



DEMONSTRATIONS IN LEBANON

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The economic recession, the dysfunctional political system and the refugee crisis have made Lebanon a vulnerable player in the Middle East region. The economic reforms that former Prime Minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri, tried to introduce, caused a massive cross-sectarian wave of demonstrations which lead Lebanon to political instability and to the Prime Minister's resignation. Moreover, Hezbollah's reaction and the developments in Syria make the situation in Lebanon even more complicated. Rapid developments in Lebanon are leading to a significant alteration in Lebanon's political system which are affecting the citizens' lives.

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Aiming at forming a sustainable government after overcoming the impediments which outcropped once more, the political parties in Lebanon have been trying to find common ground. However, regardless of the consensus reached by the political forces in Lebanon in January 2019, a new circle of instability emerged.

More specifically, on the 17th of October, a massive wave of demonstrations outbroke across Lebanon. The motives of these demonstrations were a number of austerity measures decided by the government. Specifically, there has been an upsurge of the Value Added Tax (VAT) which has caused discomfort and social unrest in the majority of the population.¹ These economic reforms included charges on WhatsApp calls, an application widely used in Lebanon. This fact increased the protesters' anger.

Apart from the austerity measures introduced, protesters have accused the government of systematic corruption -due to patronage system and crony capitalism. The Lebanese people have been weary and outraged with the state's political elite. As a result, they feel that they cannot be represented by them anymore. Additionally, the protesters have accused the government of its inability to provide the Lebanese citizens with the basic goods in order to cover their needs, such as water, food, clothing and electricity.²

An element of vital importance is that these demonstrations are leaderless, that is to say that none of the sectarian political parties, none of the sects are orchestrating these protests. On the contrary, people took to the streets spontaneously. The demonstrations escalated very quickly, and the protesters demanded the resignation of the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri, as the profound causes of the demonstrations came to the surface.³ The majority of the people engaged in these protests are young, even school students, who do not have any experience from the civil war. However, they do have a collective memory which can function as an element of influence.⁴

It is the first time, since the restoration of political stability after the Taef Accords in 1989, that the Lebanese citizens are not divided into sects. Currently, Lebanon functions as an undivided national entity, which surmounts the political parties and sects. These current developments seem to be an intersection in the political life of Lebanon. Demonstrators are against this obsolete -as they say- division that cuts Lebanon through the constitution that has been imposed on the Lebanese people for decades. The new form of citizenship goes beyond the national and religious division. This citizenship will play a significant role in the decision-making process from now on.

The former Prime Minister, in a move to appease the protesters, followed a strategy in order to avoid instability. This strategy has also been followed by other states which have been in similar circumstances such as Iraq and Tunisia. While the strategy followed is different and always directly related to the occasion and the state that applies it, the mentality is similar. More specifically, the former Prime Minister announced that no new taxes will be implemented and that \$160 million will be given as funds for housing loans. Additionally, he announced that the government will pass a law to return money squandered by the state to the citizens, a phenomenon which was common during the previous decades. Finally, the former Prime Minister announced his intention to hold early elections. Although Hariri made this commitment in order to appease the demonstrators, the protests escalated and the demand for Hariri's resignation became more intense.⁵

A very important factor that made the strategy mentioned above ineffective is the fact that banks are confronting severe liquidity problems, which lead them to enforce capital controls and seek financial support from international institutions which would lead to the adoption of structural adjustment measures. This means that the government should fund the banks in order to overcome the liquidity issue. This fact will sharply increase people's anger as they demand higher incomes and better standards of living for themselves and not for the banking system.⁶

Despite the fact that the demonstrations are massive and intense, the level of violence is low. In the first few days of the protests alone, there was a violent escalation, due to the orders that the Lebanese army were given by the government. The reason why there is not much violence is directly

related to the cruel civil war that took place in Lebanon from 1975 to 1990. The civil war's impact acts as a deterrent, limiting violence by virtue of the fear of the same phenomenon being repeated in Lebanon.⁷ The situation is very complicated regarding the Lebanese army. There is a belief that the Lebanese army is the only institution of the state that has nothing to do with the sect division. Undoubtedly, the role of the Lebanese army in the demonstrations is far from self-evident. It is split between orders by the government and the demonstrators' demands, as well.

Another factor defining the volatile situation in Lebanon is Hezbollah's intervention. Hezbollah not only ordered protesters to stop demonstrating and return home but also threatened them with an upcoming civil war. Additionally, Hassan Nasrallah claims that these protests have been orchestrated by external powers which want to interfere in Lebanese matters. Consequently, the armed wing of Hezbollah organized some counterattacks to the anti-government protests, due to Hezbollah's coalition (National Coalition) with the former Prime Minister. These acts have reduced Hezbollah's popularity in the Shia circles. There are some Shia's who have recently opposed Hezbollah and its support to the anti-government protests. This reaction comes mostly from the poorer Shia, who completely agree with the demonstrators' requests. As a result, a crack has been created between Hezbollah and part of its social base.⁸ That means that maybe a different pole of Shia power will be created in order to represent the new requests of Shia people, due to Hezbollah's inability to do so. This fact will increase the conflict in the Shia circles and, consequently, a different kind of division may occur.

Despite the Prime Minister's commitment and Hezbollah's actions to put an end to these demonstrations, the latter have escalated across Lebanese territory. As a direct result of this escalation, the Prime Minister of Lebanon resigned on the 29th of October.⁹ This evolution spread optimism towards the protesters, however the demonstrations did not stop there.

The protesters are carrying on the demonstrations until their basic demand, after Hariri's resignation, is granted. More specifically, they want Hariri's government to be replaced by an independent cabinet of experts who can provide solutions to three matters of vital importance. More specifically their demands are: first, to be led out of the recession that Lebanon has been facing for a long time; second, to secure basic public services; and, third, to establish a new electoral law free of the sectarian division still existing in Lebanon.¹⁰

Due to the continuous escalation in Lebanon demonstrations, the first casualty has already occurred. More specifically, a local political party official has been killed by a soldier in Beirut. That means that the demonstrations can very easily get out of control and the levels of violence can increase rapidly. The situation in Lebanon continues to be very intense and fragile without any reliable solution insight yet; a solution which will ameliorate the current circumstances.¹¹

It is true that Lebanon did not experience Arab Spring outbursts similar to the outbursts that the majority of the Arab states experienced in 2011. Recent demonstrations though, seem to be a second wave of Arab Spring. This is due to the Arab people's demands which have influenced other Arab states such as Algeria, Sudan and Iraq. As a result, Lebanon has changed into a very vulnerable player in the Middle East region facing severe problems, such as the economic recession, the high unemployment rate, the dysfunctional political system, the refugee crisis and the social discontent. Hence, the unexpected demonstrations that started there on the 17th of October, which are directly related to the situation in Syria. Apart from the instability which the refugee crisis caused to Lebanon, the fragile ceasefire in Syria among Turkey, the Syrian Kurds and Syria played a role of vital importance for Lebanon. External powers, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia craving for instability, seized the opportunity to cause political problems in Lebanon.

In conclusion, Lebanon is due to experience rapid developments in its political system which will be regarded as a radical intersection in Lebanon's political life. This cross-sectarian movement has never appeared before in Lebanon's history and it will be the reason which will bring about multifaceted and multidimensional changes in the area.¹²

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