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Drinking coffee, talking politics



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On a warm evening on the patio of B.Hive, a cafe in Beirut's Hamra area, people aren't just sitting in small groups or sipping coffee with their earphones in.

Aina De Lapparent Alvarez | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: On a warm evening on the patio of B.Hive, a cafe in Beirut's Hamra area, people aren't just sitting in small groups or sipping coffee with their earphones in.

Instead, they are listening to Alain Bifani, the director-general of the Finance Ministry, who speaks for an hour about his ministry before taking questions from the audience.

The event is part of an initiative called Coffee & Politics, launched by 29-year-old Tracy Nehme.

Nehme was doing a master's degree in public policy and international affairs at the American University of Beirut when she realized she didn't know much about Lebanese politics and history.

"I'm half French and half Lebanese, and was always more interested in French politics, because I thought Lebanese politics was chaotic," she told The Daily Star.

When she began her quest to learn more, the general advice she received was to join a political party. She wasn't persuaded.

Instead, she turned first to various books and documentaries, and then began striking up informal discussions with friends to dig deeper.

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She started structuring them into scheduled events, organizing monthly talks on a particular topic, and began advertising them online in September.

As more people began attending, she decided to invite speakers to lead the discussions and hold Q&As.

She soon discovered there was a real thirst for platforms to have frank discussions about Lebanese politics.

“Why are we being deprived of politics for our whole lives? It shouldn’t be restricted to political parties and academic conferences,” she said. Now, almost a year after launching the initiative, she feels the responsibility to continue it.

Nehme says the context in which Coffee & Politics happened was key. Coffee shops are ideal venues - informal open spaces that attract diverse crowds. Despite the shortcomings, such as capacity limitations, Nehme is against moving the meetings elsewhere.

“I don’t want to make it more academic. I go to conferences, and I see the audience: professors and some students. Not everyone who’s here today.”

The size of the audience varies based on the topic, location and timing. “It’s an average of 70 people. We’ve also had 20 and 100. Thirty percent of them are regulars. Otherwise, there are always new faces.”

Aside from Bifani, Nehme has also secured Beirut I MP Paula Yacoubian as a speaker. The rest have been mainly professors and experts.

Hosting the Finance Ministry official presented a new set of challenges, and marked a shift in the open atmosphere Nehme has been cultivating. Everything was “off the record” and some topics were off-limits altogether.

After Bifani wrapped up his Q&A, several attendees lingered, trying to slip in a few extra questions.

One participant, Claude Jabr, shared his enthusiasm about the initiative, but with some reservations. “It was nice, but he didn’t talk about politics, he kept his talk very technocratic. But it’s interesting to have a debate,” he told The Daily Star.

Regardless of the topic, Nehme prepares for each session by having a conversation with the speaker to ensure that the subject matter won’t be offensive to anyone, and then acts as a moderator once the talk kicks off.

When it comes to discussing particularly sensitive topics, such as the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90), Nehme approaches the session delicately. “I am very careful, because I know we are in a country where you can’t say anything [you want] and get away with it, and I’m responsible for what is being said at the sessions.”

As for the future of Coffee & Politics, Nehme says she’s in it for the long term.

“I’m not thinking of a year or two. I’m thinking of 10 years. There are lots of ways this could grow. ... We could go to schools, teach children. We know there’s little teaching of history. We don’t teach anything about the war.”

The 1989 Taif Accord, which put an end to the Civil War, stipulated that the country standardize its modern history textbooks and civics curricula. Yet three decades later, the state still gives schools the freedom to choose their own history books, as decision-makers



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representing Lebanon’s various communities have been unable to agree on a single narrative.

Another obvious way to expand the initiative would be to bring it to other locations in Lebanon besides Beirut. Nehme has already organized a session in Tripoli, and has inspired a young Lebanese student from the northern coastal city to start organizing similar events there.

Lynn Ayoub, 19, moved to Beirut from Tripoli last September to study law at the Lebanese University. After finding her way to a Coffee & Politics meeting, she began attending the events often.

“I loved how encouraging people were, the hope they had, the questions. The questions were even more interesting than the topic itself. It inspires me,” she told The Daily Star after attending the event with Bifani.

Soon, the idea to create Let’s Talk Politics in Tripoli was born.

Though 10 years apart in age, Nehme and Ayoub share the conviction that politics should be discussed away from partisan spaces.

Let’s Talk Politics held its first event in early May. At Warche 13, a cafe in Tripoli, 40 people gathered for a discussion on the topic of secularism, led by Joumana Haddad, an activist who ran unsuccessfully in the 2018 parliamentary elections with the Tahalof Watani coalition of civil society groups. The response to the first event has been overwhelmingly positive, Ayoub said, with many people coming to the organizing team to ask how they could contribute to future sessions.

All of this has encouraged Ayoub and her team to follow through with their plans to continue organizing monthly discussions. “We’re trying to break this culture of people following their parents’ ideology, so people get exposed to all points of view and can decide for themselves what ... they stand for.”

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on July 01, 2019, on page 3.

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