the judiciary. That is why the law keeps getting delayed at different steps and by different parties each time."

Change MPs have also focused on the investigation into the August 2020 Beirut Port blast. Hamdan explained that the accountability process is hindered by a legal loophole that allows subjects of the investigation to present repeated "Requests to Respond", each time delaying the investigation. Change MPs presented the parliament with an amendment to civil court procedures, which focuses on the exploited loophole, but the speaker of parliament refused to put it on the legislative agenda. They also presented an accelerated draft law to offer compensation to victims' families, but all established parties voted against it. The accelerated draft law was transferred to committees, where it remains according to Hamdan. The sole symbolic victory in this regard was the successful obstruction of the draft law to demolish the port grain silos, which residents credit with protecting much of Beirut from further destruction during the blast. Change MPs, with the support of the Kataeb, Lebanese Forces, and their allies managed to break quorum and thus prevented the law from being passed and implemented.

IMF reforms, lifting the banking secrecy law, and amending the capital control law are at the top of Change MPs' agenda. The banking secrecy law was already being debated before Change MPs came into office, as the battle to retrieve some of depositors' funds now trapped in commercial banks was being led by civil society groups and members of the Beirut Bar Association. With the help of Change MPs who helped push for it inside the parliament, the draft law is nearing the final stages of the legislative process and is "almost passed" according to Daou. The capital control draft law, on the other hand, faces a bleaker future, as ruling parties formulated their own version of the law that protects banks and does not satisfy IMF demands. The draft law was passed through joint committees and will be voted on in the parliament soon. As Douaihy remarked:



"We face a big and difficult battle to pass reforms for financial recovery, as we are going up against massive banking interests... There is complete opposition to any kind of financial reforms because it would trigger a chain of other reforms that undermine ruling interests."

While the aforementioned tasks took up most of Change MPs' time, they also worked on other proposals, including a law to implement electronic voting in the parliament to improve transparency; a constitutional appeal regarding the postponement of the 2023

⁴ The Venice Commission is an advisory body of the Council of Europe, a leading human rights organization. It comprises independent constitutional law experts and is tasked with helping states uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

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municipal elections; opposition to the 2022 public budget, which increases regressive taxes; a decentralization law to address the ongoing electricity crisis; a proposal for a new non-sectarian electoral law; and a law to establish a civil personal status code.

Ultimately, MPs admitted that despite all their efforts, they have not been able to pass laws, only halt the progress of certain draft laws. Mneimneh acknowledged that Change MPs lack an infrastructure to introduce impactful and timely legislative proposals:



"This legislative process should be done through a party structure, which we lack. We need to build that up with the help of experts. Once we have that, we can do more effective lobbying."

Other Change MPs highlighted the importance of understanding the inner workings of the parliament. Yacoubian, for example, has changed her approach since first entering the parliament in 2018:



"I no longer propose laws like I used to because it is useless. I have some excited colleagues who are doing this work and I sign with them, but I no longer do it because I have seen how it is a waste of time and efforts. I am blacklisted by the parliament and its speaker, but I do not have a problem with that because I know that even if a good law gets passed, it will not be applied properly."

Having all-but given up on proposing laws, Yacoubian is instead adopting a new strategy that focuses on leveraging international community pressure to push for reforms. This approach, she admits, will be far more effective once a president is elected. The presidential vacuum continues to be a major hurdle for legislating and even more so for oversight, as will be demonstrated in the following section.

2. Evading Accountability: A Paralyzed Oversight Toolbox

"Ministers shall be collectively responsible before the Chamber for the general policy of the Government and individually responsible for their personal actions." (Article 66, Lebanese Constitution)

In addition to their legislative duties, MPs play a crucial oversight role. According to Article 37 of the constitution: "Every Deputy shall have the absolute right to raise the question of no-confidence in the government during ordinary or extraordinary sessions." Specifically, MPs monitor whether the Council of Ministers adheres to laws, respects the constitution, and implements policies in the public interest. In contemporary Lebanon, these duties entail vigilant monitoring and scrutiny of the caretaker government's activities. Given the severity of the crisis, effective oversight is essential to ensure transparency, accountability, and proper allocation of resources, including scrutinizing government spending, budgetary plans, and economic policies to identify potential mismanagement, corruption, or inefficiencies. As part of their oversight role, MPs can demand explanations in writing, hold government officials accountable for their actions by summoning them to the parliament, and identify needed reforms.

While oversight is critical to restoring some trust in the state and carving a pathway toward recovery, Change MPs face the challenge of holding a resigned government to account. Indeed, Change MPs who inquired about the government's work and sought to hold public officials accountable have either been ignored, dismissed, attacked, or bureaucratically sabotaged, leading them to rely on non-traditional

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oversight tools such as cultivating relationships with low-ranking state employees and exerting pressure on ministries through the media.

The most common oversight tool used by MPs to perform their oversight duties on the executive branch is by addressing written questions to ministers. All interviewed Change MPs said that questions addressed to ministers are either ignored or responded to very late without providing convincing and complete answers. Mneimneh details:



"They will not give you a transparent answer, so you fall into a process of back and forth and wasting time. If we had a real functioning government, we could turn these questions into interrogation sessions that lead to a vote of no-confidence in the minister. In our case of executive vacuum, they can exploit the situation to avoid that."

When a response is deemed unsatisfactory, MPs can summon ministers to the parliament for an interrogation session, or even in some cases call for a vote of no-confidence in the concerned minister. In contemporary Lebanon, these sessions are rare because the government resigned and is serving a caretaker role. The option of relieving a minister of their duties is thus not available to legislators, who also struggle to establish Special Investigation Committees, which require support from other parliamentary blocs. All these factors have led Change MPs to feel it is impossible to perform their oversight duties under such conditions. In fact, El Kaakour recounted:



"When I took part in my first oversight session, I was shocked to find that I was the one being attacked by fellow MPs because I was actually interrogating the minister in question. I recall asking the minister of education about the security measures taken following the death of a student as a result of the collapse of a schoolroom ceiling in the north. Several MPs attacked me, accusing me of being a populist. I told them this is what interrogations actually look like and to get used to it."

Despite these hurdles, Change MPs have attempted to investigate cases of corruption and mismanagement. These include questioning the Minister of Foreign Affairs regarding the sudden replacement of Lebanon's UN Representative Jeanne Mrad with former Free Patriotic Movement advisor Hadi Hashem, questioning the Minister of Education over the collapse of a public school ceiling that led to the death of a young girl in north Lebanon, an investigation into wasted public funds at Dbayeh's public swimming pool, an investigation into illegal public sector hiring, a lawsuit against former Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, and confronting Minister of Public Works Ali Hamieh over a controversial deal to construct a second terminal at Beirut's airport.

Among these investigations, Change MPs only succeeded in scraping the controversial airport expansion deal - which was carried out without a bidding process - after summoning Hamieh to the parliament. Apart from this modest victory, MPs like Daou are finding other types of tools to perform oversight responsibilities:



"I realized that a very effective tool to find out what is going on inside ministries is by building relations with senior public officials who oversee the implementation of laws and can tell you exactly what is going on from the inside. You can also summon them to parliamentary committee meetings to ask them those questions directly."

The media can also be used to exert pressure on ministries and public officials who are protected by the ruling establishment. This aligns with the goal of informing the broader public about how the state functions

and which laws and norms are being violated by their elected representatives. Despite a lack of adequate response from ministries, El Kaakour believes that continued efforts to reveal state-level corruption not only demonstrate to citizens the importance of accountability and how their rights are being breached, but also familiarizes them with how an MP should actually perform their duties.

3. Reaching Consensus Amidst Gridlock: What Happened to the "Change Bloc"?

"The President of the Republic is the head of the state and the symbol of the nation's unity. He shall safeguard the constitution and Lebanon's independence, unity, and territorial integrity. The President shall preside over the Supreme Defense Council and be the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces which fall under the authority of the Council of Ministers." (Article 49, Lebanese Constitution)

Among the primary duties of the parliament is electing a president, particularly in contemporary Lebanon, where MPs have struggled to elect a new head of state. For their part, Change MPs have struggled to agree on a candidate they can collectively endorse, in the process bringing light to larger strategic and programmatic disagreements that have prevented them from forming a united parliamentary bloc. Indeed, Change MPs went from being symbolically allied candidates to disjointed members of a strategically vague bloc and finally to independent voices, who to varying degrees work in a coordinated fashion. The main fault line separating Change MPs is their approach to dealing with the establishment, with some pragmatically allying with sectarian parties, while others have adopted a more principled but also isolating strategy that rejects the existing binary between two sectarian camps.

In the lead-up to the 2022 parliamentary elections, the opposition was divided between two camps: Those who believed that opposition candidates should put their differences aside and run as united representatives of the October uprising, and those who favored programmatic and strategic consistency within electoral lists. Ultimately, most opposition candidates sided with the former approach, arguing that voters wanted unity and their demands had to be met in order to win. While this decision helped elect 13 MPs to the parliament, the underlying tensions and differences between candidates quickly came to the fore once in office.

During the first parliamentary session, when MPs were tasked with electing a speaker of parliament and a deputy speaker, all 13 MPs reportedly voted for Ghassan Skaff as Deputy Speaker, an independent MP from Bekaa 2 who ran with the Progressive Socialist Party and Muslim Brotherhood. Skaff, who was backed by all March 14 parties, received 60 of 128 votes and narrowly lost to the March 8 candidate Elias Bou Saab of the Free Patriotic Movement. Change MPs were heavily criticized for that decision, as it seemed they had been co-opted by the March 14 camp. It was later revealed that prior to the session, the Change bloc held an internal vote to determine for whom they should cast their ballots: seven MPs voted in favor of Skaff,⁵ forcing the remaining six to concede or risk revealing to the public that the bloc was, in fact, not in harmony from the outset. A former member of Beirut Tuqawem – the group that organized Mneimneh's electoral campaign – shared in an interview:

⁵ Paula Yacoubian, Rami Finge, Elias Jarade, Yassin Yassin, Waddah Sadek, Mark Daou, and Najat Saliba were in favor of electing Skaff while Halimeh El Kaakour, Michel Douaihy, Ibrahim Mneimneh, Firas Hamdan, Cynthia Zarazir, and Melhem Khalaf were against.

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*"What happened with Skaff, from the perspective of [Ibrahim Mneimneh's] base of support, was really bad and we were heavily blamed. We knew that some of the other MPs were coercing us, and we tried resisting until the final moment, but the pressure inside the parliament was mounting for our bloc to make one choice and not two. Since Skaff was the choice of the majority, we had to accept it because this is what makes us look serious and effective in front of public opinion."*⁶

Yacoubian argued that fissures began to emerge between opposition groups prior to parliamentary campaigns, citing the election of the Order of Engineers and Architects in 2021 as a major turning point. Yacoubian claims that sectarian parties' strategy of "divide-and-conquer" was implemented during those syndicate elections, as multiple individuals affiliated with March 14 parties engaged with the opposition for the purposes of dividing it. Yacoubian said such practices are common, and is a key reason why the opposition "could not form the type of parliamentary alliances and lists they wanted."

Change MPs initially attempted to present a united bloc in the parliament, as reflected by the choice to collectively vote for Skaff. However, one month into their tenure, Change MPs disagreed again over who to designate as prime minister to form a government, with some endorsing diplomat Nawaf Salam, while three opposed that choice, according to Daou.

Problems reached a tipping point as the term of President Michel Aoun ended in October 2022 and Change MPs launched a joint initiative to elect a new president. All interviewed MPs agreed that their presidential initiative was disorganized and lacked direction, as no clear decision-making principles were applied. While they did have certain criteria in place for the selection of a candidate, their stance was "too weak and vague" according to Douaihy, because their initiative was aimed at accommodating a middle-ground between Change MPs' different political approaches.

Candidates Michel Moawad and Salah Honein - who were endorsed by the March 14 camp - were rejected by some Change MPs for their ties with the political and banking establishment. The final nail in the coffin of the nascent Change bloc came when three MPs - El Kaakour, Jarade, and Zarazir - refused to vote for Jihad Azour, resulting in sustained divisions among the new MPs. Jarade stood by that decision, summarizing the reasoning behind it:



"The problem was that three of us rejected the pressure to align with any of the two sectarian camps, namely March 14 and March 8. That's why we did not vote for Jihad Azour and named Issam Khalifeh instead."

The difference in perspectives between Change MPs ultimately comes down to a tradeoff between what can be summarized as "pragmatic" and "principled" political choices. Yacoubian explained what led other MPs to vote for Azour:



"When we voted for Azour alongside the Lebanese Forces and Free Patriotic Movement, it was to stand against the Hezbollah-Amal candidate. We saw that voting for anyone else would be strengthening

⁶ Interview with a member of Beirut Tuqawem in: El Kak, Nadim. "Counterrevolutionary Imaginaries: Neoliberal Co-optation in Lebanon's New Opposition", M.A. thesis, 2022.

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Hezbollah's position, who wanted it to seem like their candidate Sleiman Frangieh was the sole realistic option... The responsibilities of an MP are different than that of a street activist – you must go for the lesser of two evils when there are only two legitimate candidates."

El Kaakour, who differed with Yacoubian's reasoning, also emphasized the importance of managing expectations, recognizing that their vote for Azour would not have made a tangible difference, as no camp holds a majority in the parliament. She explained:



"There was a difference in approaches between "realistic pragmatism" and an admittedly harder path that [entails] trying to present a new and revolutionary approach inside the parliament. My goal is to revolt against the principles of "pragmatism" and "realism" – I know the system is very strong but I am not here to take part in the realities it created. That is why my approach in naming a Prime Minister or President will differ. I am here to stand out through a new approach and I do not have a problem if it only aligns with two or three other MPs. If I can be pragmatic while sticking to my principles that is great, but I will not take part in the establishment's approach."

Daou elaborated on these strategic differences by arguing that the Change bloc primarily failed because they could not establish internal voting mechanisms by which members would abide:



"The two approaches that divided us were the following: One approach believes in "flipping the table" completely – as in refusing to take part in the political game – and the approach we believe in is "dividing those at the table" – as in fomenting clashes within the establishment to force concessions. Of course, we remain closest to Change MPs in terms of principles and programs, but in practice we differ in political and strategic choices."

Ultimately, the failure of the presidential initiative and the collapse of the Change bloc divided Change MPs into three unofficial groups that often coordinate and agree on various issues. One group includes El Kaakour, Jarade, and Zarazir, who still stand by the revolution's slogan "All of them means all of them" by refusing to endorse candidates who support the interests of March 14 parties. The second comprises Khalaf, Najat Aoun Saliba, Mneimneh, Hamdan, Yassin, and Yacoubian, who are willing to make strategic concessions but without explicitly aligning themselves with establishment parties. The third group of Daou, Douaihy, and Sadek have closer ties with traditional parties as the latter details:



"While we were not able to form an opposition bloc with Change MPs, we did succeed in forming a bloc of 31 MPs that can block parliamentary sessions, prevented the election of Frangieh, blocked the French presidential initiative of Le Drian, and are succeeding in the parliamentary committees ... We still coordinate with 9 of the 12 MPs but we needed a larger and coherent opposition bloc which we now have."

The parliamentary bloc Sadek referred to meets twice each week and includes the Lebanese Forces, the Kataeb, the Renewal Bloc, and some affiliated independents alongside Sadek, Daou, and Douaihy. According to the latter, the main impetus for forming this bloc was preventing the Hezbollah camp from forcing through the election of their preferred presidential candidate. Daou added that the bloc is aligned on presidential candidates, the investigation into the 2020 Beirut Port blast, and probing the Central Bank. The bloc differs over IMF

negotiations, socioeconomic reforms, and the role of religious institutions. While Hamdan is not part of this alliance, he emphasized that Change MPs should stick together:



"We are still trying to build connections between different opposition groups because we know how strong the system is. There is a difference in opinions, approaches, and political practice between Change MPs but there are more things we agree on and we do not have the luxury of being divided... Some claim to belong to the opposition but stances on essential issues like socioeconomic reforms, civil liberties, and presidential choices reveal who truly stands with change."

Change MPs went from symbolically united candidates, to disjointed members of a loosely knit bloc, and now to individuals each making their own political choices based on varying degrees of coordination. As discussed in the next section, this trajectory reflects broader differences in political strategies and visions of how structural change could be realized.

4. The Paradox of Gradualist Change

Most opposition groups shifted strategies in the aftermath of the October uprising by moving away from the streets and focusing on garnering support at the ballot box. This signaled a shift from a rupturalist, revolutionary approach that brings about quick change toward a more gradualist and pragmatic approach. A gradualist approach to change through the parliament allows for careful and deliberate planning, enabling MPs and associated groups to discuss and propose laws, lobby internal and external actors, and avoid potential violence and uncertainty associated with street mobilizations. Moreover, incremental change can mitigate potential shocks that abrupt political changes might trigger, providing a sense of stability and predictability in a crisis. However, this approach has drawbacks: The urgency of the crisis may necessitate swift and radical reforms to effectively address pressing issues. Gradualism could lead to prolonged suffering for the affected population, as it delays much-needed relief and recovery measures. The crisis could worsen over such a period, causing further damage to the economy and society. A gradualist approach focused on a reformist trajectory may also fail to address the systemic and structural causes of various challenges facing Lebanon.

This section presents some Change MPs' reflections on political change and Lebanon's future. It shows that MPs have shifted toward a gradualist approach to change and recognize the urgent need to evolve as an opposition by forming a coherent political front. It also demonstrates that these opposition members are focused on small victories to combat demoralization among their ranks and among supporters, all with an eye on being prepared to capitalize on future opportunities.

When asked to reflect on the anti-establishment movement's strategic shift from the street toward formal institutions, most interviewed MPs stressed the importance of nonviolence, gradualist change, and sustainability. Even El Kaakour, who is one of the most left-leaning MPs in the parliament, admits that while she does want "radical" change, she also sees it as a "gradual" process rather than a rupturalist one. Hamdan captured this sentiment, saying:



"In light of regional and local violence, state institutions are the only path forward. Responding with violence is not part of our principles, culture, or even our tools to oppose the establishment. Change must

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come through institutions and through accumulation. The only condition is to show a different approach and practices that oppose those of the ruling establishment. While this change comes from within the state, it also has to be complemented by the streets, alternative media, student groups, unions, and so on."

Ultimately, the main impediment to the opposition's growth has been an inability to create a clear and organized front that consolidates and coordinates the efforts of different groups. As Daou put it:



"Right now, there is no opposition with a common agenda – there is only an issue-based opposition that varies in members from case to case."

Douaihy accepts that each MP has a right to oppose the establishment in their own way, but he also contends the opposition needs to close ranks:



"Even if 'Change MPs' disagree on some issues, our presence is still a step in the right direction that is bringing in a new approach to the parliament. But this opposition needs to evolve through a common political program that carries forward the legacy of October 17."

Yacoubian went even further, arguing that some members of the opposition are driven by personal interests that make them content with being the leader of a small political "shop" instead of working toward broader goals. According to her, the legitimacy and sustainability of the opposition movement is at risk if a united front cannot emerge:



"It is a shame that this opposition has so far failed to form a front through which it can work in an effective and organized manner. Forming such a front is the most important goal we can accomplish because the approach of only strengthening one's own little shop and pursuing personal goals will lead us into the abyss, not toward building a solid opposition."

The inability to form such a front is sometimes affected by egos and personal disputes, but it is also rooted in core disagreements over political approaches, as explained by El Kaakour:



"It is easy to call for unity, but what are we allying around? We need a clear vision and honest people. Of course, we cannot accomplish anything individually, but any opposition front has to come together in an organized, calculated, and gradual manner."

As MPs become accustomed to the inner workings of the parliament, some like Daou are calling for a move away from symbolic acts of resistance towards more concrete goals:



"We only know how to oppose things, but we need to learn how to get things done as well. With that experience, we can move from slogans and opinions towards tangible practices that leverage cracks within the existing system."

Mneimneh had a similar takeaway, stressing that "little by little, [Change MPs] are learning where we have room for maneuvering and how to identify and navigate the system's different cracks." When asked how they manage to maintain resolve, Change MPs not only focused on the long-term but also emphasized their numerous minor successes. For instance, Sadek noted how their presence in the

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parliament has strongly undermined kleptocratic channels of state expropriation:



"We are building towards radical change little by little: We were able to expose their corrupt deals and stop some of the theft that was taking place. Ruling parties are afraid now of being exposed. We usually oppose all sorts of bullying, but in this case the public shaming is making them feel threatened and its effective."

Beyond these accomplishments in the parliament, Mneimneh listed several successes at the grassroots level:



"We were able to penetrate specific communities in Beirut which seemed impenetrable from the outside. They see us and see how our interests intersect despite some of our differences. This allowed us to find means of collaborating or finding common ground in environments considered sectarian strongholds. To me, this is the biggest accomplishment."

These small steps forward have helped MPs deal with demoralization that has swept across Lebanese society in recent years. Mneimneh recognizes this reality but also believes that opportunities will emerge, necessitating preparation:



"It is normal for us to experience ups and downs. We are currently taking a step backwards and we have to accept this reality. But we also have to be ready for future opportunities and that requires continuing to work and organize until that moment comes. We were not ready in October 2019 so that opportunity slipped away, and people were disappointed in us. Next time, we have to be ready."

Sadek also believes in that long-term approach, but called for people to be patient and realistic, as Change MPs are trying to halt the ongoing financial and socioeconomic collapse:



"Change does not happen in a year. People need to be realistic. We are trying the best we can, from inside and outside the system. Change MPs cannot lose hope because we are the frontliners fighting for the project of political change. If we give up, this project will collapse so we will not let go and I will personally keep serving this project."

Jarade added that building a true opposition will require considerable time and necessitates youth participation, particularly among those who reject the predominant political culture:



"We need social and cultural change, a new generation that is freed from existing binary alignments, that has a different way of thinking. We need to show this new generation of free-thinkers that alternatives to the status-quo exist, so they do not lose hope."

While political change may indeed require a long-term and protracted approach, it is impossible to deny the urgency of the socioeconomic crisis that requires near-term solutions. El Kaakour noted that although they are trying to push for reforms through the parliament, structural change will require concerted efforts and broader organizing with workers' unions, student groups, and alternative media:



"The situation is really bad and requires urgency so of course we cannot just wait for long-term change. That is why my priority is healthcare and education, in order to allow people to survive and last until we get another true opportunity for radical change. If we cannot guarantee

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people these basic rights, they will not care about our long-term approach and vision."

It is evident that Change MPs are facing a paradox in their approach to political change: On the one hand, they view the Lebanese state as the entry point to realizing broader change. On the other, the same state is responsible for recurrent gridlock, passing harmful legislation, and protecting sectarian parties and their allies. Considering this reality, many have lost faith in Change MPs and the broader process of political transformation. Nonetheless, alternative means of resisting are limited, with most people losing faith in revolutionary change and prioritizing their own livelihood and that of their families. As Mneimneh admitted:



"If there's a faster and better option than the parliament, we are willing to take it."

CONCLUSION This paper offers the first insider account of Change MPs' experiences in the Lebanese Parliament. Change MPs described the systemic and structural hurdles that impede parliamentary work, including about how intimidation tactics and bureaucratic delays affect legislative activity and how the "presidential vacuum has undermined effective oversight. Change MPs have sought to overcome obstacles in varying ways, with some accepting pragmatic concessions to obtain practical results, while others are more committed to revolutionary principles that reject compromise with the ruling class. This dichotomy is at the core of divisions between Change MPs, who have thus far been unable to establish a programmatically coherent and sustainable political front through which the new opposition can organize and grow.

Considering the state and established parties' capacity to counter revolutionary or transformational political movements, many in the opposition camp have pursued progressive change, a strategy that requires effective organizing and strategizing among members of the new opposition. These efforts must bridge the gap between pragmatic and principled approaches on the one hand, and top-down and bottom-up approaches to political change on the other. While the 2019 uprising helped elect several politically independent anti-establishment MPs to office, the legacy of the movement still depends on present and future organizing efforts to help steer Lebanon out of its ongoing crisis. With a proper vision and plan that leverages intra-elite divisions and existing cracks within the system, establishing a sustainable and just foundation for the country's recovery is still a fleeting possibility. Without these, the disconnect between opposition groups and a disillusioned citizenry could widen, putting the nation at increased risk of further breakdown as it remains governed by the very architects and beneficiaries of its collapse.

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