The Lebanese Rise Up Against a Failed System

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On October 17, 2019, the Lebanese took to the streets in protests that spread from Beirut to the entire country within hours and to the diaspora within days. The trigger was a proposal by the minister of telecommunications to tax Internet voice calls to the tune of $6 per month. Some media dubbed the uprising the “WhatsApp protest,” after the popular Facebook-owned voice-and-text platform. This unfortunate tendency to use tech lingo to explain contentious politics goes back to the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings of nearly a decade ago, which were tagged as the “Twitter” and “Facebook” revolutions. Then as now, such labeling simplifies the complexity of a genuine popular uprising against a corrupt ruling class and the political and economic system that this class represents.

In Lebanon, the “WhatsApp tax” may have been the straw that broke the camel’s back, but the camel has been ailing for years. In the past decade, the Lebanese have endured a garbage crisis, palpable environmental degradation, assorted political dramas, mounting corruption by a brazen ruling elite, and a rapidly deteriorating economic situation that by the start of the protests had become a full-fledged emergency. Inequality is extreme: the top 1 percent of the adult population takes home half of the total national income, while the share of the income pie for the bottom 50 percent of the population’s comes to just a tenth. And Lebanon’s gigantic national debt stood at 140 percent of gross domestic product in 2018.

As debt payment deadlines loomed, credit agencies downgraded Lebanese government bonds in January and August 2019, then again in October. A year ago, the central bank ordered institutions to pay salaries in Lebanese pounds, and now banks set limits on withdrawals in US dollars. The pound’s dollar peg has come under the most severe strain in twenty years. Panic set in as many Lebanese recalled with horror the dark days of galloping inflation in the 1980s. In this environment, only a cruel and unprincipled political class could have come up with the government’s proposal to offset a small portion of the national debt by cutting the salaries of public servants. In September, news that Prime Minister Saad Hariri several years earlier had paid a South African swimsuit model $16 million exposed the gaping chasm between the elite and the populace, even if the timing of the disclosure was dubious.

As if these difficulties were not enough, an unprecedented and suspicious wave of forest fires in early October escalated the popular malaise to biblical proportions. As millions of trees burned, including old specimens of the cherished cedar that emblazons the national flag, the government’s incompetence was in full view: firefighting helicopters stood idle, lacking spare parts. While billowing smoke choked the sky over the entire country, a fireman’s death in one of the blazes further stoked public anger.

Within 24 hours of the first protest, the legendary slogan of the 2010–11 Arab uprisings resounded in Lebanese cities from Tripoli in the north to Tyre in the south, with a slightly different nuance: “The people want to topple the system.” In Lebanon’s October uprising more than in the Arab Spring, the Arabic word nidham refers to the “system” that props up a corrupt and inhumane political economy of governance, rather than a political “regime” personified by a dictator. Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia back then, and like their peers in Iraq and Algeria now, Lebanese protesters lack a reviled tyrant as a single target.

The breathtaking corruption of politicians has trumped sectarian loyalties and turned the entire ruling class into the target of protest. The slogan “All of them means all of them” soon supplanted “The people want to topple the system,” casting the ruling elite as a loathsome and indivisible entity. Protesters started a bonfire on a key intersection in Beirut, with the highly symbolic backdrop of a side-by-side mosque minaret and church bell tower, challenging politicians who proffer platitudes about interreligious coexistence while...
sharing the bounty of a national embezzlement scheme.

**A CHANGED ENVIRONMENT**

In the past, feuding sectarian leaders organized protests and counterprotests in Lebanon. During the 2005 Independence Intifada (also known as the Cedar Revolution), which was triggered by the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, incumbent leaders stood at a podium in Martyrs’ Square in Beirut to address their followers. Advertising executives were recruited to brand the demonstrations. Shameless politicians shuttled to Washington, Paris, and Damascus to solicit external help against their opponents.

The Independence Intifada included brief moments of cross-sectarian solidarity but quickly devolved into sectarian bickering. While the central demand in the initial protest that year was accountability for Hariri’s murder and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, dueling demonstrations gave rise to the major alliances that have dominated Lebanese politics ever since: the Saudi-US-dominated March 14 coalition led by Saad Hariri, and the Iranian-supported March 8 bloc comprising Hezbollah and President Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement.

The current movement is different. Unlike what happened in 2005, this is a genuine bottom-up popular uprising that crosscuts traditional political loyalties. The ongoing protests erupted throughout the country, whereas in 2005 they remained confined to Beirut. In 2019, politicians are the targets of protests, not the organizers; the current upheaval appears leaderless, focused on socioeconomic issues and animated by a deep anger against the entire political class.

This does not preclude attempts by sectarian leaders and regional powers to subvert the protests. It is likely that Saudi Arabia was behind Hariri’s October 29 resignation as prime minister, which left the Iran-backed Aoun and Hezbollah as the main targets of the uprising. Both Iran’s supreme leader and the US secretary of state have made prescriptive statements, suggesting an internationalization of the crisis.

The Lebanese media and information sphere has also changed drastically since 2005. Then, protests were amplified by powerful television and press organs that commanded large audiences and mobilized them around the sectarian leaders who owned these outlets. Today, major newspapers and television channels have faded, facilitating the emergence of civic narratives on social media while also spurring the spread of misinformation.

Beirut’s two venerable newspapers are either dead (the left-of-center Assafir) or moribund (the right-of-center Annahar). A few months ago, Hariri shut down Future TV for financial reasons, and the Free Patriotic Movement’s OTV struggles to attract an audience beyond party loyalists. Although less controlled by the ruling clique than it used to be, the media landscape is still polarized: Hezbollah’s Al-Manar TV remains a force to be reckoned with, but so do its ideological opponents—LBC, a right-of-center outlet that emerged in the 1980s, and MTV, increasingly the voice of the Christian right.

Now, however, the robust network of Lebanese civil society and activist groups has a strong Internet presence. In the first days of the 2019 protests, a video of a woman kicking a politician’s armed bodyguard went viral—the first iconic image of a popular revolution. The evolving digital ecosystem has weakened the elite’s ability to shape public opinion, contributing to a Lebanese information sphere that is diverse but fragmented and volatile.

Since 2005, repression has increased. Social media posts have resulted in arrests. A concert by the rock band Mashrou’ Leila was canceled in August 2019 on moral grounds after a rabidly populist Twitter campaign by political entrepreneurs.

The current protests have spawned awkward and revealing vignettes of change. The Hezbollah flag was conspicuously absent and the Lebanese flag visible on the screen when Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech. Television channels covering the protests live were caught muting the sound when protesters shouted slogans impugning the channels’ political patrons.

As raw and righteous anger is blunted by the passage of time, there is a high risk that wily politicians supported by foreign patrons will turn protesters against each other with virulent sectarian rhetoric. But today’s uprising appears to be a genuine bottom-up swell of anger against a political class that has turned Lebanon into a Mediterranean dystopia of greed, corruption, pollution, and
overall human degradation. Decentralized protests resounding with chants of “All of them means all of them” help preempt sectarian manipulation.

**Generational Shift**

There is a new feeling on the streets of Lebanon as a new generation rises up. Thirty years ago, on October 22, 1989, the warlords who waged Lebanon’s civil war huddled in the Saudi resort city of Taif to sign a peace agreement that improved the state’s sectarian balance but made paralysis and dysfunction permanent and ensnared systemic corruption. The new taxes recently announced by the government, including the infamous WhatsApp tax, were scheduled to go into effect on October 22, thirty years to the day after Taif.

This gives the October 2019 protests an unmistakable generational dimension. Many demonstrators are under 30—which means that they were born after Taif. The young people occupying streets and squares with their elders did not live through the civil war. They came of age in the relatively stable and prosperous years of the mid-2000s, and may have become politicized during the 2005 Independence Intifada. Their hopes were dashed by the escalating economic crisis; they face bleak employment and housing prospects.

The octopus of political sectarianism that chokes Lebanon has a weaker hold on members of this generation than on their parents or older siblings. Their political leanings and actions are shaped largely by bread-and-butter issues. Their quality of life has plummeted; their cities reek of garbage; their roads are snarled with traffic; they pay twice for electrical power and water supply from both the unreliable government and the private utility “mafias.” Lebanon’s gigantic debt, which already constrained youth employment by dampening business investment (particularly from abroad), became a crisis for the young when they were hit by austerity measures, then an emergency when banks placed limits on withdrawals from cash machines.

The protesters are not motivated by specific political ideologies. Rather, they have mobilized against a corrupt political class that has driven those who could leave into exile and cornered those who could not into rebellion.

These protests did not emerge out of nowhere. They build on a rich recent history of dissent: activism for a faster and freer Internet, gender equality, more representative election laws, historic preservation, and access to public space; a 2013 campaign for the rights of domestic workers; a besieged yet resilient LGBT movement; the 2015 You Stink campaign in response to the country’s garbage crisis; Palestinian activism for socioeconomic inclusion; and the secular Beirut Madinati political alliance that contested the 2016 municipal election. Although none of these groupings is claiming leadership of the current protests, activists who cut their teeth in previous scuffles with “the system” are playing an important role today.

The October uprising is a new layer in a sedimented political history, but the question is whether this anti-sectarian mobilization will give birth to the post-sectarian political order to which many Lebanese aspire. In recent years, waves of popular discontent that looked promising have fizzled into oblivion. But this leaderless, decentralized protest movement is different, and undeterred by the tragedy of the Syrian revolution next door. Whatever the eventual outcome, the October 2019 protests in Lebanon have accomplished an important feat: Lebanese leaders are now more afraid of the people than the people are afraid of them. This allows a new generation to feel a better future within its grasp.