

Lebanon's October Revolution: Hope in the Midst of Crisis

Research Analytical Note

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Lebanon's crisis has been looming in the horizon for months, [if not years](#). The country's post-civil war system, characterized by sectarian power-sharing and neoliberal economy, [reached a serious deadlock](#). The year 2019 exposed the [country's financial and economic fragility](#). The shortage of US dollars and the serious threat of the devaluation of the Lebanese pound (so far not officially declared, but obvious in the unofficial exchange rate used outside banks), coupled with inflation and a loss of purchasing power by around 30%, has seriously affected most segments of the Lebanese society in their everyday life.

The week preceding the start of the revolution was [explosive on many levels](#): the accentuation of the US dollar liquidity problem, the state's catastrophic response to the wildfires that ravaged the country, the insulting [sectarian and patronizing declarations](#) of some politicians, the intermittent shortage in some of the essential needs such as [gas, medical supplies and bread](#), and the government's decision to impose new taxes (including a tax on Whatsapp calls!) formed the perfect recipe for the eruption of a revolution.

On the evening of October 17th, thousands of Lebanese – mainly from deprived backgrounds - mobilized on their motorbikes in the capital Beirut to block roads and burn tires in protest against the government's newly imposed taxes and the dire socio-economic conditions. Spontaneous and unorganized, the mobilizations quickly spread to other parts of the country with Tripoli, Sidon, Tyr, Aley, and the Beqaa witnessing unprecedented mass mobilizations against the ruling class.

[The revolution was declared!](#) Two main slogans took over the squares everywhere in the country: “*The People Want the Downfall of the Regime*” [*Al-Sha'b Yurid Isqat al-Nizam*] echoing the chant from the 2011 Arab Uprisings rejecting the ruling regime, and “*All Means All*” [*Kellon Ya'ani Kellon*] responding to the Lebanese particularities whereby the sectarian consociational regime does not have one head (a dictator) but rather multiple leaders all equally rejected by the revolution. The denunciation of the regime as a whole, in all its figures, was the unifying call during the first few days of the revolution.

As time went by, the political dynamics transformed and the attempts by the sectarian political parties at coopting or repressing the revolution became clearer. Some sectarian political parties tried to ride the tide and coopt the revolution by presenting themselves as being part of it (such as the Lebanese Forces, and the Phalanges [*Al-Kata'eb*]), while others have clearly tried to counter the revolution by mobilizing their constituencies in the streets either in militia/thugs-like scenes of violence (such as the Amal and Hezbollah supporters' mobilizations in Beirut, Tyr and the Beqaa) or through protests in support of the regime (such as the Free Patriotic Movement's supporters mobilizations to Baabda Palace). This counter-revolutionary wave was also coupled with sectarian leaders using the army and the state's security apparatus to [arrest activists and violently repress protesters](#). However, despite all these attacks, the uprising is still on.

The Centrality of the Socio-Economic Question

Lebanon has always been studied and analyzed from the vantage point of geopolitics, international relations, and sectarian dynamics. Rare are the instances when the Lebanese society and its internal social and economic dynamics have been taken seriously. Dubbed as a [“deeply divided society”](#) along sectarian lines, other ‘deep divisions’ such as class, region or gender have been marginal in the broader study of Lebanese politics. The revolutionary explosion of October 17th over economic issues and internal governance is a clear reminder of the importance of understanding not only the regional context and its implication on sectarianism, but also - and maybe more importantly - the internal social and economic dynamics that govern society.

The centrality of the socio-economic question in this uprising is clear. For the first time since the end of the civil war, people mobilize in such big masses in all regions with clear class-based slogans addressing the ruling class as a group of “corrupt thieves” and targeting the [central bank and commercial banks](#) as being the essence of the crisis. The rejection of austerity measures and of flat and regressive taxes that take away from the working and middle classes has been loudly raised in the streets. In the face of growing discontent, the [rejection of the central bank to impose capital control or haircuts](#) on the ‘big depositors’ while illegally restricting all other bank depositors from freely accessing their current accounts and imposing weekly ceilings on withdrawal as low as 200\$ have only led to more rage against the banking sector. For most people, it has become clear that [the bill of the crisis will have to be payed from the pockets of the average Lebanese](#), while the ultra-rich get away with transferring their millions outside the country in order to preserve their wealth. This tension has created numerous attacks on banks around the country. Instead of the state intervening to impose regulations that protect small and medium depositors and ensure that people have access to their funds, it intervened by [deploying security forces to protect bank branches throughout the country](#).

It is worth mentioning here that Lebanon’s sovereign debt is now at [86 billion dollars](#) – the third highest in the world relative to its GDP - most of it to be paid back to [Lebanese commercial banks](#) that have been lending the state at high interest rates since the end of the civil war in 1990. This [regulated Ponzi scheme](#), in which the banking sector is benefitting at the expense of the majority of Lebanese people, have [exacerbated social inequalities](#) to the point that Lebanon has become ranked amongst the most [unequal countries in the world](#) in terms of wealth disparity.

Moreover, the absence of a productive economy and the reliance on the banking and service sectors that offer very limited job opportunities and have very low appetite for skilled labor has led Lebanon to have amongst the highest rates of [youth unemployment](#) globally. The majority of the [country’s youths are either unemployed, or have been pushed to migrate for work abroad](#) - a perfect deal for the rentier economy that relies heavily on remittances in US dollars from Lebanese emigrants. The absence of productive sectors also means that Lebanon imports most of its basic needs, and thus pays for it in US dollars – a main reason why the current financial crisis and shortage of US dollars pauses a serious threat in terms of food security and healthcare provisions. This all comes at a time when the [World Bank warns](#) that while 30 percent of the Lebanese population already live under the poverty line (set at 4\$ a day), the figure is likely to increase to 50 percent in the near future given the rate at which the financial situation is worsening.

It is in this context of deteriorating economic conditions that the alarming structural problems of the Lebanese economy became obvious to the lay person. Tens of thousands have already [lost their jobs or have seen their salaries being cut because](#) of the crisis. The figures are expected to increase in the coming months, with the majority of Lebanese workers and small business owners having to pay the highest price. The economic crisis and its clear implications on the everyday life of the big majority of the Lebanese society has exposed the dysfunctions of a rentier neoliberal system that cares little about social protection while it focuses on preserving the interests of the few. It is in times like these that the “us versus them” in Lebanese society is reversed from the often-cited sectarian one – the usual card of the ruling elites – to a more obvious class-based one.

A Leaderless Revolution?

Born out of a deep economic crisis, Lebanon’s October revolution is far from being an organized uprising with clear leadership. Unlike revolutions that take the form of a pre-planned ‘coup’, this uprising is closer to a social explosion that came as a reaction to an economic crisis that has impoverished the majority of the population. In that sense, Lebanon’s uprising was neither pre-planned nor clearly organized in its initial stages. The spontaneous mobilizations across the country, the radical rejection of the system as a whole, and the insistence to remain in the streets for weeks – even after the resignation of the Prime Minister Saad Hariri – indicated that this is not simply another ‘movement’ that is set to end soon; but rather that a revolutionary process has started and is expected to last for years, if not decades.

One of the most heard criticisms of this uprising – mainly from the regime, but also from bystanders – is that it has no clear leadership or demands. While it is true that for the revolution to mature and lead to a transition it needs to be able to propose a clear alternative, it seems too naïve to request from a spontaneous uprising to organize itself and come up with a leadership and a clear plan within only a few weeks. A quick analogy with the ruling elites exposes the ridiculousness of the request: while the main figures that govern the Lebanese regime are less than thirty men who have known each other and worked together for more than thirty years, and who are well organized in political parties that have clear structures and important powers, are unable to agree on a rescue plan for the country or to agree on a new government; why are around a million citizens who spontaneously mobilized in the streets without previously knowing each other or having pre-existing organization expected to have a clear leadership and clear demands? This seems to be an absurd request.

Moreover, the rejection of the uprising to name a clear leadership has been a strength in the initial phase of the revolution. Learning from the experience of the 2015 #You_Stink movement, activists have recognized the call from the regime to designate a leadership and negotiate as a trap to contain the movement. In 2015, the regime used the same tactic and protesters responded by forming a committee that tried to negotiate with the government possible solutions for the garbage crisis. This had catastrophic results: the known leadership of the #You_Stink movement was systematically attacked in a defamation campaign orchestrated by the regime accusing them of being traitors and working for foreign intelligence, while the negotiation committee that spent months meeting with the ministry in charge was unable to enforce any of its recommendation. This

whole process only succeeded in putting an end to the movement and retrieving people from the streets.

Therefore, learning from previous experiences with this regime, the October 2019 uprising raised the famous slogan “The People Demand, They Don’t Negotiate” [*Al-Sha’b Yutaleb wa la Yufawed*]. This is an important reminder that the people and the regime cannot be equated, especially not in cases of popular uprisings that are spontaneous. After all, it is the government that has power and responsibility to act on the economic and political crisis, not the people who mobilized to protest the crisis. In such cases, the power of the hundreds of thousands in the streets is to pressure the regime, hold it responsible, and force it to work on their demands; therefore, it cannot be treated as an equal party in the political game and it cannot (yet!) be asked to negotiate or take responsibility as if it was part of the system.

Having said that, it is also important to mention that the lack of pre-existing strong organization is one of the main predicaments of this revolution. The post-war regime has worked systematically on killing any possibility of organization that can counter the sectarian political parties. Unions and syndicates were amongst the first targets. Alternative non-sectarian political parties too. Today, almost all unions are controlled by the ruling parties and all non-sectarian political parties are weak and marginal to the point that they play no serious role in the uprising. Absent are the political parties that have a real popular base and that are able to propose an alternative political plan to counter not just the sectarian system, but also the neoliberal system that is at the core of today’s crisis. Moreover, the post-war era witnessed the flourishing of the NGOs sector that also contributed to the depoliticization of public life and the spread of an ‘apolitical’ culture. While these obstacles are real and form an important setback to the revolution, the picture is not completely bleak.

Lebanon also has a long history of activism with many networks of activists and organizers dating back years, if not decades. Although not organized in ways that can claim representation of the masses in the streets, these pre-existing bodies – together with newly formed groups and coalitions – can surely become the scaffolders of the revolution in its coming phases if they manage to organize and create broad alliances to push for a clear agenda that prioritizes social and economic questions. It is also these pre-existing networks of activists that are today the most active in the various squares around the country, organizing marches and sit-ins, planning mobilizations and discussing possible strategies, and providing spaces for public debates and discussion sessions that aim at bringing people together and disseminating knowledge about the regime and how it works. There is also great efforts being put in the past weeks at creating coalitions between the various groups on the ground and trying to focus the demands and the political vision for the transitional period. This work will take time to mature given the lack of resources and the organizational weaknesses, but it seems that the importance of organizing has become a priority for many. Three main key points are crucial for the coming period: (1) the organization along lines that maintain the horizontal (interest-based) division rather than the vertical (sectarian-based) divides; (2) organizing at the national level beyond the centrality of the capital Beirut; and (3) developing a clear political agenda that prioritizes the socio-economic demands and forms a realizable alternative.

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The Ghost of the Civil War

During the first two weeks of the uprising, many have declared October 17th, 2019 to be the real date of [the end of the civil war](#). It was considered that this revolution was going to finally turn the page of the (post-)‘civil war regime’ that has governed the country since the declaration of the Ta’if agreement in 1989. In fact, the end of the military operations in 1991 came with an amnesty law that prevented any type of transitional justice and that allowed sectarian warlords to become the country’s rulers. More than three decades later, it is still the same warlords – in addition to some new figures that have accepted to cover their crimes - that control the country and its resources. This class of elites has adopted two main strategies since 1992: (1) reinforcing fierce neoliberal policies under the guidance of the former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri who pushed for the privatization of several vital sectors, and (2) the sectarianization (and cantonization) of society through the entrenchment of a system of clientelism that plays on the ghost of the civil war in order to divide and rule. The October Revolution came to loudly reject the post-war system in all its figures and policies.

However, this initial euphoria around the idea of the revolution putting a final end to the civil war was quickly countered by the growing fear around the prospects of a new civil war erupting, especially following the repeated violent attacks of regime supporters on protesters. Less than a week into the uprising, the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, [warned against chaos and the possibility of sliding into a civil war](#). This was followed by a number of orchestrated attacks that reminded many Lebanese of the civil war days and of militia-rule in the streets. The fear of the renewal of the war started to rise with the attempts of political parties to sectarianize the streets. While protesters had been mobilizing for more than forty days raising only Lebanese flags and focusing mainly on socio-economic demands, the mobilization of the partisans of Amal and Hezbollah in the past week under clear sectarian slogans and chants formed a crucial turning point in the revolution. Following the daily attacks on protesters and the ferocious social media campaign against the revolution, the country entered in a few days of heightened fear and tension during the [last week of November](#). However, this quickly dissipated with the following days witnessing a number of [‘mothers marches’](#) against civil strife in [many regions of the country](#). The revolution bounced back to clearly denounce the attempts at sectarianization and the possibilities of dragging the country into a civil war.

For the sake of clarity and accuracy, it is worth noting that there is no such thing as “sliding into” a civil war. The idea that the road to civil war is a slippery slope is wrong. Civil wars are not a natural development or a coincidence. They cannot be the result of an unintentional drift away from the initial path. Civil wars are political decisions. They require arming and funding, as well as training and political backing. In that sense, all talks about the possibility of the revolution to slide into a civil war are unfounded. This is not to say that a war is completely unlikely. However, this is to clarify that a civil war is a political decision that can only be taken at this point by political parties that are in power and that have access to arms and funding. In that sense, it is wrong to accuse the revolution for taking the country to a civil war. While revolutions can come in the shape of social explosions, civil wars are intentional political decisions. Therefore, in times of economic crisis and social hardship, sectarian political entrepreneurs will try to bring out the ghost of the civil war and might try to instigate violence in order to kill the revolution with fear. However, the reply of the Lebanese streets so far has been mature enough in making sure not to be dragged into

the sectarian playground of the ruling regime. The image of protesters around the country carrying white roses, chanting against the civil war, and insisting on their unity against the ruling class that is stealing their wealth and their futures can only be seen as a light of hope in the midst of the great Lebanese crisis.