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Lebanon Uprising: Causes and Repercussions

Unit for Political Studies

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Since 17 October 2019 Lebanon has been rocked by unprecedented popular protests pushing for the end of the political system that has governed the country since the end of the Civil War in the early 1990s. These protests have been unique, bringing together people of all sects, regional backgrounds, ages, and social classes. They are united by a general mood seeking to topple the ruling political class and leave behind the system of sectarian power-sharing and the parcelling out of government offices and public resources that has operated in the country since the proclamation of the National Pact in 1943. But while it has broken the barrier of clientelism, political sectarianism and fear, it still faces major challenges. Its demands have not yet clearly crystallised, and it has not produced new leadership capable of translating street pressure into real political gains. This will not happen overnight, and the movement is too spontaneous to elect representatives: it will need to produce spokespeople.

Causes

The fees imposed on the internet chat application WhatsApp served as the initial motor for the demonstrations – the straw that broke the camel’s back. But the strength of the Lebanese public’s reaction and the scope of the demonstrations, which have shocked the political class, point to a great number of accumulated structural problems in Lebanese politics, economy and society. These problems have ultimately driven the Lebanese to overcome their internal and sectarian divisions and the legacy of the Civil War and go out into the streets across the country to demand the ouster of the current political class. There are four major factors underlying the protests:

The fall of the Taif System

The current Lebanese political system is the product of various regional and international settlements whose main purpose was to bring an end to some fifteen years of civil war. It was not, importantly, the product of *domestic* settlements or of an agreement between Lebanese people but was imposed from outside by Syrian tutelage and with US-Saudi sponsorship manifested in the Taif Agreement. The assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 was a major blow to this system in that it led to the end of direct Syrian dominance and replaced it with a political division between the March 8 Alliance supported by Damascus and Tehran and the March 14 Alliance backed by Washington and Riyadh; this political confrontation was settled militarily during the May 2008 takeover of Beirut. It was then dealt a second crippling blow with the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in 2011, which divided Lebanese citizens between those who supported the Syrian regime and those in favour of the opposition – especially after Hezbollah joined the conflict directly.

The years 2011 - 2013 thus saw a period of sustained political tension brought to an end by the intervention of foreign powers. This intervention was motivated by fears regarding repercussions



for Lebanon's role as a host to many Syrian refugees as well as the international peacekeeping force in its southern regions, as well as the need to settle the maritime dispute between Lebanon and Israel over the exploitation of the newly discovered gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean. With joint US-Saudi-Iranian sponsorship, a neutral candidate (Tamam Salam) was chosen for the premiership. In 2016, a US-Iranian agreement (opposed this time by Saudi Arabia) renewed the settlement, filling the presidential vacuum through the election of General Michel Aoun in exchange for Saad Hariri taking the premiership. But Washington's withdrawal from the Iranian Nuclear Deal and its reimposition of sanctions as well as its decision to target Hezbollah, accompanied by Saudi escalation against Iran in Yemen and elsewhere at the beginning of the Trump presidency, have combined to place great pressure on Lebanon and have had serious ramifications on the political and economic system.

The decline of the Sunni-Shi'i dichotomy

The international umbrella created in 2014 has transformed hostility between the Sunni and Shi'i blocs into an alliance, perhaps a strong one: Saad Hariri no longer has any reason to confront Hezbollah. Since King Salman took power in Saudi Arabia – and especially since his son Muhammad Bin Salman was named crown prince – Riyadh has been withdrawing both financially and politically from Lebanon as its regional influence declines. Moreover, Saudi has cut off all Hariri's sources of funding and frozen his investments, even detaining him in November 2017 and forcing him to resign the premiership. All this has weakened his position, as clearly shown by the results of last year's parliamentary elections which deprived him of his majority and gave it to an alliance of his enemies in Hezbollah and the National Movement. Hariri's position has been further shaken by a series of scandals at a time when the salaries of hundreds of his employees have been in arrears for several years. It was thus no surprise that the traditional areas historically loyal to Hariri were the first to join demonstrations demanding the fall of the government that he heads. Hariri has been unable to hold on to the Sunni position in government – he has reduced the premiership to a minority opposition within the government – while also failing to provide services, leaving Hezbollah and Aoun to take responsibility rather than serving as a facade for them.

Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has likewise faced various setbacks since the Party decided to seize power in Lebanon in 2006, attempting to fill a power vacuum left by the withdrawal of the Syrian Regime. Above all else, however, the party's position has been damaged by its decision to intervene militarily in the Syrian conflict, which has seriously undermined the party's popular base. The damage has not only been financial but moral: Hezbollah fighters have returned from Syria in caskets without a convincing explanation for their sacrifice and sometimes without a funeral being held. Since the Israeli invasion in July 2006 Nasrallah has lived out of the public eye, addressing his constituents through colossal screens; this has necessarily limited his interactions with his support base. Moreover, the pressures facing Iran and its involvement in various regional issues from Syria to Iraq and Yemen have meant less resources and less effort directed towards its allies in Lebanon.



Nasrallah's tendency to do nothing but defend Iran's policies even as his popular base is suffering has also affected his popularity. And Hezbollah's traditional policy of providing free social services has recently been replaced by demands for monetary donations from its supporters.

The confrontation between Hariri and Nasrallah in 2005 served both parties, allowing them to mobilise their supporters by whipping up sectarian tensions as well as to guarantee regional support from their respective foreign backers. But with the end of this confrontation in 2014 and the Hariri-Nasrallah coalition formed in 2016, both constituencies have come to realise the futility of the political battles that have left the country in gridlock for years without any solutions being put forward to make citizens' lives easier or improve their economic and social situation.

The crisis of sectarian powersharing

One of the most important issues in the Lebanon protests is exposing the structural failure of the sectarian power-sharing arrangement as a rentier system in which power and wealth are divided up or monopolised according to criteria that have nothing to do with competence or capability. Since 2005 Lebanon has been in a state of permanent political paralysis as the result of this struggle over resources and power, preventing any important reforms from taking place. Regional tensions have also stymied regional trade with Syria, Iraq, Jordan and the Gulf, slowing down economic development in the country and showing other structural problems in the Lebanese economy and its financial policy. The Lebanese public debt is currently stands at more than 85 million dollars, some 150% of GDP, with most of it owed to Lebanese banks which possess great sway over the political class. Since the government reflects the balance of power in the parliament, it is impossible to hold it to account; the judiciary is entirely under the thumb of the ruling political class and is unable to help put things in order or adequately adjudicate corruption inside and outside the state apparatus. This situation is exacerbated by the government's inability to provide basic services like electricity and clean water, prevention of pollution, public transport or rubbish collection. All this explains the pan-sectarian rhetoric uniting demonstrators.

Unjust distribution of wealth

Class divisions are one of the most important drivers of the Lebanese uprising, as has been given clear expression by the demonstrators themselves, particularly those in the northernmost and southernmost parts of the country and in the Beqaa Valley. The disparity between a minority monopolising the country's wealth and a majority living on the poverty line has never been as clear in Lebanon as it is today. An Oxfam study published at the beginning of this year showed that the personal fortunes of seven of the wealthiest Lebanese came to some 13.3 billion dollars – ten times the total property of half the Lebanese people. The wealthiest 1% of Lebanese own more than the poorest 58% put together. The call for a minimum level of social justice has united demonstrators



seeking to explain the corruption at the heart of the Lebanese system. Their central message has been rejection of new taxes being imposed to reduce the deficit while the wealth of the ruling classes continues to increase. This is encapsulated by the slogan 'get back our stolen money!'

The dilemma faced by the public sector has also played a prominent role in the protests. The Lebanese public sector is too large for the state to adequately fund because of unnecessary recruitment to serve sectarian power-sharing, making it a burden on the economy. It is also of limited effectiveness because of a lack of competence as well as low wages, which encourage corruption and bribery. The public sector will likely continue to suffer from these problems so long as there is an inability to make decisive structural reforms because of the political class's fear of the collapse of rentierism, which uses state employment as a reward to be divided up by sect leaders via their representatives in the ministries in such a way as to strengthen their position. This issue is particularly thorny given the absence of alternative jobs and the decline in the regional funding that kept Lebanese political life afloat for many decades.

Conclusion

Lebanon is facing an unprecedented historical uprising whose main object is the ouster of the ruling political class and which is led, unusually, by the middle and working classes, with urban civil society attempting to come to an accommodation with it and direct its demands. Demonstrations in regions as disparate as Tripoli, Acre, Tyre, Zahle and Aliyeh likewise herald the end of Beirut's traditional dominating role in deciding the direction of Lebanese political life. More importantly, a new political consciousness is forming, producing a new national identity and a desire for a new system that will finally put the unsustainable regime left behind by the Civil War and the Taif Agreement to rest. Will the uprising be able to successfully bring about such an important shift in Lebanese political life without clear leadership or mechanisms by which demands can be implemented and given the fierce opposition to change shown by the long-established political class? It will be a difficult task, and there are no theoretical answers to these questions. They depend on the demonstrators' ability to organise outside political sectarianism and the continuing unwillingness or inability of armed political forces to resort to violence (as has happened in Iraq for example). What is certain, however, is that it is no longer possible to ignore the suffering of Lebanese citizens or dismiss their desire for change – change that has long been prevented by a corrupt, sectarian political class.