

Movie Script Lebanon:

“Lebanese waste crisis – Did the #YouStink movement overcome sectarian borders?”

by Nele Balgo, Miriam Siemon, Katharina Wischmeyer, Fatima Al-Mahmoud, Gasia Trtrian, September 2017

Summer 2015, where Lebanese people should cover themselves with sunscreen and enjoy the beach season, they cover their faces with mouthpieces. Streets and sidewalks have been filled with trash overnight as the Lebanese garbage crisis escalates with the closing of the garbage dump.

Due to the closing of Naame landfill, the rubbish wasn't collected anymore. That time, Lebanon do not had a functional government for more than one year. Thus, political leaders had no plan to find a quick solution.

Protests spring up across Beirut. Initially gathering tens, hundreds, and finally 100.000 people demonstrated peacefully against the inactivity of political leaders. Instead of searching for solutions to end the crisis, leaders give out orders to beat the peaceful protesters with batons, gas and spray them with water cannons.

Interview with Wadih Al-Asmar (Organizer of the Protests, Lebanese Center for Human Rights)

“We were following the garbage trucks that were dumping the garbage in the rally, everywhere in the country and were following some key ministers and some of our colleagues threw some garbage on the house of the minister or on the cars of some ministers to explain to them that it's not acceptable to make all Beirut and all Lebanon a big landfill.”

Lebanon is a multi-confessional republic and organized along sectarian lines. All official authorities are allocated by sectarian quota. These sectarian groups are also reflected in the media system.

Interview with Dr. Sarah El-Richani (Centre for Lebanese Studies Fellow, University of Oxford):

“The political link between media and political stakeholders is very strong, it remains so. It fluctuates sometimes, but because of the intense political battle, we see that in times of crisis even the most liberal and most commercialized media institutions sometimes have to give into political pressure and serve these political elite.”

When the protests started in 2015 all Lebanese media, regardless of their sectarian affiliation covered on the waste crisis in a critical way.

Dr. Sarah El-Richani (Centre for Lebanese Studies Fellow, University of Oxford):

“It got a lot of intention and a lot of support from across the broad, because that was a crisis that touched every Lebanese. And the media actually rallied around the course. But as the protest continued and grew larger and more powerful and then there was a fear also from government and also people realized that the garbage crisis is intrinsically connected to the political system and the corruption that exists on the political system and you cannot treat the garbage crisis without touching upon the corruption that exists on the level of the country. The rhetoric became more politicized and the media had to in the end even the media that were really supporting the two most commercialized stations, they were really supporting this movement and in the end had to take a step back and bow down to the political pressures, because in fact all the media are in a certain extent be holden to the political sectarian elite.”

Besides the traditional mass media, the power of social media increased. Under the hashtag #YouStink people organized the protests and vent their anger.

Interview with Dr. Claudia Kozman (Visiting Assistant Professor, Lebanese American University):

“From a social media point of view it was what brought people somehow together. I would also say that the hashtag that they used and the name of the movement, which is YouStink was so powerful, because it has to do with the garbage that it was stinking, the whole city, the whole country was stinking, but also it says something about the politicians, people were telling politicians ‘youstink’. And I would say, one of the few times that the government and politicians were somehow affected by this.”

Because the waste crisis affected people of all ages and backgrounds, the YouStink movement offered a chance to bring people together and overcome sectarian borders for a while.

Interview with Dr. Sarah El-Richani (Centre for Lebanese Studies Fellow, University of Oxford):

“Everybody went to these protests in the beginning. But then again, once you move beyond the garbage crisis, because the garbage crisis is symbolic of the crisis that exists on the level of the country – mainly corruption and nepotism and all that. There were some sensitivities that started to emerge. So initially yes, there was support from across the board, but once they started pointing fingers, that actually the whole political sectarian elite are responsible, there were some sensibilities that came out and people were reluctant to support it, because ‘ok, you are attacking my leader and not attacking the other leader, and when you attack all the leaders, you also mean, you know X, Y and Z’.”

Interview with Dr. Claudia Kozman (Visiting Assistant Professor, Lebanese American University):

“For me personally, I would say, it’s good. It did bring people together, more sensitized towards a one unified Lebanon. So yes, when they had that one cause, they did go together. But once you go into the details of the whole movement and the cause, I’m pretty sure that the sectarian problems will start to come again, because it again will go down to who’s to blame for what.”

Although the YouStink movement mobilized people of different groups, the people were sensitive with criticism of their own leader. The movement opened a chance to create one Lebanon. Regardless that a lot of people attended the protests and the digital movement, the waste crisis is still an ongoing problem and no long-term solution was found. Instead of opening a landfill that is far away from the city, the garbage is stored at the beach or thrown into the sea.
