

The Communication Strategies Employed by the Lebanese Forces During Their 2018-2022 Election Campaigns: An Analysis of Violence-Infused Discourse

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Abstract

Lebanon has faced violence and political instability since the Lebanese Civil War, resulting in challenges related to social unrest and outbreaks of violence (O'ballance, 1998). Political parties frequently adopted the color red in their visual identity to symbolize unity and determination. However, the color red is also associated with political violence and bloodshed in Lebanon's history. This article investigates the communication strategies used by the Lebanese Forces during their 2018-2022 election campaigns, analyzing the use of violence-infused elements in their outdoor billboard advertising and exploring whether they seek to evoke war and fear memory structures to secure their legitimacy.

Keywords: Political advertising, media analysis, Lebanon.

The study of collective memory has gained attention in social science since the late 1980s, when Maurice Halbwachs' classic work, "La mémoire collective", was translated into English, and Pierre Nora's "Lieux de mémoire" was published. Despite the fertile ground that the conflict-ridden modern history of the Middle East provides for memory studies, valuable work in this area has been slow to emerge in Middle Eastern studies. One of the most interesting cases in point is the memory of the civil war in Lebanon (1975–90). While there is a general consensus on the start date of the war, establishing the end date is more difficult. The disarmament of militias, the stabilization of the economy, and the restoration of state institutions took years to achieve, leaving many Lebanese feeling as though they were still living in a state of war (Haugbolle, 2005). Thus, the Lebanese experienced several years of collective shell shock.

The Lebanese Civil War was a complex and multifaceted conflict that involved numerous factions vying for control over the country. One of the most prominent faction was the Lebanese Forces, a Christian political and paramilitary organization that played a significant role in the war. The Lebanese Forces (LF) was founded in 1976 as an umbrella group for various Christian militias and political parties, with the aim of protecting Christian communities and promoting their interests in the midst of the conflict. Over the course of the war, the LF engaged in a wide range of activities, including military operations, political negotiations, and social services provision, making it a highly influential and controversial actor in the conflict.

In the aftermath of the Former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri assassination in 2005, Lebanon experienced a political transition that included significant changes in the political landscape, such as the release of Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, from prison on 18 July 2005, under a general amnesty bill. With his release, Geagea resumed his political career and retook the leadership of the Lebanese Forces party. Against this backdrop, our research seeks to explore the election campaign strategies employed by the LF under Geagea's leadership; How did the Lebanese Forces employ communication strategies and the color red in their election campaigns of 2018-2022, and to what extent do these strategies draw on Lebanon's violent history?

Despite early efforts to focus on political and economic recovery, ethical issues were given second priority, and the confessional system that stipulates equitable representation of Lebanon's sects in public employment and government remained intact (Haugbolle, 2005). This was reflected in the political and election campaigns targeting the dazed Lebanese population (S. Saab, private interview, January 08, 2020).

In this article, we examine the use of visual stimuli in the political and election campaigns of the LF. The methodology employed involves a semiotic analysis of election ads published on outdoor panels in the streets of Lebanon. I primarily relied on the Ipsos Statex ad views module to gather data, supported by desktop research and images retrieved from advertising blogs.

The analysis itself involved a close examination of both the visual and textual elements of the ads, with a particular focus on the use of semiotic codes and conventions. By exploring the ways in which these codes and conventions are employed in the ads, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how the Lebanese Forces presented itself and its message to potential voters. This methodology allowed us to uncover the various strategies and tactics employed, shedding light on the role of Christian history representation and the red-color domination in these campaigns as well as providing new insights into the broader dynamics of political advertising in Lebanon.

The study of the Lebanese Forces' election campaigns offers numerous potential contributions to the field of political science. Overall, this study advances our comprehension of the election campaigns of Christian parties that emerged from the Civil War era in Lebanon. The thorough examination sheds light on the representation of Christianity in election advertising, offering insights into the factors that may influence voters' decision-making in Lebanon.

Furthermore, it offers fresh insights into the role of collective memories and identities in political campaigns, including violent memory structures providing a more comprehensive understanding of this crucial aspect of political communication. This nuanced analysis can aid political parties in Lebanon in better understanding their opponents, target audience, and developing more effective campaign strategies.

Despite the LF's history as a Christian militia, its 2018-2022 election campaigns disregarded the party's traditional dark green uniform and gear and instead featured the color red. This choice carries multiple connotations for both LF followers and non-followers, given the party's history of civil war and the ongoing political tensions in the country. The meaning and symbolism of the color red used by the LF vary widely depending on the cultural and historical contexts and are interpreted differently by different people and sects.

In the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War, the Lebanese Forces (LF) political party adopted the color red as a symbol of their brand. This color represents the sacrifice, bloodshed, danger, and power that characterized the militia's activities during the conflict.

The Lebanese Forces logo incorporates the color red with different significations (see figure 1). The logo features a white background with a green cedar tree at the center, which is the same cedar as depicted on the national flag. Surrounding the cedar is a red circle, which is significant for its representation of sacrifice and perfection in defending the heritage and perceived continuity of the Christian community. The color red is also seen as a symbol of power, strength, and determination. In the ideology of the Lebanese Forces, the "red line" is a metaphor for their boundary that should not be crossed. This boundary is associated with negative and bloody consequences, which can result in military actions being taken. As such, the cedar tree in the logo represents the Christian community and dismisses others, including those belonging to their allies.



Figure 1: The Lebanese Forces logo

In summary, the color red is included in the LF logo as a symbol of sacrifice, passion, and commitment to the Christian cause. However, the use of red can also have negative connotations, especially in the context of war and conflict, where it is associated with violence. Despite this, the color is often associated with passion, energy, and strength, which may be part of the reason why the LF has chosen to use it as a symbol. Overall, the use of "red" in Lebanese symbolism is complex and can convey various meanings depending on the context and the audience.

The upcoming section of this article will explore the use of the color red in the Lebanese Forces' campaigns from 2018 to 2022.

1. The Lebanese Forces Takeover of the Red Background in 2018.

According to Haber's (2020) private interview, the LF dominates key outdoor locations in major areas in 2018, to promote a national election campaign with an aggressive outdoor strategy. The party's aim was to project a strong media presence and reinforce its political power through strategically placed panels and wall signs in prominent areas. This could have a psychological impact on the audience, strengthening the party's perceived *forte*.

The campaign was distinctive in its use of a red color background and white typography. The semiotic significations of these elements are important to consider. Apart from the discussed color connotations, red is a bold, attention-grabbing color that is often associated with passion, strength, and power. It is also commonly linked with the political right. For the LF, the use of red may have been a deliberate choice to convey a message of strength, authority, and dominance. White typography, on the other hand, is viewed as representing purity, clarity, and simplicity. It is a neutral color that can complement and enhance other colors.

In the context of Lebanon's identity, the LF campaign visuals can be seen as highlighting the Lebanese national flag's horizontal red stripes, with a reference to their 2009 slogan "our national colors will not change".

The goal of the 2018 campaign was to promote a unique selling proposition (USP) that would appeal to different audiences while adhering to a shared vision. The USP, known as "Sar Badda" in Arabic (Figure 11), aimed to challenge the existing authority. It also attacked President Michel Aoun's ruling and the authority that was shared with Hezbollah during that time (Haber, private interview, 2020). The LF used a short, two-word sentence as a teaser message, which was not signed by the party. Unlike their 2009 campaign that featured a white background, the party opted for a red background with multiple connotations. The color red is associated with the party's history of martyrdom and bloodshed in their efforts to establish Lebanon as a Christian country within the Middle East region. Additionally, the color signifies the party's unwavering beliefs and positions, distinguishing them from their competitors, including the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). Red also serves as a dramatic symbol of alertness, danger, and a call to action. Its stop sign connotation aligns with the campaign's message of change, which is necessary to counter the agendas of Hezbollah and Iran in Lebanon. Furthermore, red stimulates various effects, provoking reactions, stimulating action, and conveying negative emotions of danger and aggressiveness. Red is also an emotional color that indicates dominance. The campaign's typography is introduced in white, the purest color that symbolizes new beginnings and brings clarity to problem-solving. It offers mental organization and balance, which is much needed in the unsettled country of Lebanon.



Figure 2: The Lebanese Forces election campaign (2018), "It's time", Source: Ipsos, Statex 2018

The LF strategically utilized the color red to assert ownership and dominance over it. During the campaign launch rally, the party positioned itself as the only remaining protector of the March 14, 2005 protests that led to the end of the Syrian occupation. This move is consistent with the deteriorating relationship between the Future Movement (FM) and their longtime ally, the LF. The FM faced numerous challenges from both internal and external sources, prompting the LF to position itself as a more reliable ally and advocate for the cause of Lebanese independence.

As part of their campaign, the LF released a statement message (Figure 12) that read, "It is time to return to the state rather than the statelet," referring to Hezbollah's "statelet" project. The visual featured the LF logo and website URL, while keeping the campaign's visual identity intact with a red background and white typography. The slogan "It's time" remained in a prominent

position, with the clarification message "To have a Lebanese State rather than a statelet", and the logo and URL in the bottom center. This slogan positioned the party as an opposing force to projects that threaten Lebanon's sovereignty as a state, particularly Hezbollah's. The LF presented itself as a reformative force, free from corruption that is deteriorating the state's body and weakening patriotism. Corruption has caused a significant divide between the people and the state, driving citizens to focus on their own interests. The message reinforces the LF's commitment to a truly Lebanese path of resistance, aimed at preventing history from repeating itself.



Figure 3: The Lebanese Forces election campaign (2018), "It is time to return to the state rather than the statelet project", Source: Ipsos, Statex 2018

The LF used various messages in its billboard campaign, while keeping a consistent artistic approach and visual identity. The messages covered numerous ethical and moral paths that are essential to safeguarding the country's essence and mission. The campaign aimed to move away from corruption and the "cheese-eaters" policy, and to reconnect politics with ethics. Lebanon is greatly affected by regional and international disputes, resulting in sharp political discord that affects constitutional institutions. The LF's 2018 political discourse stressed their belief in change and development based on the party's spirit and resistance values.



Figure 4: The LF campaign (2018), "It is time for integrity not corruption"; "It is time to return to the state rather than the farm (with no rules)"; "It is time for accountability, not favoritism"; "It is time for investments, not deals"; "It is time for competence, not mediation"; "It is time for sovereignty, not dependency"; "It is time for justice, not injustice"; "It is time for partnership, not quotas"; "It is time for accountability, not immunity"; "It is time for transparency, not ambiguity"; Source: Ipsos, Statex 2018

The LF emphasizes the importance of respecting rules and coexisting in unity, as exemplified in one of their slogans: "It is time to return to the state rather than the farm (with no rules)." This slogan urges the Lebanese people to prioritize rebuilding and strengthening the country's central government over sectarian interests. The LF uses the term "farm" metaphorically

to criticize Hezbollah. The LF considers Hezbollah a dominant player in "farm life" because it operates independently outside the laws and regulations of the central government.

Furthermore, the LF's slogan is also likely a criticism of the government's failure to provide security and a call for a more inclusive political approach. Without inclusion and the rule of law, harmonious living cannot be achieved. State sovereignty is at the heart of the LF's national beliefs.

In brief, the LF campaign can be open to multiple interpretations. It serves as an attack on the FPM, the party that failed to deliver on its promises of change and reform, including the promise of 24/7 electricity. In contrast, the LF claims that it promises and delivers on its commitments, making it the trustworthy choice for voters. The campaign suggests that the LF is capable of making and fulfilling promises, unlike its competitors, and that it has the weight, strength, and persistent political team to achieve its goals. The campaign emphasizes the importance of not wasting votes on parties that cannot deliver on their promises and cannot address the concerns of the people or the country's national aspirations. The campaign highlights three scenarios for making promises: failure to keep them, failure due to internal or external factors, and successful delivery of promises, which is embodied by the LF.

The party's call to action for the masses to vote for the LF is conveyed through an advertisement with the "It's time for your vote" typeface, featuring a stamp-styled message to "Vote Lebanese Forces" with their logo at the bottom center. This call to action is based on the party's self-perceived well-established history and founding principles of culture, partnership, and impartiality, based on the Lebanese Forces website.¹ The LF portrays their vote as much-needed in light of the overall dramatic situation in the country, with Hezbollah's "statelet" taking over, corruption, favoritism, and injustice at their highest.



Figure 5: The Lebanese Forces election campaign (2018), "It is time for you to vote. Vote Lebanese Forces", Source: Ipsos, Statex 2018

Saab remarks that the LF campaign was not confrontational but rather neat and correct in its messaging, aiming to build a structured country without the influence of Hezbollah (Saab, private interview, 2020). The message is not exclusive to Christians, but appeals to a broader audience of Shi'as and Sunnis who oppose Hezbollah. However, the LF has limited reach in southern Beirut and lacks a presence in Sunni areas due to their past history and inability to change the beliefs of those audiences (Haber, private interview, 2020).

The Lebanese Forces campaign is characterized by messaging that promotes the fight against corruption, accountability, upholding the constitution, and building state institutions. However, the campaign also utilizes violence-infused messaging by advocating for the disarmament of Hezbollah. The LF seeks to recruit followers and establish local relevance by fighting against the illegitimate weapons of Hezbollah. The campaign focuses on short-term gain and delivers clear and correct statements that question the legitimacy of Hezbollah's weapons in Lebanon. The campaign challenges the taboo of Hezbollah and boldly asks why Hezbollah. The LF thus positions itself as the opposition party, frequently criticizing its political adversaries and

¹ <https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2018/05/03/daily-report-elio-constantine-03052018/>

instigating fear of its rivals (Atallah & El-Kak, 2020).² The campaign relies on widespread anger to win votes, presenting the LF as the main faction willing to contest Hezbollah in the power-sharing government. This messaging is an introduction to the revolution of change, according to Haber, signaling a desire for a shift away from the status quo (Haber, private interview, 2020).

2. Reinforcing Consistency in the Adoption of Red Color in 2022 as the Country's Situation Aggravates.

The 2018 issues persisted and worsened. With the prevailing lack of progress and improvement in 2022, the LF election campaign remained consistent with its previous approach and messaging. The party's rhetoric and strategy remained steadfast and fixed in its position against the current status quo, focusing on the dire state of the country, which it largely attributed to the actions of Hezbollah and the FPM. As electoral expert Rabih Hadad pointed out, the LF viewed the situation as a battle against Hezbollah, with the ultimate objective of gaining power through a parliament willing to engage in such a conflict.³

The 2018-2022 socio-political context of Lebanon was marked by political gridlock, economic collapse, and social unrest. In this context, the Lebanese Forces' decision to use the same color background and typography as their 2018 election campaign suggests a deliberate attempt to tap into the nostalgia and positive sentiment associated with that campaign. By reusing these elements, the LF may have been seeking to recreate the success of their previous campaign and capitalize on the goodwill it generated. Additionally, the repetition of these elements may have been seen as a way to reinforce the LF's brand identity and maintain consistency in their messaging, which could be particularly important in a volatile and unpredictable political environment.

In March 2022, the LF launched their teaser visuals, which included two ads that emphasized the distinction between those who are capable but unwilling, and those who are willing but unable (see figure 16). This message was aimed at those who blamed obstacles for their failure to deliver on promises, such as Gibran Bassil – leader of the FPM, who famously said that "if they let us work, the country's shape would be different now."⁴



Figure 6: Lebanese Forces, 2022 Election Campaign Teaser visuals. Source: Blog.tarekchemaly.com

The Lebanese Forces maintained their iconic red background and used it in various statement outdoor visuals. The campaign conveyed aggressive attacks on the LF opponents,

² https://api.lcps-lebanon.org/content/uploads/files//1610524161-lcps_national_reports_discourse_final.pdf

³ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2022/05/15/lebanons-next-parliament-will-be-lebanese-forces-hezbollah-face-off/>

⁴ <https://blog.tarekchemaly.com/2022/03/lebanon-elections-2022-teaser-though.html>

criticizing their political journeys and agendas. For example, in their political discourse, the LF accused Hezbollah of being responsible for the dire situation in the country and claimed that the Future Movement had failed to achieve justice for slain Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. By targeting their opponents in this way, the LF sought to position themselves as the only viable alternative and reinforce their image as a party that is committed to addressing the country's most pressing issues.

Subsequently, the LF released the campaign messaging, which was thinly veiled as a rebuke to its competitors, although it was clearly addressed to its current supporters. One of the billboards read "we can protect the identity," a nod to the nationalist speech of their rival, the FPM. Another read "we can procure light to the country," a direct response to Gerban Bassil, the former Minister of Energy and head of the FPM, who was criticized for failing to bring electricity to the country during his long tenure.⁵ The LF claimed to be able to achieve justice, a response to the FM, which has long campaigned on the idea of justice for Rafik Hariri. Additionally, the LF promised to build for the youth, which was a counter to Hezbollah and their 2018 campaign, "we build and protect."



Figure 7: Lebanese Forces, 2022 Election Campaign Reveal/launch visuals. Source: Blog.tarekchemaly.com

The Lebanese Forces' use of red as their dominant color in their 2022 election campaign, along with their aggressive attacks on their opponents, can be interpreted through the semiotic analysis as an attempt to entice anger and resentment from the electorate towards other political parties. As mentioned earlier, red is often associated with power, strength, and passion, but it can also be associated with violence and anger. By using this background color and combining it with aggressive messaging, the LF is likely attempting to appeal to voters' emotions and encourage them to vote out of frustration and anger towards other political parties.

The aggressive attacks on opponents also play into this strategy. By criticizing their opponents and highlighting their failures, the LF is attempting to position themselves as the only viable alternative and tap into voters' current sense of dissatisfaction. This approach can be seen as an attempt to push voters to vote favorably for the LF, as the party seeks to establish itself as the best option for those looking for a change in Lebanon's political direction.

⁵ <https://blog.tarekchemaly.com/2022/03/elections-2022-lebanese-forces-reveal.html>

The LF and its Executive Chairman Samir Geagea primarily blame Hezbollah, with its autonomous military status, for the country's problems and believes that the group is motivated by an ideological commitment to enforcing Iran's regional ambitions.⁶ Both parties have diametrically opposed perspectives on regional and domestic politics. Geagea warns of a "major confrontation" ahead while highlighting the need for a united front to achieve country stability and peace.

Overall, the use of red and aggressive messaging can be seen as an attempt to tap into the emotions of the electorate and position the LF as the best option for those looking for a change in Lebanon's political landscape. However, the campaign faced opposition from civil organizations similar to Khat Ahmar. This group emerged from the October 17, 2019 movements and aims to start afresh with a motto of "kellon ya3ne kellon" (all of them means all of them). Khat Ahmar launched an attack on the two main Christian factions, the FPM and the LF. Their ads criticized these factions for their alliances with corrupt politicians and their family ties. Their spoof campaign served as a reminder of the complexity of the political landscape in Lebanon.⁷

Despite encountering occasional setbacks and enduring ridicule, the LF persisted with their "we can" messaging. Even after only winning 21 seats, including allies, in the post-elections, they continued their campaign. Eventually, they conceded and expressed gratitude, proclaiming "we cannot but say thank you." The Lebanese Forces showcased resilience and adaptability in adjusting their messaging while maintaining the consistency of their visual identity and stimuli.



Figure 8: Lebanese Forces, 2022 Election Campaign – Thank you visual. Source: Blog.tarekchemaly.com

Conclusion

The Lebanese Forces (LF), a right-wing Christian party that has its roots in the civil war era, employed a careful strategy in their 2018-2022 campaign rhetoric, choosing to avoid explicit references to their controversial militia history and the negative connotations associated with it in the context of the civil war. Despite this, they still prominently featured the color red in their visual identity and maintained a message of strength, power, capability, and determination.

By steering clear of direct references to their past involvement in militia activities, the LF attempted to distance themselves from the violent history and bloodshed, while still maintaining a strong and powerful image. The strategic use of the color red, which has strong associations with political violence, conveyed a sense of determination and solidarity with their supporters.

In summary, the LF strategically avoided explicit references to their violent militia history in their campaign rhetoric and instead relied on a message of strength and power conveyed through the prominent use of the color red in their visual identity. This approach aimed to appeal to those who viewed the party as protectors during the civil war era while avoiding alienating other segments of the electorate. The LF thus aimed to rebrand itself as a national movement capable of reaching out to all Lebanese, not only its traditional sect.⁸ By emphasizing their ability to take

⁶ <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87756>

⁷ <https://blog.tarekchemaly.com/2022/03/lebanon-elections-2022-khatt-ahmar-goes.html>

⁸ <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87756>

action and get things done, the LF aimed to position themselves as a viable political force capable of leading Lebanon into a more stable and prosperous future.

Overall, the Lebanese Forces' campaign rhetoric was a delicate balancing act between distancing themselves from their controversial past while still projecting an image of strength and determination. However, this strategy raises concerns about the perpetuation of negative memories and emotions in Lebanese politics, hindering the country's ability to move towards national unity and addressing critical issues. A shift towards promoting unity and addressing critical issues is essential for Lebanon to move forward.

In conclusion, Lebanon remains confronted with significant political and economic challenges, and the potential for instability and violence persists. The LF approach raises questions about the party's reliance on collective memories, fear, and worry to garner and maintain political support. The perpetuation of such negative memories and emotions may hinder the country's ability to move forward and tackle its national issues. Therefore, it is crucial for Lebanese politics to shift its focus from fear-mongering and divisive tactics towards addressing the country's critical issues and promoting national unity. Only then can Lebanon move towards a more prosperous and stable future for all its citizens.

Interviews

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