



Colour Zeal

By Stephanie Tournear

What do the Bloods and the Crips have to do with Lebanon? It's all about the colour... >



With early images of tanktop-clad, flag-waving cute girls, face paint, and flags aplenty, it was clear that no matter what twists and turns politics in Lebanon took following the “Cedar Revolution”, image would be everything.

The only safe colours left are black, brown, and purple. Wearing anything else implies an allegiance to one of the many new and weathered political parties, and depending where you roam, can brand you as a friend or an enemy. The colour-coded conflict has reached epic proportions lately, with even white – the absence of all colour – being appropriated by a new party. Usually fashionable Beirutis are having to think twice before stepping out of their homes.

The phenomenon of political leaders using visuals to market themselves to consumers is rooted in the aftermath of the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Emotions ran fever pitch, resulting in two blocs known as March 8 and March 14. March 8, led by Hezbollah, was a demonstration in support of Syria after the country’s government was accused of being involved in his death. This demonstration so infuriated the followers of Hariri and anti-Syrian groups that they took to the streets six days later in protest on March 14.

Soon after, March 14 leaders commissioned a PR firm to give this new revolution against Syria a logo. The “Independence 05” campaign was born, and with it a commercialised venture using flags, pendants, t-shirts and other trinkets. The country was awash in red, white and green as flag sales took off.

It was during this time that General Michel Aoun returned to Lebanon from his exile in France to reclaim his position in the political sphere. In deciding on a logo and image, Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) took orange to signify revolution, as it was used in the Ukrainian “Orange Revolution” according to Lina Khatib, a media researcher and analyst. The FPM said the checkmark symbol was also incorporated for its diverse meanings from a positive sign to the “V” for victory.

Other parties already had their colors and logos in place since their 1970s and 80s beginnings. According to Khatib, Amal’s dark green was chosen for its resonance in the Shi’a community. The Lebanese Forces had their red dagger cross logo. Hezbollah had its signatory yellow and green flag, while the Future Movement, led by Hariri’s son, Saad, adopted light blue from the Hariri-owned television station Future TV.

The Summer 2006 war further accelerated the commercialisation of political upheaval. After the ceasefire was called, Hezbollah hired a PR firm to run its victory campaign, according to Khatib. Billboards, posters, and a massive push for merchandising were employed by the party to wave its victory in the face of Israel. Sales of Hezbollah merchandise skyrocketed and replaced Lebanese

souvenir sales by tourists. One popular downtown Beirut shop reported that the handcrafts and gifts it was once known for no longer sell. The shop’s new mainstay of commerce is now political souvenirs, such as Hezbollah flags, t-shirts and key chains as the gift of choice by both tourists and locals. A makeshift stand, also downtown, selling political paraphernalia earned \$700 for one day of sales on January 23, 2007, the day of the nationwide general strike.

Marketing campaigns initiated by both sides also filtered into local businesses and shops. A display for a men’s clothing store in Hamra includes all signatory colors of the parties; orange, blue, yellow and green were the only coloured ties among the more traditional men’s suits. A children’s clothing shop in Bachoura dressed its mannequins only in opposition colors of orange, yellow and green. It’s a widespread trend that shows no sign of slowing.

Neighbourhoods also display flags and colours identifying the parties with whom they are aligned. In traditionally Sunni Hamra, light blue bows are hung above the streets. Nearby Shi’a neighbourhoods are draped in dark green for Amal as well as yellow and green for Hezbollah. It is easy to discern with whom a neighborhood is affiliated; very few areas – like Sassine Square in East Beirut’s Ashrafieh neighbourhood – are conspicuously devoid of color.

Several new campaigns sprung up recently. The “I Love Life” campaign was launched for March 14 by PR firm Saatchi and Saatchi (the same firm used for Independence 05) to urge unity and a return to normalcy. Their billboards can be found all over Beirut. Some simply read “I Love Life” while others carry messages urging people to combat the widespread slump many people feel.

FPM members have taken the “I Love Life” campaign and added “with colors”, a rainbow consisting of all colours used by the major parties. Further proof of just how far tokenism has gone is in local businesses spinning the campaign for themselves. Carpet company Iwan Maktabi has new billboards that read “I Love Carpets” bearing a logo very similar to that of the “I Love Life” campaign.

While the campaigns and marketing of a revolution may be entertainment fodder for the media, on a personal level the reality is very different, especially for the younger population. On the campus of the American University of Beirut, Amal students were passing out flyers on green paper explaining their stance on a student council issue. One student related how a friend of his, on the day of student elections, wore an orange shirt by mistake. At one point during the afternoon, he had to tape a message on his chest that he was not a member of the FPM because of all of the comments he received. “I’m in graphic

design and we use colour to mean things,” said Nadine Zein. The definition of, and by, colour is inescapable; clothing colours instantly mark someone as a member of a particular party.

“I was wearing a green shirt the other day and my seven-year-old cousin heckled me for Amal. Even little kids associate colours with politics,” AUB student Racha Moussa explains.

“Every colour is ruined because some political party has taken it on... It’s an assault on aesthetics,” said Chris Chamoun. Now even white is taken, students explained, by a movement called March 11, which is seeking a middle ground. “I’m not with any political group so it’s even harder for me. I don’t want to wear any colours,” said Rameen Khatib.

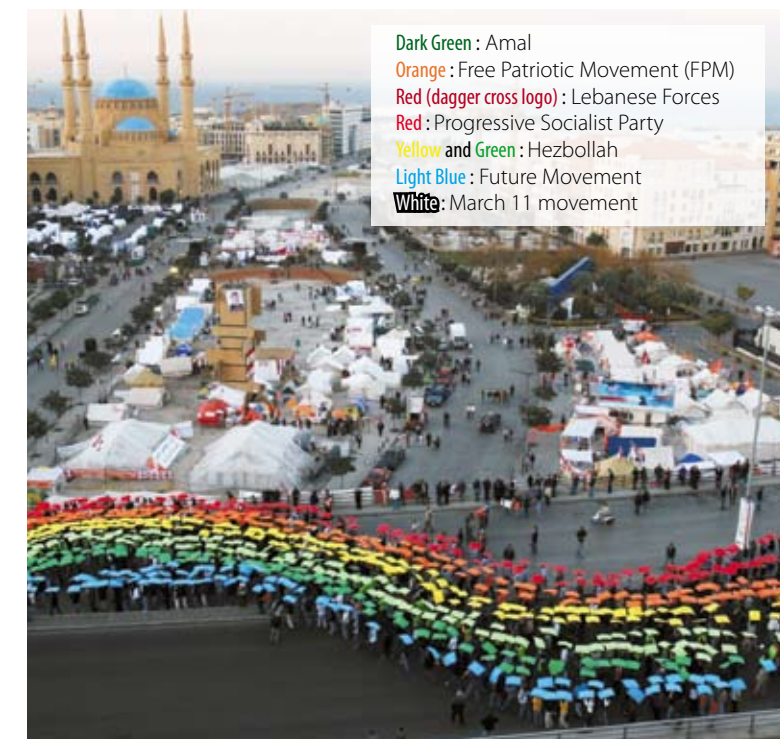
Two Greenpeace volunteers standing on a corner in Hamra also talked about how their signature green sweatshirts have hindered their work. “It’s really difficult to get people to stop. They assume we are aligned with a political party,” Sara Moussa explains. “It’s the same colour green as Amal.” Her partner, Ramona Hijazi added, “It’s dangerous though, especially that each area in Lebanon has its political affiliation. For instance, if I were to walk around Dahiya in orange they would take it with a smile that she’s with us. If I go around in orange in Hamra people wouldn’t take it too well because this is a Future area. So that’s why we avoid it.”

Hijazi explained that in the past no one really cared about identifying people by affiliation, but in this climate one of the first questions that is asked relates to what area a person comes from or their favorite colour as a way to identify their allegiance. Lina Khatib confirms this by stating that people are looking for more and more markers of difference. However, in her view, the situation won’t go to the extent of violence for wearing a colour.

In such a Francophile country as Lebanon, writer Victor Hugo’s words “Fashions have done more harm than revolutions,” seems appropriate. But in reality, the two seem inextricably entangled. ●

“Every colour is ruined because some

political party has taken it on”



Dark Green : Amal
 Orange : Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)
 Red (dagger cross logo) : Lebanese Forces
 Red : Progressive Socialist Party
 Yellow and Green : Hezbollah
 Light Blue : Future Movement
 White : March 11 movement

AFP, Reuters