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From Loud to Silent: The Free Patriotic Movement 2005-22 Outdoor Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

Lebanon's history is characterized by events and players outside the country's borders, which mainly include Israel, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran and the United States. Towards the end of the Lebanese Civil War, General Michel Aoun, the caretaker Prime Minister of 1988 and head of the army, emerged as one of the most popular Christian political leaders. He strongly opposed the establishment of Syrian hegemony over its tiny neighbor Lebanon legalized by the Ta'if agreement. Yet, defeated by the Syrian army, Aoun was expelled from Lebanon and went into exile in Paris, France (Rowayheb, 2014). In 2005, twelve days after the last Syrian soldier pulled out of Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, Aoun returned. Upon his return from exile, he resumed his political career, founded the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) in April 2006 (Ajroudi & Chughati, 2018) and reengaged with the Lebanese public and his backers. What were the political messages employed in the FPM's resurging political advertising activity? And how did it evolve from 2005 to 2022 based on local and regional alliances?

INTRODUCTION

This article sketches the FPM advertising campaigns and the respective contours of the domestic political context. The analysis is contextualized in line with the party's developing relationship with Syria & Iran, highlighted through the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Hezbollah, the Shiite-majority armed party. The FPM-Hezbollah agreement established an alliance that influenced and changed Lebanese politics; It allowed Aoun to get to the republic presidency in 2016 and, in return, gave Hezbollah Christian political support and a cover for its military presence. The article investigates how this growing relationship affected the FPM's advertising discourse. This article focuses on their outdoor billboard campaigns from 2005 to 2022, noting the power of outdoor advertising in Lebanon as one of the few mediums not to be associated with political parties, and the only unaffiliated media capable of boasting national coverage.

The Heroic Comeback (2005)

General Michel Aoun's comeback to Lebanon from his 15-year exile, instigated a national outdoor campaign by a group of volunteers including Rabih Haber, Sami Saab and others. Simple billboard ads and street graffiti displayed the two-word message "Aoun reiji3" in Arabic, translated into "Aoun is coming back" in English. Visually, the slogan was written in graffiti style and large red Arabic typography on a painted white wall, with the FPM logo and website URL. The message relayed deeper significance. It instinctively decodes a message of authority related to the interpretation of a famous Lebanese saying: "Your dad is coming", which forces kids to behave accordingly. The psychological connotation is that fathers have a certain firm tone that when heard by their kids, they know their father means business. Hence, the signified positioning for General Michel Aoun and its upcoming claim of authority.

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Figure 1: “Aoun is coming back” (2005)–Source: Ipsos, Statex & Gettyimages.

In her article, “Graphic Identity in the Scriptorial Landscape of Lebanon,” Diane Riskedahl (2017) argues that the “Aoun Raje3” message moved from predominantly Christian enclaves to more central areas throughout the city, including the downtown area, which mounts a challenge to other Christian leaders. This suggests the expansion of Aoun’s reach and supporters beyond traditional strongholds and offers insight into the country’s shifting landscape of political power. The mediated representations of street graffiti allowed the Lebanese public to participate in the political process. It was a remarkable shift for political advertising campaigns (S. Saab, private interview, January 08, 2020).

The visuals were updated upon Aoun’s return with affirmative messages. In the same visual, one vowel was scratched off the slogan with black spray, thus transforming the slogan from “Aoun is coming back” to “Aoun is back”, confirming Aoun’s return (Figure 1). This

message spreads comfort and a feeling of safety and security to Aoun’s followers, with hope for the Lebanese Christian community in general.

The overall 2005 messaging approach was daring and bold. It reflects similar traits of General Aoun’s political discourse during that period. Aoun was positioning himself for strong ownership, leadership, and reclaimed authority and power. He founded the FPM to renew his political life in Lebanon based on ethics, progressiveness, and the emancipation of the Lebanese individual, which projected a shift in the party and its leader’s positioning. Between 1988 and 2005, Aoun’s motto was focused on ‘Freedom, Sovereignty, and Independence’. As the Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon, Aoun announced liberation and a new unique selling proposition (USP), which was ‘Change and Reform’ (G. Najem, private interview, January 03, 2020). This change in USP signals a change in the FPM’s strategic direction and orientation.

The Branding Campaign

Another campaign came about in 2005, announcing the FPM’s visual identity and logo. This campaign was meant to restore the party’s image, boost the followers’ pride and belonging, and appeal to the Christian audience who had long been feeling neglected (S. Saab, private interview, January 08, 2020).

The Free Patriotic Movement claimed ownership of the orange color following the launch of their 2005 branding campaign. The orange fruit was included in the lexicon of the symbols used to represent the FPM, along the tick and the omega sign, among others (Abdouni & Abou Jamra, 2009) (Figure 2). According to Saab, the color choice was driven by the party’s desire to choose a color that symbolizes it. Other colors had already been taken by other political parties. Hence, the FPM chose the fluorescent color orange that is attractive, particularly to younger audiences (Figure 3). The hereunder photos showcase the use of the party’s flag and branding in Lebanese protests within universities and student committees (Figure 4 and 5).

The FPM was originally part of the March 14 Coalition, calling for Syrian troops’ withdrawal from Lebanon and opposing Hezbollah’s hegemony over the country (Figure 6). In 2005, Aoun’s FPM defected from the coalition because



Figure 2: Free Patriotic Movement – “Aoun is coming back”, “Aoun is back” (2005) – Source: Ipsos, Statex.



Figure 3: Free Patriotic Movement - Logo campaign (2005) – Source: Ipsos, Statex.



Figure 4: Free Patriotic Movement Logo Flag.



Figure 6: FPM Supporters in Orange.



Figure 5: FPM Student Committee Logo.

of its conflicts with the Future Movement (FM) and the Lebanese Forces (LF) over the distribution of cabinet seats (F. Souaid, private interview, January 10, 2020). Naturally, Aoun's prior positioning as an anti-Syrian political actor led many, including Aoun himself, to expect an alliance with the March 14 Movement but events dictated otherwise. The FPM switched its alliance to Hezbollah's side and the March 8 movement within the framework of the MoU.

The Positioning Statement (2009)

The FPM 2009 election campaign enforced new standards of political advertisement within the Lebanese scene (S. Saab, private interview, January 08, 2020). Initially, election campaigns solely entailed a passport-like photo of the electoral candidate with a catchy slogan (Figure 7). Saab explains that the "حال الصال او ري غتلا" (Change and Reform) campaign addressed the frustrated Lebanese citizens. The primary aim was to push everyone to vote and initiate Christian involvement in the election process. The campaign avoided always naming the FPM not to limit its reach to the party's followers. The FPM aimed to regain both the overall Christian trust in the Lebanese system as well as that of the new generation, reinforcing that it was the right time to change the system and create the country they want (ibid). Christians who were tired of the Hariri-dominated system and Syrian interference, as well as those making up for the regression of Christians that resulted from the exile of Aoun and the imprisonment of Geagea, were the core audience of the campaign. The share of parliamentary seats reserved for Christians was reduced within the Ta'if agreement, and the power of the Maronite President of the republic weakened. These changes infused the Christian community with a deep sense of insecurity and a strong desire to regain some of its lost power. Aoun's

ultimate goal for the 2009 elections was thus to reassure Christians and expand March 8's representation by picking up a large number of Christian seats (ibid).

In February 2009, the "think right" campaign was released. The strategic approach was to kick off with a multi-visual outdoor campaign that presented the FPM's logo in a variety of colors – yellow, red, green and blue.

The concept built on the fact that each political party in Lebanon owned a color, and the FPM, in 2005, had claimed the color orange. Hence, the colored series ranged



Figure 7: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), "Whatever your color is, vote right", Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009



Figure 8: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “Think right for the sake of the country”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009.

from dark green as associated with the Lebanese Front (Phalanges and Lebanese Forces), yellow as associated with Hezbollah, blue as associated with the Future Movement, and red as associated with March 14 and the Cedar revolution. The slogan read “Whatever your color is, vote right” (Figure 7); a message telling people to put aside the colors and favor rightful voting in the best interests of the country; No matter what your color is and who you follow in politics, you still need to “think right”. The campaign message targeted the total population smartly and subtly, pushing the communication standards higher and urging voters to do the right thing in choosing who they intend to vote for.

The FPM acknowledged that the country was suffering and needed to recover. Hence, Figure 8 emphasized the need to vote right for the sake of the country. The slogan reads “Think right for the sake of the country.” The visual followed the same practice, all excluding the FPM logo and signature. It had an orange background and a center-aligned white checkmark. The advertisement claimed that voting right signified voting for the FPM. The party thus wanted to present itself as the right (correct) choice for the country’s future.

During May 2009, the month of parliamentary elections, the Free Patriotic Movement further developed their “vote right” concept and spread visuals about choosing the party’s ideologies over poverty, opposition, association, and lying – qualities that they transmitted to their rival political parties – “the others”. The series of visuals utilized their orange background color with stripes and white checkmarks favoring the right choices associated with the FPM. In Figure 9, the white checkmark is placed next to the word “correct” to reemphasize that the correct choice is to vote FPM. The visual had three choices, either “correct”, “wrong”, or “in-between,” referring to the policy of the other competing parties and highlighting the correct decision to be made within the voting process. To avoid any confusion, the “tayyar.org” URL was aligned with the “correct” section and checkmark. The visual included the FPM electoral program website link and logo.

The series elaborated into different adaptations with two main choices and the checkpoint highlighting the correct choice and attributing it to the FPM ideology and program. The idea was to portray the FPM standing against

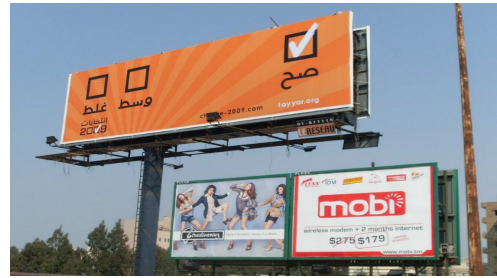


Figure 9: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “correct”, “wrong” or “in-between” 2009 elections, change-2009.com, tayyar.org”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009



Figure 10: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “Change” over “Misfortune”, “Harmony and understanding” vs. “Collision”, “Partnership” vs. “Clientelism” and “Agreement” vs. “Hypocrisy”, 2009 elections, change-2009.com, tayyar.org”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009

the corrupt system, and position it as an active advocate for structural reform (Figure 10).

The FPM-Hariri battle of power and positioning translated into a massive outdoor execution on the road leading to the airport. It conveyed a creative message with an Arabic play on words, recalling Hariri’s accused corruption. The play on words and visual signs used, including the airport departure and landing icons. The significance of the strategic location chosen to convey this message, referred to the Beirut airport, named after the assassinated former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and renamed Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport in June 2005. By the time the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990, a huge reconstruction program was needed for the airport. In 1994, a 10-year program was kick started by Rafic Hariri and included constructing an additional terminal, along with a fire station, power plant, two runways, a general aviation terminal, and a belowground parking. The visuals read, “49 billion dollars have disappeared” – a reference to the state’s massive public debt that highly increased during Hariri’s economic rule (Figure 11). Different connotations can be extracted from this message, including an indication of Hariri’s corruption, and a suggestion that the heroism



Figure 11: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “49 billion dollars vanished, what are you waiting for to change? We are landing to change on June 7. A take-off stopping) corruption, 2009 elections, change-2009.com, tayyar.org”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009.

portrayed in describing the assassinated Hariri was questionable. The message certainly highlighted the need for change and to break the country’s Hariri political and economic approach and plan.

“Change and reform” was the campaign’s broad title. The flow of messaging based on the need to CHANGE during the elections allowed the party and its allies to recruit supporters and votes to enable them to reformulate and redress the local system. The FPM program leaned more towards replacing foundations upon which the state apparatus lay (earning it the title of “The Third Republic”) (Figure 12) and less towards a step-by-step approach

to reform the existing power structure. In an interview with *National Review*, Alain Aoun, Member of Parliament of the FPM, argued that the goal was “to overhaul the entire system.” He stated that because the party had never been in power, they did not have an innate sense of which reforms were politically correct and which ones were to be steered clear from. He iterated that they would proceed with their program in a bulldozer-like manner (The National, 2009).

“The Third Republic is stable” controversial outdoor message was part of the campaign’s rhetoric. General Michel Aoun discussed the “Towards the Third Republic” concept at least as far back as 2001. But the FPM capitalized on it for this electoral campaign. The FPM referred to the third republic as the projected one, portrayed as a strong state in contrast to the first, weak, post-independence republic. The third republic was characterized by two things: the political classes’ divisions and consequent failure to shield the country from regional forces, and an accountable, transparent governance system, which was a contrast to the second, crooked post-Ta’if republic. The FPM’s electoral program explains how the party plans to achieve this vision. The narrative serves the specific version of history that the party referred to, with the country’s lack of a unified history. Furthermore, the Lebanese proverb that the campaign references – “al-thaalitha thaabita” (or in Lebanese colloquial: el telteh sebtteh) which translates into “The third one is the final one” or “the right one” in English – signifies that the third element provides stability.

Lebanon’s second republic was established following the civil war, and its founding document – the Ta’if Accord – kept up the political system’s sectarian nature while, in parallel, appealing for the political sectarianism’s ultimate elimination via forming a senate and adopting a non-confessional electoral law. These reforms were never followed through and the patronage politics system, along with the affiliated corruption and negligence that enabled almost all government sectors, have persevered until today, although the Lebanese people across the board widely address the issue of political sectarianism. Alain Aoun commented on this, saying that “something



Figure 12: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “The Third Republic is stable”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009.



Figure 13: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign: “Sois Belle et Vote”. Source: Ipsos, Statex, 2009.

dramatic has to be done [...] and we are the people who will do it” (The National, 2009). The FPM is among other political parties that launched an electoral platform. Still, it’s the one that led the efforts in making it an issues election instead of a simplistic referendum on Lebanon’s independence from Syria and its sovereignty, similarly to 2005. Their endeavors hit the mark in certain areas.

The FPM’s periodization builds on an existing one. It positions the present as the final result of a history of weakness and corruption, following a series of movements and events that led to “the third republic”. The FPM emphasizes on the stability of the final state – “The third republic is stable”. The FPM’s version of Lebanon’s current republic highlights problems beyond corruption, bad management, social and economic inequalities, rural neglect and communal marginalization, which are diagnosed in their electoral program and primarily stressed concerning the post-Ta’if (read, Hariri) period.

Within their controversial messaging approach, the FPM released a relatively entertaining and light communication “Sois Belle et Vote”, aka “Be Beautiful and Vote” written in French. The message depicted in poster form on billboards and unipoles around Beirut, its suburbs, and Christian areas in the North. The image was made up of three main components: the white-to-orange gradient background, the text “Sois Belle et Vote”, and the photograph of a young woman (Figure 13). The play-on-words campaign excludes the FPM’s signature and logo, and includes their website and electoral program link (Figure 14). The female’s body is turned away from the onlooker and her face towards them. The visual represents the quintessential beautiful woman who places emphasis on her appearance. Structurally, the message is constructed based on the French saying, “sois belle et tais toi” which directly translates to “be beautiful and shut up”. The original saying is usually targeted at beautiful but stupid women, referring to the idea that women are only objects of beauty with no substantial opinion that needs to be voiced; “women should be seen and not heard” is its closest English idiom (Abou Saleh, 2009). Unsurprisingly,



Figure 14: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign: “I Vote Orange”. Source: Ipsos, Statex, 2009.

the campaign garnered a lot of controversy, with some declaring the FPM sexist and degrading towards women. The party explained that the message of the campaign was to “not be ignorant and vote for what you believe”. Saab reiterated that the target audience was women who were image-conscious and not politically involved, or if they were, they would cast their votes through pressure from family or spouses (Abou Saleh, 2009). The campaign’s ability to send the correct message remains questionable.

Furthermore, within the same series, another visual adaptation featuring a different female model, this time stylish and fun, with “I Vote Orange” written in French (Figure 14). With a similar layout structure, the slogan was positioned on the right-hand side and the female cast to the left side. The visual encourages women to actively participate in the elections, and promotes that a smart vote is actually a vote for the FPM. The use of women wearing sleeveless summer tops, with their hair down and bare shoulders, comes across as a bit controversial for the FPM’s allies. Although the campaign targets the Christian audience, it would still highly contradict the ideologies of the party’s main ally, the radical Shiite Hezbollah.

Previously, political communication only targeted



Figure 15: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign: “I Vote for change”. Source: Ipsos, Statex, 2009.



Figure 16: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “June 7, Change!”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009.

men and took on masculine grammar and language. Communicating with Lebanon’s women, an overlooked audience when it came to political issues, was the result of Sami Saab’s focus on communication and strategy opportunities. In 2009, statistics showed that 52% of voters were women - an insight that allows Saab to claim the campaign’s success and its ability to create a progressive image for the party (Saab, private interview, 2020).

With regard to gender equality, the party released another visual depicting a young trendy male model. He poses with a sleek smile, while wearing his sunglasses and having his chin up high. Using the same visual elements (white-to-orange background color, sunrise pattern, Tayyar and electoral program website URLs), the male image is on the left side of the poster, with the slogan that reads, “I vote for change” (Figure 15). The FPM’s CHANGE motto is thus introduced and spread over other series of fun and light-hearted campaign visuals (see Figure 16).

Even though the FPM’s campaign posters were generally meant to be more light-hearted than severe and serious, General Aoun gave provocative speeches in his 2009-election rallies and appearances. The pervasiveness of that kind of rhetoric was prominent and untimely on one hand, but the minimality of tangible political violence, given the circumstances, was notable and positive on the other (NDI, 2009). The FPM responded to rival parties with retaliatory messaging. An outdoor message of retaliation was released to counter to the Future Movement’s (FM) campaign installed in the Metn and Kesserwan areas. In Figure 17, the Future Movement’s quote is plastered



Figure 17: The Future Movement election campaign (2009), “The future is where you spend the rest of your life”, “To know the future, you need to make it”. “The future is certainly promising”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009.

across a blue background (their proclaimed color), with the party’s name and campaign logo. The word “mustaqbal” or future, is used in a play on words to draw inspiration from popular quotes. It transforms famous sayings to fit the FM discourse, consequently taking on the intellectual hat. The FPM responded to the Sunni party’s campaign with Figure 18, which has the FPM 2009 visual identity, motto and party color at heart. The FM “blue sky” was used in a reactive approach and countered by “No future without Change,” from the Arabic “La moustaqbal ella bel teghyir” (R. Haber, private interview, 2020). The FPM message reiterates the urgent need for the FPM electoral program and “Change and Reform.” It also highlights the negative implications of Hariri’s political strategy and thinking.

In a private interview, Saab draws on the similarities of messaging between the FM and FPM, both conveying their efforts to sustain the country and build a better future for their successors. Yet, battles occur at the symbolic level where one idea of the nation prevails in reaction to what the others propose. It represents the varying historical perceptions across different confessions.

The FPM also reacted to the Lebanese Forces (LF) election campaign with a counter-attack visual. The FPM re-affirmed that change was definitely coming and would start from the core strategic areas, presumably



Figure 18: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “No future without Change”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009.



Figure 19: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “Ashrafieh is the Beginning, the beginning of change”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009.



Figure 20: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “Let your vote be correct, correct, or wrong, wrong, 2009 elections, change-2009.com, tayyar.org”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009

dominated by the LF. The message reads, “Ashrafieh is the Beginning, the beginning of change, elections 2009” with the party’s orange background with stripes. Strategically, it was installed in the Ashrafieh area on a large wall sign. The message banked on the LF mottos, “Ashrafieh is the Beginning, the beginning of Bachir”, “Ashrafieh is the story, the story of liberation”, which have historical significations, and are also translated into a popular LF song (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xLtq8xKkEE>) (Figure 19).

A significant aspect of the FPM electoral campaign was style, and the play on words, with a sparkle of substance in the more serious messages released under the umbrella



Figure 21: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “There is a chance, 2009 elections, change-2009.com, tayyar.org”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009



Figure 22: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2009), “Cheers to the correct”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2009

of “Change and Reform”. In their rival focused messaging, the LF leader, Samir Geagea, inspired another play on words. Geagea is known for his rhetorical style of tactfully repeating the same word to add clarity and emphasis. The approach was borrowed by the FPM, in Figure 20, to emphasize the need to vote for the FPM and implying that voting for their rival party would be the wrong choice. The message reads “Let your vote be correct, correct, or wrong, wrong”.

Again, addressing t`he Christian doubtful audience, “There is a chance” was released to reassure them of hope, and the chance to change the status-quo. This is a projection of a barely disguised reflection of the Christian’s inner conditioning – the Christians desperate feeling of being weakened.

Lastly, within their series of Christian connotations and subconscious indirect empowerment, the FPM celebrated the election results with a cheerful message. The light orange-white background, conveyed the message “Cheers to the correct” with a visual edit of an orange-champagne glass. The celebration visual is inspired by the Christian community’s common social practices. Key occasions are celebrated over drinks. Weddings are celebrated with champagne, and orange juice is served during events along with other types of juices. A practice that is not common for Muslims, given that alcohol is forbidden according to teachings of the Qur’an. Having said that, the FPM campaign addresses the Christian community’s commonalities and hints back to its history of rivalry



Figure 23: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2018), “For Lebanon, all of Lebanon”, Source: Ipsos, Stutex 2018

and unrest amongst the key Christian leaders. All in all, Christian districts witnessed a fierce competition during the 2009 elections (Figure 21 and 22). This, in turn, brought out the kind of extreme and aggressive patriotism that had branded Christian privileged discourse and bloated egotism, each side adamant on its representation and defense of Lebanon’s (Christian) true interests.

On the whole, the FPM campaign gestures vaguely at the problems and the solutions, but it does not elaborate on the details. Together with the assertive claims of the FPM, more wishful, hopeful and entertaining messages were released. Yet, the FPM recapitalized the urgency and importance of voting in their 2009 election ads. The campaign persistently attacked the government’s stewardship; it promoted a one-note communication for change. The efforts to take advantage of old sources of tribal, clan, and sectarian loyalties for the sake of encouraging votes, especially among the Christians, is undeniable, even with the party’s endeavors to portray a multi-confessional and nationalist image.

Comparing the campaign to election results, Saab still believes that the 2009 campaign was highly successful, even though the FPM did not win the elections back then.



Figure 24: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2018), “Strong party for a strong Lebanon. Announcement ceremony for the FPM 2018 electoral campaign, Saturday March 24 at the Forum de Beyrouth at 3:30 pm”, “Persistent, nothing can stop us!”, Source: Ipsos, Stutex 2018

The campaign helped build brand notoriety and not only get the required votes for the 2009 election. The campaign shaped the image of the FPM and positioned it at its best. It was presented as one of the elite movements in the country – a party with a project, program and agenda for the future of Lebanon (Figure 23). A party that really wants to rebuild the country with a well-defined structure and strategy. The brand equity and image were not tangible election results, but implications that can be seen in the long run. Saab believes that without the standards and level of professionalism, witty messages and smart approaches, the FPM would not have been classified the way it is today, and General Michel Aoun would not have made it to the presidential role (Saab, private interview, 2020).

Maintenance and Excuses (2018)

After a two-year presidency void and a continuous boycott of presidential elections driven by Hezbollah, in 2016, the FPM signed an agreement with their Maronite rival, the Lebanese Forces, in Maarab. General Michel Aoun thus made it to the Republic Presidency. The newly-elected president vowed to protect Lebanon from “regional fires”, referencing the Syrian conflict. During the presidential vacuum period which started in May 2014, it was better for Hezbollah and their allies to have an empty presidency than a president who could challenge and question the coalition’s involvement in Syria or its overall position status as a national resistance. Hezbollah supported Aoun and his candidacy was hindered by the Sunni-dominated rival, the Future Movement, until Aoun and Hariri reconciled in 2016 (Karam, 2017). The deal was reportedly that the Future Movement’s leader, Saad Hariri, would become prime minister (Figure 24).

In light of these changes, President Michel Aoun leadership of the FPM was passed to his son-in-law



Figure 25: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2018), “Lebanon is strong by his youth”; “Lebanon is strong by his unity”; “Lebanon is strong by his oil platform”; “Lebanon is strong by his political pact”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2018

Gebran Bassil, former Minister of Energy and Water, as well Foreign Affairs and Emigrants. Bassil thus led the 2018 election campaign – the first to be released after Aoun’s presidency – along with the party’s communication bureau. The election campaign decision-making shifted from the hands-on implication of Aoun. Back in 2009, then-General Aoun was very engaged in the campaigning process; reviewing, adjusting and approving the visuals.

With the power shift to MP Bassil, the FPM ideology focused on “Change and reform” was changed, although the country had not witnessed any developments and the 2009 issues remained problematic and aggravating. The party’s political rhetoric focused more on the rights of Lebanon’s Maronites, in Arabic referred to as “Al marouniyeh al siyasiyeh”, and the need to retain the balance between Christians and Muslims through Bassil’s strategic role in internal and regional politics (Saab, private interview, 2020). Bassil thus presented himself, and the FPM, as the caretakers of the Maronites. This was relevant as, over the years, emigration and low birth dates resulted in diminishing community numbers, eclipsed by the Sunni and the Shiites, according to unofficial statistics, as the last official census in Lebanon was taken in 1932, due to extreme political sensitivities. Christian leaders on both sides of the political divide were united in their calls for restoring the community’s strength and dignity (Yacoubian, 2009).

The FPM 2018 campaign was initiated with a series of visuals on billboards that featured different landmarks of Lebanon, with a blue sky, shades of white clouds, white typography and the FPM logo. The “For Lebanon, all of Lebanon” (Figure 24) campaign depicted the Cedars of Lebanon, Baalbek historical temple, Raoucheh rock, Sidon Sea Castle, and the Phoenician Wall. The campaign aimed



Figure 26: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2018), “A strong woman, for a strong Lebanon”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2018

to resonate with all Lebanese people, from whichever sect or background. As Georges Najem stated in an interview in 2020, demographically speaking, the party is not solely communicating to Christians. The FPM electoral lists include candidates from different regions, confessions and religions. For example, non-Christian candidates were on many lists, including the Baabda and South lists. Thus, despite Christians being the core audience, and based on the ongoing agreement with Hezbollah, the communication did not adopt any particular fashion or slant, neither in its content nor its overall look and feel of the campaign. Yet, the referenced landmarks are affiliated with primary sects based on Lebanon’s demographic split; i.e. the Christian north and Jbeil regions, the Shiite dominated Baalbek area, and the Sunni Saida-Beirut. The concept analysis draws on two key notions: (1) Lebanon is all for its people and not split by areas – promoting a unite and inclusive country, and (2) the FPM is restoring Christian’s right for all of Lebanon, the 10,452 m² – highlighting the FPM’s capability to ensure Christian’s representation, authority and privileges across the country, while tapping into Muslim (Sunni and Shiite) dominated areas.

The 2018 campaign was later driven by the “strong covenant” concept benchmarking on Aoun’s presidency. The election of President Michel Aoun was filled with headlines on Christians’ rights and on amending the partnership among the Lebanese components. Aoun and his political propaganda team has excelled in using the term “power” and its derivatives. Aoun was projected as the certain president because he was a “strong leader” who, through his power, could help Christians regain their rights. This alludes to a presumed weakness of his predecessors. He is the “strong president”, supported by a wide social base and political forces which have given him the biggest parliamentary bloc. He is the “powerful era” that fights corruption, pushes the country forward and makes people happy (Alarabiya News, Koteich, 2020).

The name of “strong Lebanon” was chosen for the covenant’s parliamentary bloc in 2018, constituting a free national movement. The FPM, along with their allies, called



Figure 27: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2018), “Lebanon is strong by his dignity”, Source: Ipsos, Statex 2018



Figure 28: Lebanese Army – “Strong Lebanon” – Portrait General Michel Aoun – 1989. Source: Signsofconflict.com archive (http://www.signsofconflict.com/Archive/poster_details/2109)

themselves “Strong Lebanese Coalition”, and they built on multiple claims including having a “strong president” for the republic, and a “strong Lebanon”. The concept was based on the notion that the Lebanese people love power, and that Aoun’s supporters would appreciate the rank of power he sits in today, being proud of the party’s achievements, mainly the presidency (Saab, private interview, 2020).

Visually, the FPM billboards had blue-white gradient skies with two visuals key elements aside from the slogan, and logos. The visual showcases a strong fist holding the Lebanese flag, signifying that the FPM’s power is unstoppable (see Figure 24). The FPM cannot be tamed, hence it will lead to Lebanon uprising and the flag continuously waving. Waving the flag in the visuals also suggests national symbolism, which evokes a psychological attachment to the nation as an abstract social entity (Schatz & Lavine, 2007), and reinforces the previously released messaging of the party built around unity and inclusion, as well as the party’s communicated concern for the functionality of national institutions

and their capability to provide instrumental benefits to citizens, throughout the previous years. The below visual reads “Persistent, nothing can stop us, the FPM” with the 2018 FPM customized elections logo to the right, and the party’s logo to the left.

The strong fist series proclaiming a strong Lebanon and the role of the strong party, is built around specificities as to these strengths. Following the same art direction, the elements are slightly reorganized within the billboard grid, allowing space to introduce visual elements that further clarify the adopted slogan. Yet, the fist is not only holding the Lebanese flag in these variations. (1) “Lebanon is strong by his youth” (Figure 25) with stock images of young couples in a valley, arms wide open, shows a positive overall spirit, accomplished and hopeful. (2) “Lebanon is strong by its unity” includes a tacky image of a church near a mosque, signifying the country’s diversity and coexistence which the FPM followers would decode as a message of reassurance that the FPM agreement with Hezbollah solidifies their positioning and has significant importance in empowering the party (and hence empowering the state). (3) “Lebanon is strong by his oil platform”, with the visual integration of an oil and gas extraction station and the seafront, is a dreamy promise that the FPM have been using in their political discourse and vision for the future of Lebanon. Promising that the country will flourish again as soon as the tenders for oil and gas infrastructure in Lebanon are concluded and oil and gas blocks are set. Oil and gas fields would thus bring wealth and economic development to the country. It presents Lebanon the opportunity to join the club of hydrocarbon exporters (Al-Darazy, 2016). Yet, until the time of writing, Lebanon had no oil or gas resources. However, the potential benefits of a domestic supply of gas are clear; ending power shortages and resolving the electricity production issue, wiping out Lebanon’s rapidly rising public debt, reviving the economic sector, social development, and the reduction of pollution. (4) “Lebanon is strong by its political pact” with the image of the Cedar tree in the right side corner and the Lebanese mountains introduced into the visual background, signifies that the FPM will continue to protect the Lebanese state and sovereignty while ensuring the power of Christians and those of the presidency.

In line with their 2009 strategy of tapping into female audiences and while maintaining the “strong-power” concept, the manly fist visual was replaced with the female fist holding onto a red waving flag featuring the infinity sign in white. The slogan reads, “A strong woman, for a strong Lebanon”, signifying the importance of women’s involvement and role in maintaining a strong country (Figure 26).

The visual also hints that the FPM party stands by women’s rights and empowerment, a debatable topic in Lebanon that was central to multiple protest movements.



Figure 29: The Free Patriotic Movement election campaign (2018), “My voice for the strong covenant”, Source: Ipsos, Stutex 2018

Women in Lebanon had been protesting against challenging social, economic and political practices. One of the key challenges faced remains that Lebanon has a biased law. It denies women nationality rights, leaving their children stateless as they cannot pass on citizenship to their children. Speaking to *Reuters*, Paula Yacoubian, a parliamentarian from the civil society bloc who has been fighting to reverse the biased law, highlighted its broader ramifications: “It is not only about women – it is about suffering families. ... They don’t have a piece of paper that says you have a nationality – it is degrading.” (Nassar, 2019)

Aside from the specificities and gender equality, the “Strong” campaign reference to the “Strong” President was translated into a billboard ad showcasing Aoun’s 1989 poster. Mobilizing the electoral votes of the existing FPM backers required speaking of their “General” and reminding them of the history that made them follow him and look up to his political stances and positions (Chemaly, 2018). A symbolic visual that features the man who gave birth to all the fanfare, General Michel Aoun, was released. The background predominantly included the Lebanese flag, while the manly fist emanates from the FPM orange flag. Along with the Lebanese flag, the visual introduced the 1989 poster of General Michel Aoun, dating back to the Lebanese Civil War era (Figure 27).

Back in 1989, General Michel Aoun portrait poster used to be mounted on the walls of the city by the Aounists (Aoun followers), creating a feeling of security under his perceived strong Army Command. General Michel Aoun had ruled the country in his temporary role as leader of the East Beirut Government. The campaign approach comes in synergy with Aoun’s statement from a couple of years ago: “مَنْ قِيْنَا نَم رَغْصَا، عِلْبِيْنَا نَم رَبْنَا، يَوْقَلْنَا نَم بَلْ”, in English, “Strong Lebanon, is too big to be swallowed, and too small to be divided”. The message was of a strong Lebanon with the reign of the Lebanese army with no actively involved militias.



Figure 30: The Free Patriotic Movement 2022 Elections Logo. Source: <https://elections.tayyar.org/home>

Sami Saab questions the FPM’s “strong” concept implementation. Saab notes the concept expansion to “strong Lebanon”, “strong movement”, “strong president”, “strong Tayyar”, and “strong covenant” (Figure 28). As Saab argues, pushing on ipso-facto statements, as per the FPM “strong” aspirations, makes people doubt them. What is behind the need to keep stating an ipso-facto matter? In his opinion, the propaganda of presenting President Aoun as “Bayy el Kell” (the father of all Lebanese people) was instigated by the parties’ recognition of the big mistake they had made in the 2018 election campaign. Once again, there is a contrast between the chosen terms, between the strong leader and the loving-caring father. The perception that Christian leaders nominated their own candidate for presidency, as opposed to being appointed by non-Christian leaders, boosted the overall morale of Christians in Lebanon but hardly made a better difference. Arguably, Aoun’s election as president of the republic did not come from a strong efficient background but from a settlement between the various parties ruling the country and many concessions. Saab perceives these compromises as the reason behind Aoun’s shy presence, his voice almost muted. The voice, language, tone of voice and vibe of General Michel Aoun squandered as president of Lebanon. The campaign can be an answer to the position of weakness that the party was stuck in, hence the need to change people’s perceptions with an election campaign that screams power and strength.

Saab argues that the strategy was too ambitious while the party was facing severe political challenges. Lebanon’s constitutional crises had adverse effects on implementing the role of institutions, and progress was slow. The campaign highlighted the FPM’s goal of being the strong party that would save the country. The aim was for people to see how strong the party was and preach about its strength. However, it remained an uncertain challenge with the party not being sure that it delivers its projected image. The campaign also brought back elements of the

Civil War, reflecting a language that the Lebanese had long struggled to forget.

To urge people to vote for the strong covenant of President Aoun and achieve his vision and promise for Lebanon, a navy blue background with white typography visual was released. Visually, the campaign capitalized on the growth of social media in Lebanon and introduced the slogan in a hashtag format “#my_vote_for_the_covenant” (Figure 29) in English, “to fulfill the promise”, with the clenched fist element taking its power from the ballot box, once again integrating the FPM orange colored flag with the Lebanon’s waving flag. Votes can be seen in the ballot box and the FPM logo overlaying it, with another logo on the left side of the visual illustrating the fist and flags mixed with the signature “Strong Lebanon”.

Remarkably, in their 2018 election campaign, the FPM steered away from discussing topics that mattered, focusing instead on an entertaining campaign that built on unity and diversification, thus indirectly promoting its unusual alliance with Hezbollah. It can also be read as a message of reassurance to the party’s followers that this partnership and the political route was the right choice to be taken, for the sake of Lebanon.

The FPM’s campaign is regarded not only as an election messaging approach; it is used to re-highlight that they finally have the presidency of the republic secured for General Michel Aoun. The campaign’s connotations refer to statements and promises of General Aoun, his historical journey, his positions and principles, and his vision for Lebanon that he had been advocating since the civil war and, recently, since his return in 2005. The call to recruit voters for the FPM 2018 campaign is based on the same.

The 2018 elections resulted in Hezbollah winning the parliamentary majority. The country’s socio-economic situation continued to deteriorate afterwards, and so did its regional political relations.

Silence (2022)

Significant challenges have marked the period of President Aoun’s rule. The country faced several economic, social and political challenges, including a mounting national debt, a devaluation of the national currency, and a sharp decline in economic growth. Lebanon’s revolution of October 17, 2019 was cumulative of many things that were going wrong within the local market, as Sami Saab suggests. For the October Revolution, Saab believes that it was the culmination of several issues and crises that preceded it, including the Lebanon wildfires in 2019. The economic crisis and lack of foreign currencies, precisely the USD, gas stations and bakeries going on strike; the government slapping additional taxes on tobacco, gasoline and some social media platforms, up until WhatsApp taxes erupted mass protests in a state of economic emergency. These signs portray a severe crisis; the total failure of state institutions.

Adding to this, Lebanon’s Arab and regional neighbors and the international community appear to have forsaken it as of 2018, preferring to focus on their own strategic, political, and economic interests. A decision that some may argue being related to Hezbollah’s hegemony over the Lebanese government and parliament.

Surprisingly, after leading the political advertising scene’s rise in Lebanon since 2005, and following the above-stated rounds of heavy communication messaging and outdoor presence, the 2022 election campaign of the FPM didn’t reach the streets of Lebanon. The election campaign excluded outdoor presence for the first time. The FPM leader, MP Gebran Bassil, refrained from spending money on electoral ads. He chose to recruit representatives and famous people to market the movement’s campaign below the line (BTL). The streets of Lebanon were mainly dominated by the Lebanese Forces, amongst the Christian political parties, followed by the Phalanges and others. Yet, the FPM was silently absent (Figure 30).

From “change and reform” in 2009 to the “strong covenant” in 2018, and with President Aoun sitting in Baabda Palace as president of the Lebanese republic since 2016, Hezbollah gathering the parliamentary majority and controlling the Lebanese government as of 2018, the FPM made the choice of completely muting its voice, in 2022, on the only mass media platform in the country with the ability to reach voters regardless of their political affiliations and choices. Bassil, thus, preferred not to pay money for advertisements and used the country’s socio-economic context to shoot at this opponent, who maintained their usual outdoor battles and investments.

The 2022 election campaign of the FPM was focused on representatives and money was spent indirectly, in an evasive manner, in order not to raise suspicions about it. Exploiting citizens’ economic and social distress in exchange for votes is against the law, but the election supervisory body of Lebanon, was relatively absent. There has been claims that the FPM electoral campaign money was transformed into diesel fuel and food vouchers and that the party had offered to pay hospital bills versus electoral votes (Sawt Beirut International, May 2022).

CONCLUSION

The implications of the internal and regional political context on the FPM rhetoric.

The FPM paved the way for the political advertising landscape in Lebanon to grow. It instigated the need to advertise when participating in electoral campaigns. Advertising in political campaigns became competitive, and the quality of the advertising content progressed (S. Saab, private interview, January 08, 2020).

“Political messaging strategy is a reflection of what people want to hear starting from the basic positioning of the specific party, in particular circumstances and while relying on the same. You cannot disregard current

situation and milestones while conceiving a political communication campaign. You cannot disregard people's life; more importantly, you cannot claim beliefs you do not have. It is a mix of what people want, what is the surrounding atmosphere and what you have to offer based on your identity and personality with emotional baggage. Time and space are huge factors in the conception of a political campaign." (IBID)

The country's election campaigns must be understood within the unique context of Lebanon's confessional system. Undeniably, the 2005–22 period was challenging for Lebanon and full of struggles. The country was dealing with an upsurge of sectarian particularism, societal Islamization, and economic and social challenges while aiming to implement a democratization and national reconciliation agenda. Belonging, nationalism and unity, memories and narration, and a trace of religious connotations are reflected in the FPM 2005-18 resurging political advertising activity, and more precisely outdoor visuals, in line with the FPM's discourse and mission to safeguard the Christian Maronites of the Middle East. Furthermore, the FPM aimed for validation and reassurance of its followers, through memories and narration from Lebanon's civil war, as well as the use of strong connotations and images.

The 2005-18 outdoor campaigns built and defended the Free Patriotic Movement's image and political positioning. The campaigns heavily relied on good design and aesthetics, with beautiful typography, to "dress" the campaigns, like a wolf in disguise. The analysis of FPM campaigns shows extensive discussion of party positions in regard to other internal actors. Critiquing and scare-mongering against opponents was common practice. This is evident in the retaliation messages highlighted earlier. The messaging approach also taps frequently into the FPM's conceptual and historical capital, a history that is not unified amongst Lebanese Political Parties. Moreover, many campaigns are either about self-flattery or arrogance (naming the 2018 "Strong" campaign as an example). The campaigns are about the advantages of the FPM, and none are about the benefits the people would get.

The FPM agreement with Hezbollah highly impacted their campaigns. In 2009 and 2018, the campaigns partially aimed to justify the long-standing relationship with Hezbollah. The messages of unity were basically messages of reassurance to the Christian community to ensure their continuity and reinforce the power of the Maronite presidency. Despite its internal, regional and international implications, they used positioning coating to justify the party and its founder's decision to maintain strategic alliances with Hezbollah.

The FPM commonly used favoritism and preferential treatment with explicit and implicit sectarian statements that were most obvious in their 2009 election campaign. Although there was an effort to dilute these allusions

in their 2018 ads, a deep dive into their communication strategy still reflects similar connotations of affective sectarian discourse. A phenomenon that was shut down in 2022 with their mass statements silenced.

From 2005 to 2018, the Free Patriotic Movement shifted from a heroic authoritative political brand (2005), to a less formal and more entertaining one, built around the insights of the others and covering retaliation messages (2009), all the way to becoming a mere generic brand with a passive tone of voice (2018), and finally the FPM resorted to putting its communication legacy to rest while shying away from the competition and resorting to alternative means to secure votes.

As for their own interests, Lebanese political heads are willing to traverse red lines and deviate their rhetoric as they deem fit to stay politically relevant and financially wealthy. This is in no way a new trend but one that should remind voters of their irrelevancy to the political elite who make choices that contradict their avowed narratives, leaving their supporters at best perplexed and at worst mimicking the new script.

The toned-down FPM communication trend can be directly correlated with the party's political journey. The FPM was forced into multiple compromises throughout the 2005-2022 period which mainly led to the election of General Michel Aoun as President of the republic (October 2016 – 2022), and partially contributed in deteriorating the socio-economic situation as well as the country's regional and international relations. Starting with Aoun's alliance with March 8 forces, to the MoU with Hezbollah, translating into full support of Hezbollah armed forces and presence internally and externally, up to the Maarab agreement with the Lebanese Forces, followed by many controversial appearances and decisions taken within Aoun's ruling period; all these encounters and more may be perceived as the reason behind the shift towards shy presence, tamed voice and language. The FPM hence lost the pulse and fierceness for which it was highly regarded in Lebanon's 1987–2009 history. Their opponents heavily highlighted the movement's failed achievements that further plunged Lebanon into economic mud in their electoral campaigns and discourse.

To conclude, the political language of the FPM has evolved and changed throughout the various rounds of elections based on the changing political dynamics locally and regionally, leading to the Free Patriotic Movement toning down their rhetoric. The country's politics are continuously conceived as more community-based than nation-based, with enhanced confessional divisions that encourage sectarian particularism and radicalization.

With the failed state of institutions at the verge of total bankruptcy of its political formula, the bottoming out of its economy, and profound social disintegration, President Aoun's term came to end a couple of months following the 2022 silenced parliamentary election campaign, ending

with it the dreams of many citizens and party followers who hoped for a heroic rule. The country plunged back into another era of Presidential void and history repeating itself, arousing confessional and sectarian struggle inside and outside the parliament.

Interviews

Private Interviews

- S. Saab, private interview, January 8, 2020
- G. Najem, private interview, January 3, 2020
- R. Haber, private interview, January 3, 2020
- F. Souaid, private interview, January 10, 2020

Archives

Ipsos, Statex – Lebanon Outdoor (2005 – 2022) Category: Political Parties

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