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## Enough is enough

*The "Khalass!" campaign shyly underlines dialogue.*

*Hanin Ghaddar, NOW Staff*



In the immediate aftermath of the August by-elections in Beirut and the Metn, the latest major Lebanese civil society campaign, called "Khalass!" ("Enough!" in Arabic) was born. Three months on, participants and organizers are still actively working on the campaign's original objective - to collect one million signatures for their petition, "Enough, and together for Salvation," which calls for an end to the political deadlock in Lebanon.

However, as the constitutional deadline for the presidential elections nears, the campaigners have begun reformulating their goals to look past the current political deadlock. Over the past few months, the initiative, which involves the participation of 120 Lebanese NGOs along with civil society leaders Ziad Baroud and Kamel Mouhanna (the two men selected to represent Lebanese civil society at the Saint-Cloud talks in France last July), the campaign is timidly starting to take the shape of a movement.

Amid the political upheavals of the past few years, Lebanon has seen a number of civil society campaigns emerge, which have enjoyed varying levels of success. Khalass may have the potential to go farther than any of them - but can it overcome its own fears and limitations to emerge as a leader?

### *Get up and go*

Initially, the campaign started off with the primary objective of "emphasiz[ing] the role civil society can play to protect Lebanon from division, to raise awareness against the danger ahead of all citizens and to pressure the politicians in order to find a solution to the current situation," according to the Khalass [website](#).

From the outset, Khalass has enjoyed support from many high-profile civil society members, on both the individual and organizational levels. The campaign is effectively a coalition of NGOs, unions, economic and educational organizations and media representatives. The campaign's website says its goal is "to emphasize the gravity of the current political crisis in Lebanon and to exert pressure on the leaders of political ends in order to overcome today's deadlock."

The Lebanese people have repeatedly expressed their wish to find a peaceful resolution to the current deadlock, through dialogue and through other civil society initiatives such as "I Love Life," "Ouaa" ("Watch out"), and "Resolve it, Solve it." But while many past campaigns have focused on awareness-raising among the population at

large, Khalass has directed its explicitly anti-sectarian message at the political class.

The Khalass petition asks Lebanese politicians to remain accountable only to the Lebanese people. A straightforward goal, but a highly ambitious one as well. According to activists involved in the campaign, drawing politicians in a "civil" initiative will require building - and maintaining - key long-term strategies.

Speaking to NOW Lebanon, Kamel Mouhanna highlighted some of the trials ahead. "The challenge is how to overcome the culture of sectarian division in Lebanon today, which is growing stronger with the current crisis," he noted.

Mouhanna's main concern is to get civil society organizations to work together outside the sectarian lines drawn by politicians and rival parties. "We could disagree on many issues, but people should be aware that the real disparity now is over shares among politicians and leaders, where the people are left out," he added.

Mouhanna, along with other activists in the campaign, believes that a detailed strategy is needed in order to build strong institutions and move from a sectarian to a civil society. "We need to make politicians more committed to our goals. It might take a very long time to get there, but through proper mechanisms and a well-thought strategy, our goals can be achieved," he said.

### *Stumbling blocks*

Although the campaign initially aimed to collect a million signatures, Mouhanna said that it has so far only gathered 300,000. Special events have been organized to collect signatures, such as a concert and trips to the various governorates. However, the campaign's visibility is still low, as it has not been very successful in gaining media coverage or in displaying itself during political events.

Mouvement Social, an NGO participating in Khalass, has been working on collecting signatures for the petition. Rana al-Hajj, a representative from the organization, told NOW Lebanon that people always tend to ask them about "who is behind" the campaign. "The culture of civil action is still absent in our society, and people wouldn't believe at the beginning that we were independent organizations," she said.

"However, when the media started talking about us, things got easier, and people responded more positively," Hajj added.

Unfortunately, fear of politicization may end up keeping Khalass from its goals. The participating NGOs have not been present at any political demonstrations, nor have they spoken out against recent assassinations and other acts of terror. Many fear being labeled either March 14 or March 8, and thus choose to hide behind general lines. While there is certainly much to be said for preserving independent credibility, this Lebanese version of political correctness is often taken to extremes. This overly-cautious attitude prevents many NGOs from approaching the real issues at hand. In a country where civil society interests are inextricably tied to the broader situation, by limiting themselves to explicitly apolitical positions, NGOs fall short of engaging decision makers and public figures.

Speaking to NOW Lebanon, Nicole Fayyad, a representative of the O5AMAM group, which participates in Khalass, said that the main obstacle facing the Khalass initiative is political division in the country. "Lobbying for a civil initiative can be very difficult, because people do not believe that civil society could actually achieve something on the political level," she said.

However, Fayyad believes that such movements are nonetheless necessary for Lebanon under the current circumstances. "Differences are normal and can be discussed in a constructive way, and this is what we are trying to tell both the Lebanese and the politicians, so that they realize that we all need to live together in this country."

According to participants, the Khalass campaign needs to reach beyond the deadlock, even though it has not been as successful as people originally hoped. Many believe the initiative still has tremendous potential. "For the first time, I saw a large number of NGOs working together toward the same purpose," Fayyad said.

### *Sustainability*

But while the breadth of Khalass' membership may be its greatest strength, it can also be a weakness without strong direction. With their own independent objectives and projects to worry about as well, NGOs participating in the Khalass campaign cannot always give it the full attention and time it needs to keep up momentum. Also, the fragmentation of Lebanese civil society organizations and their competition over funding could be a roadblock to

sustaining the campaign and transforming it into a social movement with broader objectives.

In addition, Khalass will need to work harder to differentiate itself from the numerous other campaigns established since 2006, and raise its profile in general. With an all-star cast of participants and supporters, there is no excuse for the initiative not already being a household name.

And perhaps most importantly, if Khalass is going to contribute to finding a solution to the current political crisis, it will have to risk earning a political reputation and take strong positions on major issues relevant to the cause. This does not mean political partisanship: After all, with such a diverse composition and encompassing mandate, Khalass would find itself both internally and externally compromised if it picked a side in the larger fight. However, it cannot let itself get scared off individual issues with clear moral imperatives, such as condemning political assassinations. Its influence on the national discussion will be immeasurably greater if the campaign is actually participating in it, and it is on the thorny political issues that neutral, independent, civil society voices are most desperately needed. As long as civil society lets their actions be dictated by their fears, politics will stay firmly in the hands of the politicians.

The deadlock has already paralyzed almost every sector of the country, and state institutions were exhausted long ago. Today, Khalass is asking politicians to come to the initiative, rather than going to them. But until civil society is ready to forcibly inject itself into the political scene, real change is unlikely to be effected, by Khalass or anyone else.

If Khalass wants to be a leader, it will have to actually lead.