The Unmaking of Lebanon's Sectarian Order? The October Uprising and its Drivers

by Tamirace Fakhoury

Last month, an unprecedented protest movement took hold of Lebanon's streets and public squares. Dubbed as the October uprising, the timing of the movement roughly coincided with important anniversaries, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall or other iconic historical events, including the October Revolution in Russia, leading many to draw comparisons.

In the context of the 2011 Arab spring wave, many argued that Lebanon would stay isolated from the protest movements that gripped the region even though the country has witnessed previous protest cycles, such as the so-called 2005 Cedar Uprising.

Still, eight years after the Arab protest wave, an unprecedented protest movement has materialised, spreading to various Lebanese cities from Tripoli to Sidon. In the wake of a proposed WhatsApp tax, people have been calling for the sacking of political leaders and the eradication of political sectarianism. Arguably, the protest movement may trace its roots back to a precursor wave of protests over a huge garbage crisis in 2015. Back then, the movement also decried the inept politics of sectarianism and corruption.

Lebanon's political system represents one of the last bastions of sectarian power-sharing, a political system in which religious groups share power

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according to rigid sectarian quotas. Since 1943, key executive coalitions and legislatures have abided by unalterable sectarian criteria. According to the seminal work of Donald Horowitz, this was one of the key reasons that led to the onset of the 1975–1990 Civil War.[1] Today, it is this system that Lebanon's protesters seek to overcome.

To attract attention and disrupt normal life, protesters have used a wide range of techniques. Roadblocks, sit-ins in front of financial and political institutions and the homes of political leaders, graffiti deploring corruption and the political economy of Lebanon's post-war order are among the most evident. At the core of this protest movement is the overarching feeling that Lebanon's political leaders have bitterly disappointed their domestic constituencies.

Inept governance and rampant corruption in addition to mismanagement of public resources and squandering of public funds have brought protesters together. Indeed, a striking feature of this protest movement is that it is not staged or driven by political parties or civil society organisations. Leaderless, and overwhelmingly cross-sectarian, it has brought together people from different walks of life. Some of the protesters I spoke to have never participated in an episode of contention in Lebanon's history.

Women and students have been the heart of the protest movement.

Acting as key agents in amplifying the demands of the protesters, they have led and staged demonstrations, coalescing around the principles of social justice, freedoms and human rights.

Many did not think such a protest movement would happen in the final months of 2019. Still, the timing is rooted in the complex disintegration of political, sociological and economic structures upon which Lebanon's post-war order was built.

Thirty years after the signing of Lebanon's post-Civil War agreement in October 1989, known as the Ta'if Agreement, sectarian patronage networks have become more entrenched than before. In contrast to the pre-war period, when people married and mingled across sects, contrived political and sectarian discourses have spread across Lebanon since the war's ending, erecting walls of separation among citizens.

Contentious files such as electricity and services, quarries, internet, gas and oil, reconstruction and development have been persistently hijacked by sectarian interests. More than that, deliberations on their management have remained restricted to sectarian leaders, making citizens unable to participate in issues that are most impactful in their daily life.

In early October 2019, the Lebanese parliament passed its first budget since 2005, a first step towards unlocking 11 billion US dollars of grants and loans promised by the international community, pending economic reforms. Hailed as a victory, the move

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[1] Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985.

left Lebanese citizens sceptical. Indeed, worrisome signs of longstanding economic mismanagement have left Lebanese convinced that the small polity was heading downhill.

Lebanon's national debt amounts to more than 79 billion US dollars, the third highest in the world. Faring badly on job creation and on the restructuring of its market economy, Lebanon has also witnessed an uptake in youth emigration. By 2017, dwindling tourism in the context of regional instability, growing fiscal deficits and a loss of confidence in Lebanon's economy, a crucial condition for investment flows, had converged, hinting at an imminent economic collapse.

Still, the political class remained gripped in deadlock, failing to develop an economy rescue plan. Instead, austerity measures and tax hikes created deep feelings of alienation. In a nutshell, precursor signs to this uprising were evident in the everyday lives of citizens. A case in point is that Lebanese are estimated to have hidden a billion dollars in their homes.[2]

Against this backdrop, the protest movement comes as no surprise.[3] Its causes are both structural and agency related. On the one hand, it signals the structural disintegration of a precarious post-war order in which buying time

over reforms, sectarian rhetoric and polarisation over external conflicts have dominated the policymaking agenda.

On the other, it unveils the deeper agentic forces moving Lebanon's society forward. Women, students, LGBTQ groups, vendors, lawyers, intellectuals and scholars have arisen as the grassroots challengers of this sectarian order. This has dispelled two assumptions: the assumption that Lebanon's citizenry is dormant and the assumption that Lebanon has sectarian rather than national constituencies.

Notwithstanding this throbbing protest wave, several short-term challenges await. The unmaking of Lebanon's sectarian order will not come by easily.

Firstly, after more than a month of unrelenting protests, the political establishment has been overwhelmingly unresponsive. While the government has resigned, the political class has so far not endorsed the protesters' demands, which include the formation of a technocratic government, the convening of early elections and the establishment of accountability mechanisms penalising impunity and financial crimes.

Instead, politicians have clung on to their posts, drawing on several arguments to justify their insistence to stay in power. They have played on the fear of sectarian strife. They have also argued that traditional political parties such as Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement and the Sunni Current represent most Lebanese.

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[2] Thaer Abbas, "Panicked… The Lebanese Hide a Billion Dollars Inside Their Homes", in *Asharq al-Awsat*, 28 September 2019, https://aawsat.com/english/node/1922341.

[3] Tamirace Fakhoury, "Lebanon Protests: Why a WhatsApp Tax Sparked a Political Movement", in *The Political Quarterly Blog*, 18 November 2019, https://wp.me/p9PVIh-Mc.

Secondly, grassroots divisions have arisen in the wake of the protests. Roadblocks and the disruption of daily life have led to the formation of a counter-protest movement, though its strength and numbers are substantially smaller. Some segments of the Lebanese population have contested prevalent protest tactics for harming their economic interests. The recent clashes between protesters and members of the Shia groups Hezbollah and Amal are a worrying signal in this respect. Adding to this, rifts have arisen between intellectuals who have called for boycotting the political class and those who called for negotiating with it.

Thirdly, the role of external powers, both regional and international, will prove critical. External interference may significantly weaken the grassroots movement and politicise it. So far, protesters have sought to distance themselves from both Western and Middle Eastern actors. On 12 November, civil society groups refused to meet a senior French official. Still, to weaken the movement's legitimacy, some political leaders have been arguing that protesters are in collusion with foreign actors.

Notwithstanding this, the hijacking of the protest movement by external agendas arises as a key threat to its trajectory. Historically, Lebanon's competing leaders have relied on foreign brokers to maximise their bargaining leverage and shift the domestic distribution of power in their favour. This makes it easier for external actors to intrude on Lebanon's political scene.

Russia, which endorses key actors in the Iran-led axis such as Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, has argued against side-lining Lebanon's traditional powers in the formation of the new government. Conversely, the US administration, a fierce critic of Iran and Hezbollah, has encouraged the rash formation of a government that conforms to the protesters' demands, in a not so subtle effort to sideline Hezbollah. Meanwhile, news of the US Trump administration withholding 105 million US dollars in military aid for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) until the latter increases its distance from Hezbollah is another worrying signal of increasing foreign intervention.

In such a setting, international actors such as the European Union, face several tough calls. Should international actors seek to scale up dialogue with Lebanon's governmental actors whose legitimacy is deeply contested by their constituencies or begin to side-line them? Should they support the fall or the survival of the regime in a region in which crumbling governance systems have unleashed instability? Most importantly, how can the EU ensure that Lebanon does not (again) evolve into a battleground for US-Iranian rivalries in the context of these protests?

Fourthly, and most importantly, the protest movement is yet to figure out the trajectory for Lebanon's political transition. Many protesters have so far framed leaderlessness and horizontalism to be the key strengths of the protest wave. Still, literature that has documented social movements and revolutions teaches us that there are several complex episodes of contention

that unfold after the first victories of the street.

Thus, initial episodes of popular contestation usually give way to more organised cycles in which challengers may bring about change through several means. They either successfully negotiate with the political class who agrees to a gradual transition, or they cause intra-elite rifts that lead some key political actors to exit the establishment and join the protesters.

All in all, a successful protest movement needs to institutionalise the change that it is calling for or develop an organisational leadership structure that would allow the movement to achieve the intended policy and legal reforms.

Whether and how institutionalising change will happen in Lebanon remains to be seen. Yet, the protest movement is promising to draw a new trajectory for the country. If successful, this trajectory will not only impact the current post-Civil War order. It will also reconfigure the very institutions and architecture of a state built since 1943 on an elite-driven form of sectarian power-sharing that is no longer capable of responding to the rights and demands of Lebanese citizens.

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