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Lebanon's 2019 October Revolution: Who Mobilized and Why?

Dr. Lea Bou Khater & Dr. Rima Majed

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Dr. Lea Bou Khater

Senior researcher at the Consultation and Research Institute and a lecturer at the Lebanese American University. She holds a PhD in Development Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies - University of London.

Dr. Rima Majed

Assistant Professor of Sociology at American University of Beirut (AUB). Her research focuses on the fields of social inequality, social movements, identity politics, sectarianism, conflict and violence. She holds a PhD and an MSc in Sociology from the University of Oxford

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P.O. Box 11-0236 Riad El Solh,
Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon
www.aub.edu.lb/asfari

 +961-1-350 000-1 ext 4469
 asfariinst@aub.edu.lb
 ActiveArabVoices.org
  AsfariInstitute

Bridging Academia and Activism

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Abstract

This study looks at the main characteristics of protesters and the drives that have pushed them to take to the streets during the first two weeks of the October 2019 Uprising in Lebanon. The study relies on an original survey that was run on a sample of 1,183 protesters across Lebanon between 19 October and 31 October 2019. Protesters were approached and interviewed at protest sites in more than twelve regions across the country. The main findings point to the majority of protesters being below the age of 31 years old, men, and single. Results also point to a cross-sectarian mobilization. Looking at the educational attainments, the survey shows the majority of protesters having achieved less than undergraduate studies and up to %42 of protesters having attended strictly public-sector institutions. Moreover, the survey shows that the largest share of protesters are students, wage earners, and informal workers, the majority of whom have never migrated for work. Similarly, the study shows that the majority of protesters have a relatively low income, pointing to a clear class aspect to the protests. The majority of protesters have also stated that their monthly expenditures

exceed their monthly income, which hints at a “society of debt”. In addition, the vast majority of protesters do not benefit from social security (NSSF) or private insurance, and more than half of the protesters do not own their housing unit. These results underline the precarity of social protection and safety nets in Lebanon. As for the political activity of the protesters, the majority stated being interested in politics but not being members of any traditional political party. Similarly, most protesters stated not having voted in the 2018 parliamentary elections, and many expressed being first-time protesters. Strikingly, members of trade unions were quasi inexistent amongst protesters, and civil servants or employees of the public sector formed less than %1 of the protesters. This points to an important role played by the mechanisms of clientelism. Finally, the survey clearly shows that the dire economic situation was the main reason for protesters to mobilize; while most other demands revolved around cabinet resignation, recuperation of stolen funds and change of regime. Interestingly, the results show that a military government is not a popular solution among protesters.

A second wave of uprisings has swept over the Arab region since the end of 2018. Starting from Algeria and Sudan, this wave has reached Lebanon and Iraq in October 2019. This study focuses on the Lebanese Uprising and examines the onset of the protests that took the shape of a struggle for social and economic justice in the early stages of the uprising. The paper aims to provide analyses of the characteristics and views of the protesters who mobilized in the different regions of Lebanon between 19 October and 31 October 2019.

In the early evening of 17 October 2019, thousands of Lebanese – mainly young men from deprived backgrounds – took to the streets in Beirut protesting against the cabinet approval of a new tax (USD 0.20 per day fee) on internet-based phone calls over services like WhatsApp. Protesters blocked main roads with burning tyres and ignited garbage bins. This mobilization came at the background of a financial and economic crisis that had been crippling the country for several months. The week preceding 17 October witnessed a rapid precipitation of events that set the ground of the uprising: wildfires ravaged many regions in the country with the state exposing its inability to deal with such disaster; the shortage of dollars in the country meant that many of the exported basic needs such as fuel were intermittently cut; and bank restrictions on access to one's deposits signalled a looming collapse in the near horizon. In addition to this already alarming context, Lebanese ministers met on 17 October and decided to impose new regressive taxes that were going to mainly affect the more impoverished sections of society. It is in this context that the Lebanese uprising exploded, shortly after the end of the cabinet's meeting, in an expression of rage and anger against the ruling elites. While the protests started in Beirut, they quickly spread to other main cities in the country like Tripoli, Tyre, Saida, and Baalbeck.

The anger against politicians, whom protesters referred to as “thieves” **ḥarami**, constituted a persistent and central element of chants and songs performed at the different squares in Beirut and other regions. The protesters chanted, “Harami, Harami”, denouncing all

those who benefited from regime corruption and from catastrophic financial planning that were advantageous only to politicians, bank owners and the few around them. Articles started circulating in the press and on social media, revealing the personal wealth and list of properties and companies owned by the ruling elite and their supporters. Regardless of the validity of numbers, corruption of the Lebanese ruling elite is without a shade of doubt.

The failure of post-civil war neoliberal policies to deliver socio-economic justice to a large majority of residents (Makarem, 2014) seems to be the one of the main motives behind Lebanon's October Revolution. In his famous book, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey (2007, p.2) explains that neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade”. In turn, ensuring “the sanctity of markets” is expected to be the core function of the state, and state interventions should always be steered by the markets. As expected, the fact that the ruling elite in Lebanon was enriched through a conflation of politics and business is not merely a violation of the system – it is the system itself (Traboulsi, 2014).

The proliferation of neoliberal policies, including fierce liberalization of foreign trade and focus on foreign direct investments (FDIs) and foreign capitals in postwar period, has deformed the economy and the labour market. Today, the rentier economic model is marred with a slowing growth (0.20% in 2018, The World Bank 2019) and a detrimental balance of payment whereby the deficit in 2019 reached 9.41% of GDP, or USD 5.318 billion (Banque du Liban, 2019). Moreover, the monetary and fiscal policies have crowded out the development of the productive sector. The reliance on remittances and foreign direct investments has triggered a palliative effect to the mounting debt service and implied a long-lasting consolidation of the elite instead of developmental transformation (Portes, 2009). It is noteworthy that total

remittances dropped by 7% in 2016 and stagnated in following years (Government of Lebanon, 2017). The accelerated decrease of remittances suddenly has also revealed exacerbated precariousness.

In addition, considering that the majority of enterprises in Lebanon are small sized – about 90% of establishments employ less than five workers (ERF, 2004) – coupled with the limited capacity for association of workers in micro and small enterprises, the activity rate has remained stagnant and low. A high share of informal employment that includes foreign workers and domestic workers, also remains excluded from labor organizing and legally restricted from unionization (Bou Khater, 2018).

Intertwined with neoliberal policies, the primary tool of the ruling elite in their relationship with the labour movement in Lebanon was political intervention at the institutional and organizational levels. Tactics of state incorporation have included withholding budget allocations from the Ministry of Labor to the General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon (GCWL); incentivizing and facilitating the authorization of those federations affiliated to ruling political parties; and intervening in elections at the union, federation, and confederation levels. Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that since the late 1990s, the GCWL has become an extension of the power exerted by the ruling elite's interests, with its core function steered towards the typical neoliberal praxis of favoring providing the best environment possible for business and investment at the expense of social protection and labor rights. By way of illustration: In 2011, the GCWL did not support the increasing the minimum from USD 333 to USD 580 - proposed by the minister of labor at the time, Charbel Nahas as part of a progressive reform package. Instead, the GCWL responded by siding with business associations in support of the Prime Minister Najib Mikati's proposal of USD 450. As this example demonstrates, the GCWL's positions are severed from the conditions and demands of the workforce it claims to represent (Bou Khater, 2018b).

Against this political, social and economic backdrop, the October Uprising of 2019 erupted. In an attempt to better understand the characteristics and drives of protesters on the ground, a survey was conducted during the first two weeks of the uprising. The below section details the methodology used.

This research follows the well-established methods of protest survey developed in the social movements' literature (Walgrave & Verhulst, 2011). It hinges on a survey conducted by the Consultation and Research Institute with a sample of 1,183 protesters targeted at various protest sites across Lebanon between 19 October and 31 October. Table 1 details the sample distribution by district.

Table 1. Sample distribution by district

| Caza | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------|-------------|------------|
| Akkar | 54 | 4.6 |
| Aley | 97 | 8.2 |
| Baalbeck | 63 | 5.3 |
| Beirut | 245 | 20.7 |
| Jbeil | 22 | 1.9 |
| Keserwan | 150 | 12.7 |
| Maten | 56 | 4.7 |
| Nabatiyeh | 41 | 3.5 |
| Saida | 101 | 8.5 |
| Sour | 113 | 9.6 |
| Tripoli | 218 | 18.4 |
| Zahle | 23 | 1.9 |
| Total | 1183 | 100 |

The data was collected using a structured questionnaire (59 questions) designed in a way to collect standardized information pertaining to:

- Socio-economic profile of respondents
- Reasons for protesting
- Priority demands
- Views regarding possible reforms
- Views regarding the armed forces behaviour during protests
- Participation in previous parliamentary elections
- Participation in previous protests and demonstration

The questionnaire was deployed via KOBO, an ODK form-builder. KOBO allows offline computer assisted (or electronic) data collection, as well as recording the GPS coordinates of the survey location which permits tighter quality controls.

Fifteen surveyors were deployed in respect to the sampling distribution that took into account the main protest sites already identified and their magnitude.

The complete sets of data were cleaned and crosschecked for possible inconsistencies. The final database was analysed for generating results and performing analysis.

Features and Socio-Economic Backgrounds of Protesters

Demographics

Results show the participation of mainly Lebanese, male, and single youth. The survey results show that the big majority of protesters are Lebanese nationals (99%), with 60% of protesters being males. Youths constitute 39% of protesters aged between 16 and 25 years of age (Table 2). Moreover, the majority of the surveyed protesters are single (52%) (Table 3). This is an interesting sociological finding given the rising average age of marriage in the Lebanese society (Saxena, Kulczycki & Jurdi, 2004).

Table 2. Sample Distribution by Age Category (n=1183)

| Age Categories | Female | Male | Total |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 16-25 | 35% | 42% | 39% |
| 26-35 | 28% | 30% | 29% |
| 36-45 | 13% | 11% | 12% |
| 45-55 | 16% | 9% | 12% |
| 56-64 | 6% | 7% | 7% |
| 65 and above | 2% | 1% | 1% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

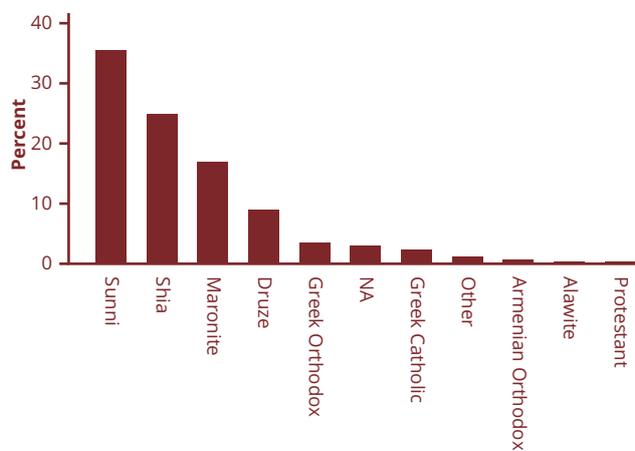
Table 3. Sample Distribution by Gender and Marital Status (n=1183)

| Social Status | Female | Male | Total |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Married | 49% | 42% | 45% |
| Separated/divorced | 4% | 1% | 2% |
| Single | 46% | 57% | 52% |
| Widow | 2% | 0% | 1% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Results also show an across sect participation of Lebanese. Figure 1 shows that participation in protests is across sects with 36% of interviewed protesters being Sunni, 25% Shiite, and 17% Maronite. This reflects the demographic distribution of the Lebanese population with a slight over-representation of Sunni

protesters and a marginal under-representation of Maronite protesters, given that the estimated sectarian distribution of the population in Lebanon is 27% Sunni, 27% Shia, and 21% Maronites (Salti and Chaaban 2010).

Figure 1. Sample Distribution by Sect



Results point to an average household size of 4.9 individuals across Lebanon. According to Table 4, the average household size is 4.9 members, knowing that in 2018 the average household size was 3.8 members at the national level (Central Administration of Statistics, 2019)

Table 4. Average Household Size by Caza

| Caza | Average household size |
|--------------|------------------------|
| Akkar | 5.06 |
| Aley | 3.97 |
| Baalbeck | 4.56 |
| Beirut | 4.87 |
| Jbeil | 5.27 |
| Keserwan | 4.98 |
| Maten | 5.24 |
| Nabatiyeh | 5.12 |
| Saida | 4.79 |
| Sour | 4.98 |
| Tripoli | 5.06 |
| Zahle | 5 |
| Total | 4.88 |

Table 5. Number of Dependents Per Governorate

| Caza | Mean |
|--------------|-------------|
| Akkar | 1.94 |
| Aley | 1.62 |
| Baalbeck | 1.27 |
| Beirut | 1.36 |
| Jbeil | 2.09 |
| Keserwan | 1.85 |
| Maten | 1.62 |
| Nabatiyeh | 1.34 |
| Saida | 1.78 |
| Sour | 1.7 |
| Tripoli | 1.6 |
| Zahle | 2.17 |
| Total | 1.62 |

Results point to an average number of household member dependents higher among protesters in peripheral areas. Table 5 results show that the average number of dependents according to protesters is 1.62 across districts with higher figures in the peripheries: 2.17 members in Zahle, 1.78 in Saida, and 1.94 in Akkar.

Education

Results show that 42% of protesters attended public sector institutions and 96% did not pursue any studies abroad. Results show a prevalence of public sector studies among protesters interviewed in peripheral areas such as Akkar (52% versus 33% in the private sector), Saida (49%) and Tripoli (47%). Taking into account that the majority of protesters are under 31 years of age, Table 6 shows that 66% of protesters have an educational attainment below undergraduate study.

Figure 2. Distribution of Protesters across Sectors of Education

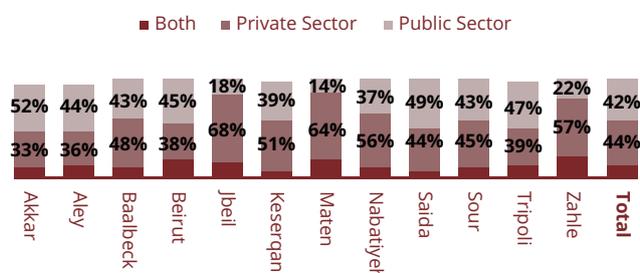


Table 6. Educational Attainment of Protesters

| Educational Attainment | % |
|------------------------|------------|
| Illiterate | 1.5 |
| Read and write | 0.6 |
| Pre-primary | 0.8 |
| Primary | 10.7 |
| Intermediate | 23.5 |
| VTE intermediate | 2.8 |
| Secondary | 22.9 |
| VTE secondary level | 3.6 |
| University | 25.9 |
| VTE university level | 2.1 |
| Postgraduate studies | 5.1 |
| Other | 0.6 |
| Total | 100 |

Employment

The largest share of protesters are wage earners, informal workers, and students. In 2018, the labour force in Lebanon was estimated at 1,794,000 of which 200 thousand are unemployed (11.4%). The survey shows that 15% of protesters are unemployed across gender. Around 30% of protesters are wage earners, and 18% of respondents are self-employed, knowing that the clear majority of the self-employed work in the informal economy. Employers constitute only 6% of respondents. When asked about labour migration, 92% of respondents declared to have never worked abroad.

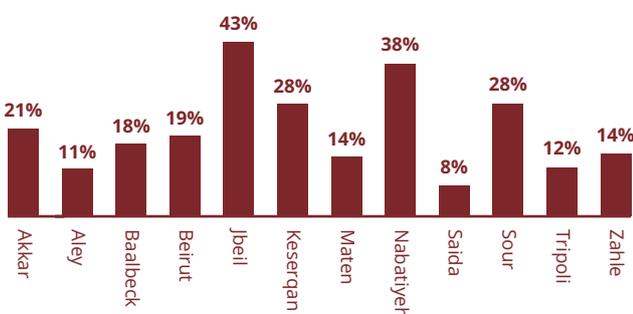
Moreover, while the public sector employs today around 300,000 civil servants or 14% of total labour force (CAS,2019), public sector employees are under represented among interviewed protesters (1%) which indicate the quasi absence of civil servants in the first ten days of the protests. This may be explained by the role of sectarian clientelism in public sector employment, in addition to the recent cooptation of the Union Coordination Committee in 2018 elections and the rapprochement of its leadership to the ruling elite (Bou Khater, 2020).

Table 7. Work Status of Protesters

| Work Status | Female | Male | Total |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Unemployed | 15% | 15% | 15% |
| Student | 17% | 14% | 15% |
| Wage-earner | 27% | 30% | 29% |
| Public sector employee | 1% | 2% | 1% |
| Self-employed | 8% | 24% | 18% |
| Employer | 3% | 7% | 5% |
| Working student | 6% | 6% | 6% |
| Not looking for a job | 19% | 0% | 8% |
| Retiree | 1% | 1% | 1% |
| Other | 3% | 1% | 4% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

It is important to note that 19% of interviewed women are inactive (not looking for a job) and are probably homemakers who have decided to take part of the protests. The distribution across governorate shows that inactive women, who are most probably homemakers, constitute 43% of women in Jbeil, and 38% in Nabatiyeh and 28% in Sour.

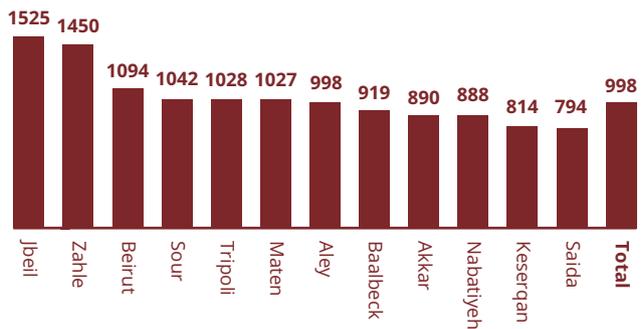
Figure 3. Percentage of inactive women among protesters across Caza



Income, Expenses and Savings

The average monthly income of protesters is relatively low. The declared average monthly income of protesters is USD 998. Table 8 shows discrepancies among regions with a lower average monthly income in peripheral areas such as Akkar, Keserwan, Nabatiyeh and Saida. Results show that the average monthly income of interviewed wage earners in USD 913 and employers USD 2523. Average expenditures are systematically higher than income, which indicates a possible reliance on debts or remittances. This is in line with the growing literature on the “indebted condition” of life under neoliberalism (Charbonneau & Hansen, 2014).

Figure 4. Average Monthly Income and Expenditure in USD



In fact, most protesters do not have any savings and in turn are economically vulnerable to any exogenous shocks. When asked whether they have savings, 86% of protesters answered negatively. The distribution across Caza shows that 94% of protesters in Baalbeck, 90% in Aley, and 89% in each of Tripoli and Sour do not have savings. Moreover, almost 40% of protesters are indebted, knowing that age distribution shows that more than half of those aged between 36 and 45 years declared to have debts.

Table 8. Percentage of protesters who have no savings across Caza

| Caza | Mean |
|--------------|------------|
| Akkar | 87% |
| Aley | 90% |
| Baalbeck | 94% |
| Beirut | 84% |
| Jbeil | 73% |
| Keserwan | 83% |
| Maten | 79% |
| Nabatiyeh | 85% |
| Saida | 87% |
| Sour | 89% |
| Tripoli | 89% |
| Zahle | 87% |
| Total | 86% |

Social protection

Furthermore, the majority of protesters are not registered at the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) nor benefit from private medical insurance, which underlines the precarity of social protection and safety nets. The 2018 Central Administration of Statistics (CAS) survey estimates that 44% of individuals in Lebanon do not have any social protection and 55% of wage earners and their families are not registered at the NSSF. The survey with protesters revealed that **68%** of protesters are not registered at the NSSF, with higher levels observed at the periphery such as Akkar (83%), Zahle (87%) and Sour (80%) (Figure 5). Moreover,

80% of protesters do not have any medical insurance. These results are a clear indication of the vulnerability of protesters and explain their struggle for change and socio-economic justice.

Figure 5. Share of Protesters Without NSSF per Caza

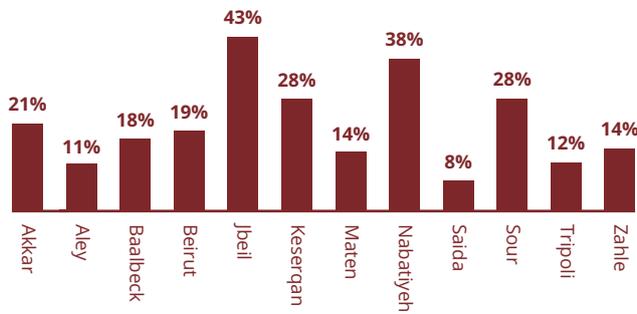


Figure 6. Type of Protesters' Property by Caza

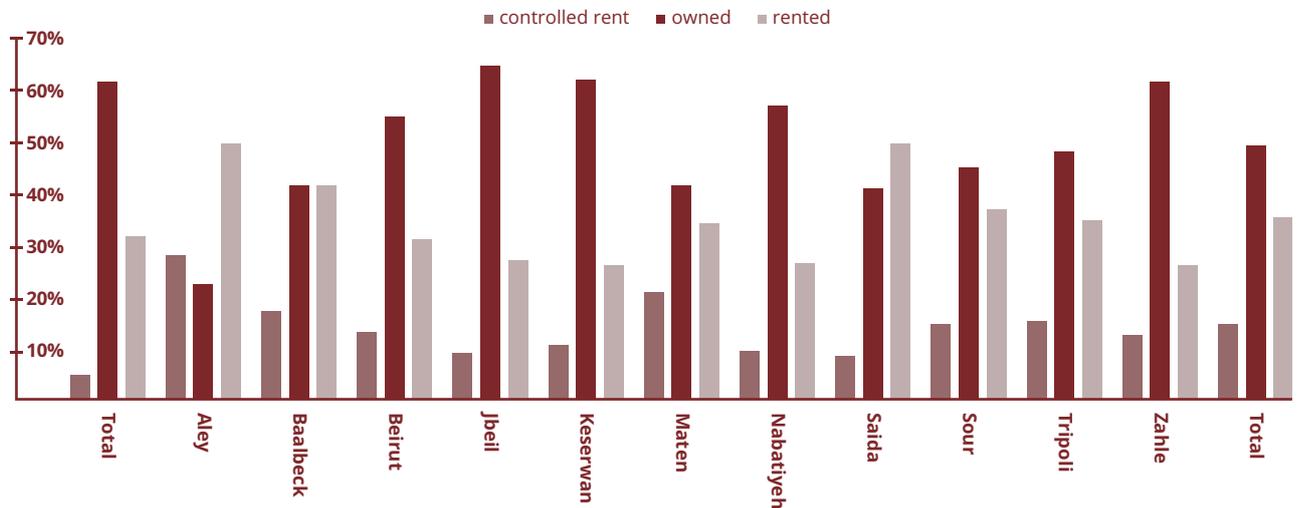
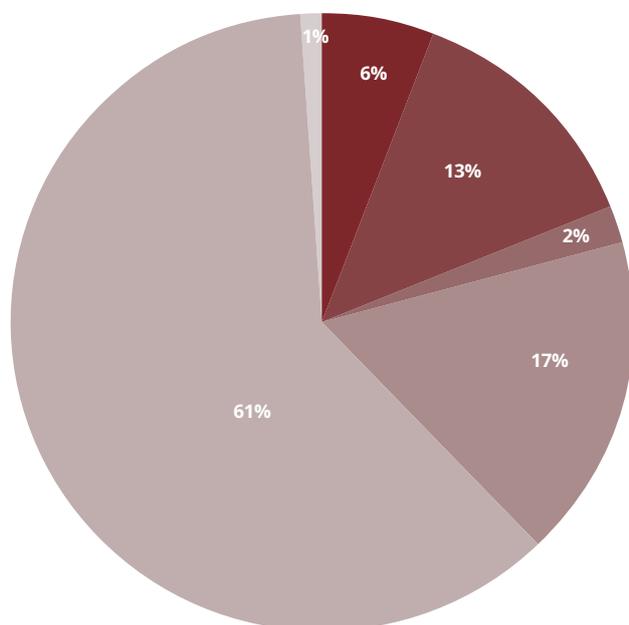


Figure 7. Type of support to own property

- Grand parents
- Husband
- Inherited residence
- Myself
- Parents
- Sold an inherited land



Housing

Only half of protesters own their main residential unit. Results show that half of protesters own their residential unit, 35% live in rented property under the new rental law, while 14% live in rented property under the old controlled rent scheme (Figure 6). When asked about the means used to own their housing unit, 61% of property owners stated that their parents purchased the property, and 6% stated that it was purchased by their grandparents (Figure 7). Moreover, 17% stated that they live in a property owned by their husband. Only 17% of respondents said that they have purchased their housing unit themselves. In addition to parents' support, 30% of property owners stated to have benefitted from housing loans.

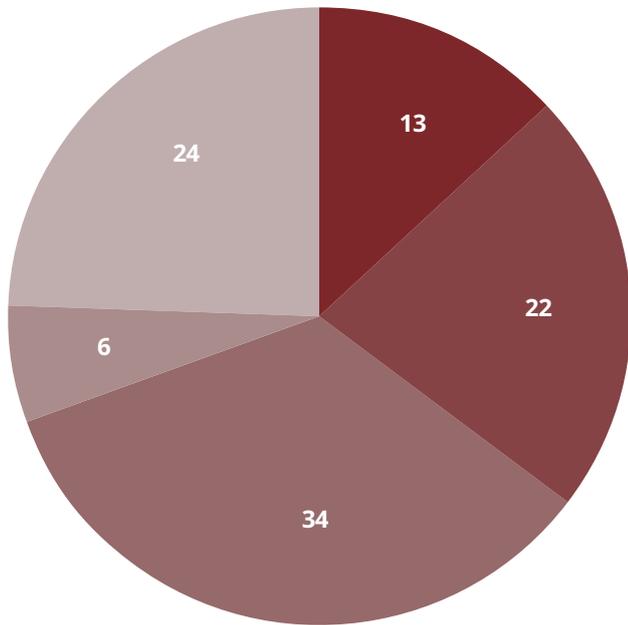
Political Activity of Protesters

Party Membership

Most protesters are interested in politics but are not members of traditional political parties. Only 6% of protesters are members of a political party while 34% are not interested in politics. Around 13% identified themselves as civil society activists. Moreover, 22% of protesters said that they are supporters of certain political parties, while 22% said that they are interested in politics but remain independent from established political parties. This is an interesting result at a time when many analyses argue that the Lebanese society has become "apolitical" (Khneisser, 2019).

Figure 8. Political Activity of Protesters

- Active in civil society
- Interested in Politics independent
- Not interested in politics
- Political party member
- Supportive of certain political party



Participation in 2018 Parliamentary Elections

Moreover, half of the protesters (50%) did not participate in 2018 parliamentary elections. Out of those who voted, 21% declared to have voted for the Future Movement, 18% for Hezbollah and Amal Movement, 17% for the Lebanese Forces, and 5% for the Free Patriotic Movement. Around 10% of protesters had voted for civil society candidates, Sabaa, Kulluna Watani and other opposition groups. It is striking to note that less than 1% of protesters had voted for the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), but this can be explained by the fact that the majority (66%) of protesters surveyed in Aley (the only Caza in our dataset with a strong presence of the PSP) reported not having voted in the 2018 elections. Finally, a group of respondents cited the names of deputies that are affiliated to small political parties. These answers were grouped under the category "other".

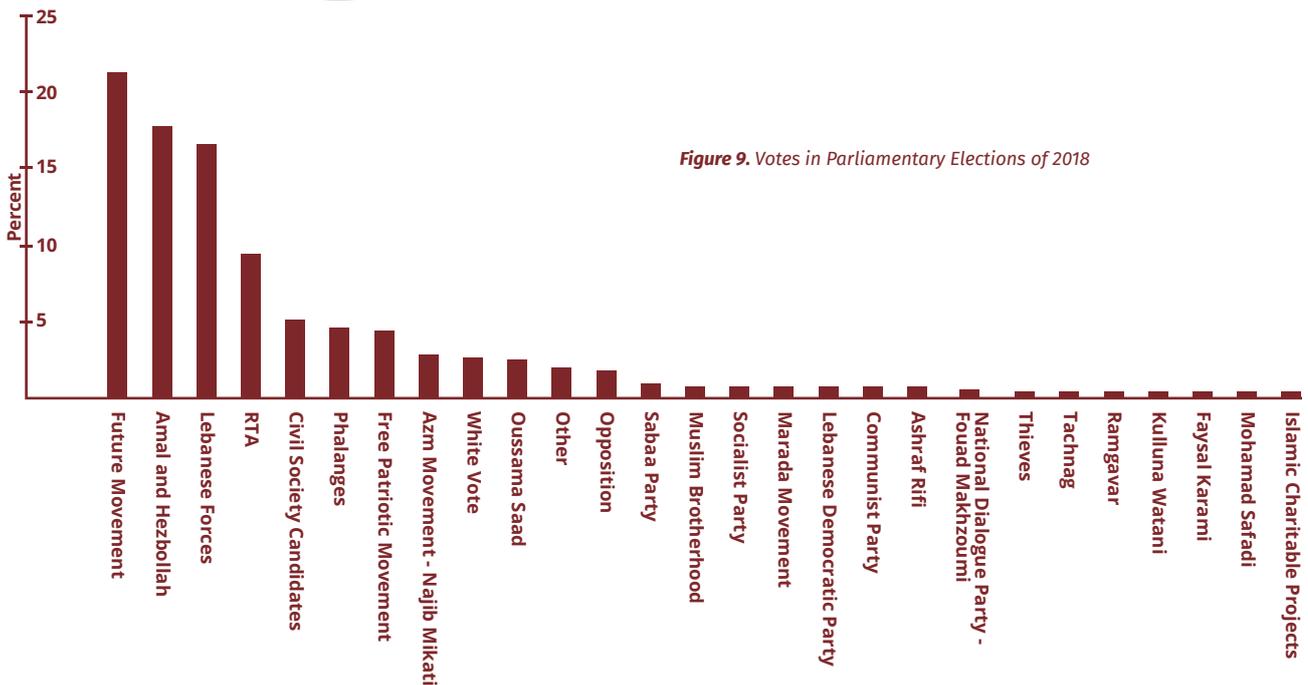


Figure 9. Votes in Parliamentary Elections of 2018

Trade Unions Membership

Members of trade unions are quasi inexistent among protesters. 95% of protesters are not members of any trade union versus only 5% who are mainly members of professional orders (doctors, lawyers, engineers, nurses, bank employees) and members of teachers' union and leagues (Table 11). When asked whether they were previously members of unions or associations, only 4% of protesters said yes and most were members

of professional orders and teachers' unions too (Table 12). The quasi-absence of members of workers' unions (less than 3 protesters in our dataset) reflects the fact that, as previously mentioned, less than 6% of workers in Lebanon belong to an organized union and that the General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon is coopted by the ruling sectarian parties. This echoes with Beinin's (2015) argument at the onset of his

book *Workers and Thieves*, where he explains that possibilities and limitations of workers are defined by their organizational capacities, relationships with political parties, civil society as well as changes in the local and global economy.

Figure 10. Current Membership in Unions or Associations

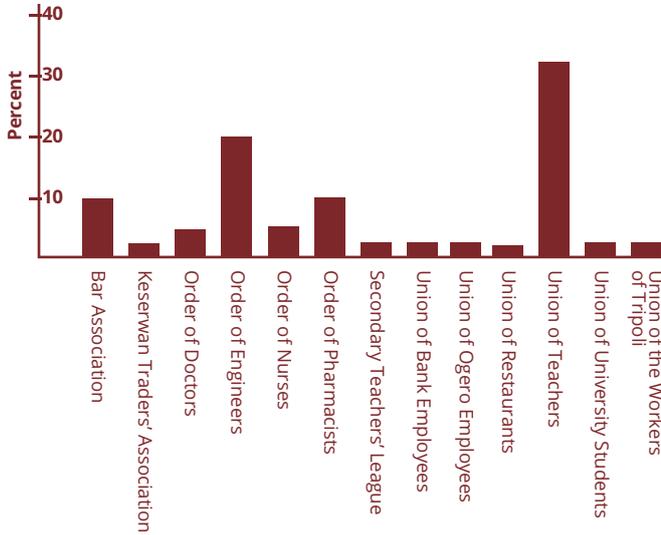
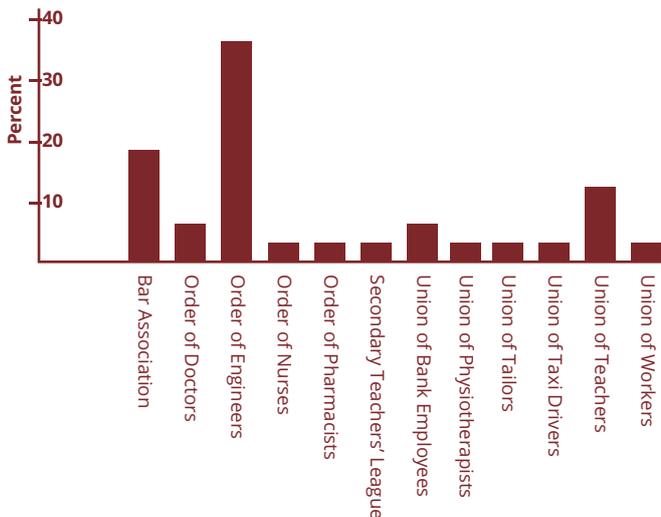


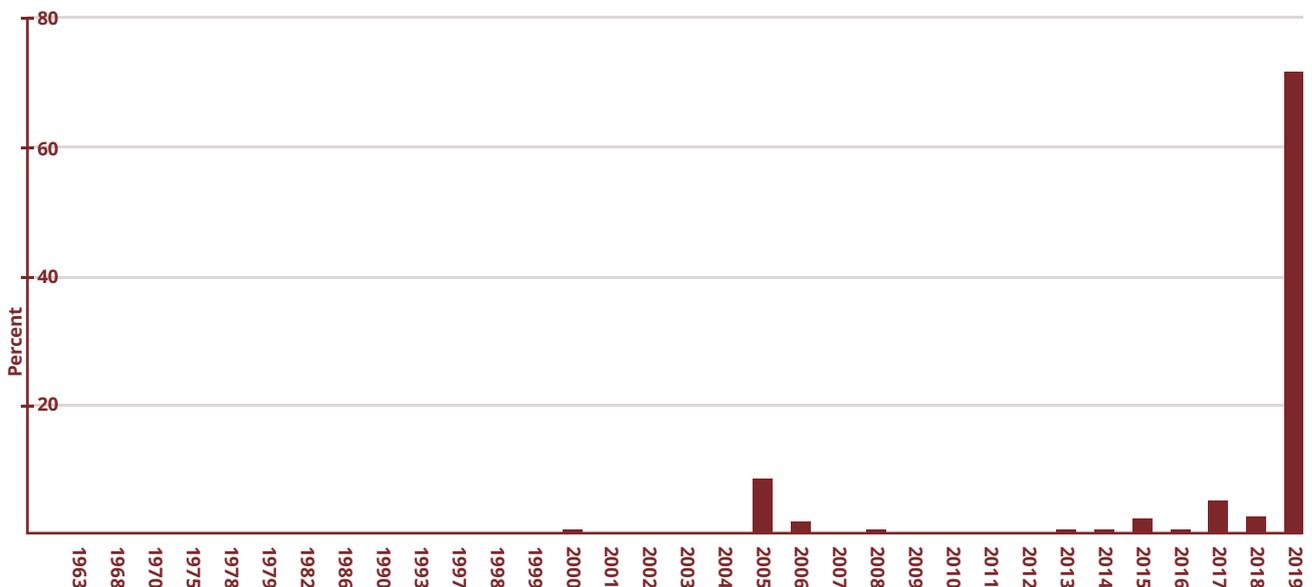
Figure 11. Past Membership in Unions or Associations



Previous Protest Participation

Most participants in the October 2019 Uprising are first-time protesters. When asked whether the October Uprising is their first protest, 61% of protesters answered positively (67% of female and 57% of males). When asked about their first protest, 71% of protesters declared that their first protest was in 2019 (including 61% in the October Uprising, and 10% in 2019 but before the October Uprising). Around 9% of respondent said that their first protest dates back to the 'Cedar Revolution' in 2005. The high number of protesters who declared mobilizing for the first time in October 2019 or only a few years before (between 2015 and 2019) reflects the young age of the majority of protesters.

Figure 12. Date of First Participation in a Protest

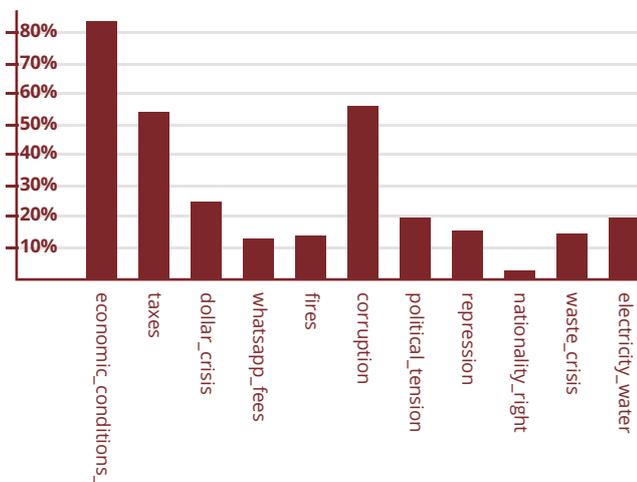


Protesters Drives and Demands

Reasons for Protest

The central reason behind the protests is the dire economic situation. More than 87% of responses indicated that economic reasons are behind the participation of interviewed protesters (Figure 5). Corruption is the second most cited response (61%), followed by the taxation system (59%). These results indicate the impact of neoliberal assault on the livelihood and social and economic justice of residents as stated above.

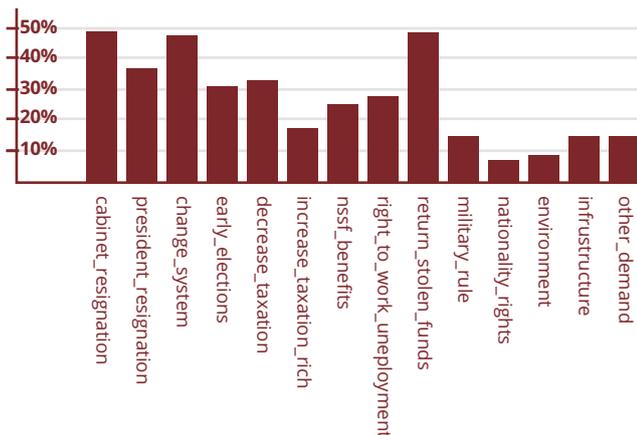
Figure 13. Reasons for Participation in October Protests



Main Demands of Protesters

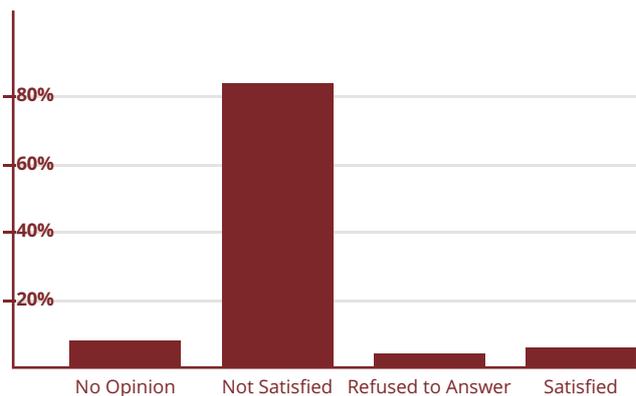
Protesters' demands revolve around cabinet resignation, recuperation of stolen funds and change of regime. Although these demands combine partial reforms as well as structural changes in the system, it is important to note that piecemeal reforms, infrastructure improvement or NSSF reforms were not the most popular demands among protesters. Conversely, as per Figure 14, the majority of protesters demanded political change such as cabinet resignation (51%) or even structural changes such as a new political system (48%).

Figure 14. October 2019 Protesters' Main Demands



A military government is not a popular solution among protesters. When asked about their main demands, around 14% of protesters stated that they wanted a military rule. When asked more directly about their approval of a military transition government, 60% of protesters said to be against such a measure. When asked about Internal Security Forces repression of protesters, 44% of protesters asked for holding the security forces accountable.

Table 9. Protesters' Reaction to the Reform Package of Prime Minister Saad Hariri



Protesters were not satisfied with the package of reforms proposed by former prime minister Saad Hariri. According to Table 9, around only 4% of protesters expressed their satisfaction with the reform package voiced by the former prime minister Saad Hariri on 21 October 2019.

The results of the survey conducted during the first two weeks of Lebanon's October 2019 uprising point to some important findings. While the protests were clearly cross-sectarian and socio-economic in nature, the majority of the protesters were young and single. Given the age groups of the protesters, most of them had educational achievement below the undergraduate level, and the majority had never left the country for study or work abroad. The majority of those who are active in the sample are either students, or unemployed workers, or workers in the informal sector. It is remarkable to note that the majority of protesters have no medical insurance (whether NSSF or private insurance), and half of the protesters do not own their housing unit. Moreover, the majority of protesters expressed having monthly expenditures that exceed their incomes, which speaks of a 'society of debt'. When asked about their political activity, most protesters said that they are somehow interested in politics but not enlisted in traditional parties. The vast majority of protesters are not organized in any form of union or syndicate. Similarly, many protesters said that they are mobilizing for the first time while a considerable number of protesters said that their first protest mobilization was in 2005. Finally, the survey clearly shows that socio-economic grievances are at the core of the October Uprising. While protesters have asked for a range of demands from the resignation to the Prime Minister, to the recuperation of stolen funds and the complete change of the regime, the big majority of protesters refuse the Hariri's reform proposal and rejected the idea of a military government.

While the slogans and efforts to bring back the billions of dollars from the ruling elite and their cronies are relevant and essential, they move away from the necessary efforts to rebuild the political system in place. It is important to move beyond the accusation of corruption and focus on the structural problems of the

system itself. As Walter Armbrust (2012, p.114) says, "to describe the blatant exploitation of the political system for personal gain as corruption misses the forest of the trees". The problem is not the violation of the system; it is the system itself that violates the social and economic rights of its people. Therefore, the chants and slogans of the revolution should not steer away from the denunciation of this quintessential neoliberal state.

At the outset of his book *Workers and Thieves*, Joel Beinin (2015) explains that one of the important steps of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia was when workers began to protest. With the coopted labour movement in Lebanon, a group of professionals including university professors, journalists, engineers and physicians began organizing under the Lebanese Association of Professionals. It is important to keep an eye on these newly-established labour associations and labour contestations as they become a distinctive element in this social ferment and integral component of the consolidation of the October Revolution.

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