

Lebanon: A Revolution against Sectarianism

Chronicling the First Month of the Uprising

CrimethInc.

November 13, 2019

Contents

How It All Began	3
The Dual Nature of the Uprising	4
Reclaiming Our Streets	5
Tripoli, Light of the Revolution	6
The South and East Rise	7
The Establishment Fights Back	8
Creative Energy	10
Subterranean Shockwaves	11
The Revolution Is Feminine	11
What Comes Next?	12

Since October 17, Lebanon has experienced countrywide demonstrations that have toppled the prime minister and transformed Lebanese society. These demonstrations are part of a global wave of uprisings including Ecuador, Chile, Honduras, Haiti, Sudan, Iraq, Hong Kong, and Catalunya, in which the exploited and oppressed are challenging the legitimacy of their rulers. In Lebanon, a sectarian power-sharing arrangement dating from the end of the civil war has created a permanent ruling class of warlords who use patronage networks to maintain power by winning elections—confirming our thesis that politics is war by other means. In this thorough account of the events of the past month, an on-the-ground participant describes the Lebanese uprising in detail, exploring how it has undermined patriarchal structures and transcended religious divisions to bring people together against the ruling class.

How It All Began

For the people of Lebanon, the week of October 17, 2019 was among the most eventful in recent memory.

On the night of October 13–14, wildfires ravaged Lebanon and parts of Syria. We lost up to 3,000,000 trees (1200 hectares) in a country of 10,500 square kilometers (4035 square miles), nearly doubling the annual average of tree loss in just 48 hours. The government’s response was disastrous. Lebanon had only three helicopters, donated by civilians who pitched in, that were just sitting at the airport because they had fallen into disuse as the government had not maintained them. Although the government had allocated money for maintenance, it had “disappeared,” as so many funds do in Lebanon, into the hands of the sectarian upper class. The fires were eventually put out by a combination of volunteer civil servants (civil defense hasn’t been paid in decades) including people from the Palestinian refugee camps, random volunteers, aircraft sent by Jordan, Cyprus, and Greece and, luckily enough, rain. It could have turned out much, much worse.

Not satisfied with their own incompetence, Lebanese politicians started scapegoating Syrians, spreading rumors that Syrians were starting the fires and moving into abandoned Lebanese homes (Syrians are apparently fireproof). Some of them, like Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) politician Mario Aoun, complained that the fires were only affecting Christian areas, ignoring the fact that the Shouf region, where much of the fires happened, is actually a Druze-majority area. (See the Lebanese Politics podcast, episode 59.)

Rather than addressing the repercussions of the fires and preventing the next ones, the state exacerbated the situation. On October 17, the state approved a bill that would tax internet-based phone calls via services like WhatsApp. They framed this as an attempt to bring in additional revenue in order to unlock over \$11 billion worth of “aid” promised at the CEDRE conference in Paris:

“The World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa Ferid Belhaj said that if Lebanon wanted to see any CEDRE money soon, it needs to get serious about implementing reforms.”

These “reforms” were essentially measures further punishing the bottom-tier economic majority while excepting the top minority.

Lebanon had already experienced a series of economic crises tied to corruption and national debt—the vast majority of which (approximately 90%) is owed to local banks and the central

bank—resulting in several bank runs, fuel shortages, and strikes. Nearly \$90 billion is concentrated in only 24,000 bank accounts in Lebanon, which is to say, something between 6000 and 8000 account holders in Lebanon have over eight times the amount of money that the government is hoping to “unlock” with CEDRE. Although many media outlets focused on the so-called “Whatsapp tax,” it was actually the combination of all of these factors and many more that inspired outrage.

On the night of October 17, thousands took to the streets of Lebanon, including Beirut, Tyre, Baalbek, Nabatiyeh, Saida, and many other places in spontaneous protests. The protests were so overwhelming that the state cancelled the tax immediately. That night, a woman named Malak Alaywe Herz kicked the armed bodyguard of a politician; the video went viral and, as in Sudan, a woman became a revolutionary icon. By October 18, parts of downtown Beirut were on fire and large parts of the country were completely shut down by roadblocks, many of which involved burning tires.

I had joined the protests in Beirut by then and have been going nearly every day since. As an organizer of the 2015 protests, who grew up in Lebanon and who has been writing about it since 2012, I could see right away that these protests were going to be different. I wasn’t the only one taken over by that rarest of all feelings: hope. On the contrary, it was everywhere. In this account, I will try to explain why these protests have already created irreversible changes in the country, changes that the ruling warlord-oligarch elites are struggling to reverse.

The Dual Nature of the Uprising

It’s useful to think of the ongoing uprising as having both reformist and revolutionary dimensions. It is an uprising against injustice and corruption and a revolution against sectarianism.

The reformist dimension takes the form of protests against corruption. One common demand, expressed in the chant *kellon yaani kellon* (“all of them means all of them”), is for the government to resign. On October 20, four ministers associated with the Lebanese Forces (LF), a party led by former warlord Samir Geagea, resigned; since then, the LF has been trying, rather unsuccessfully, to ride the wave of the protests. The first major victory was Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s resignation on Tuesday, October 29, effectively collapsing the government as we had known it—although, as of this writing, he is still caretaker prime minister.

There are no unified demands coming from the streets; in many ways, there is resistance to formulating a list of demands. That said, there are several popular demands, mostly calling for the end of corruption and sectarian politics, which are rightly seen as intertwined. We see these in the street interviews conducted by TV stations, on social media, and between protesters themselves. As Kareem Chehayeb and Abby Sewell wrote, in addition to the government’s resignation, two common demands have been for “early parliamentary elections with a new electoral law for elections that are not based on sectarian proportionality” and “for an independent investigation into stolen and misappropriated public funds.” That last one was succinctly summarized by a man from Aarsal: “There is no war. This is about money. You stole the money, return the money.”

The protests are anti-sectarian in many different ways. They transcend what we might think of as left/right divides and even include traditional supporters of sectarian political parties. This anger is nearly three decades in the making; the inter-generational traumas are even older. Since the end of the civil war, Lebanon’s transnational warlord-oligarch class has perfected the rules

of the game. The state serves as a vessel through which this class can do business with itself and with primarily Gulf, Iranian, and Western elites; clientalist networks maintain structures of power benefitting this class, keeping segments of the population dependent on them; public infrastructures have been left to rot while rapid privatization limits freedom of movement between regions and regularly paralyzes the whole country; and, more recently, the fear of violence spilling over from Syria have been regularly evoked, three decades after the country's own civil war, to impose helplessness on the people of Lebanon.

Long story short: while trying to recover from 15 years of civil war, residents of Lebanon have spent the past three decades navigating life in a country whose affairs they have had very little say over. An implosion was inevitable, but the way it has happened is challenging the more cynical interpretations of Lebanese political life, including those of the Lebanese themselves.

Reclaiming Our Streets

When the civil war ended under the “tutelage” (read: occupation) of the Syrian regime, the powers that be scrambled to create a semblance of politics in order to promote the message that the 1990s would be the decade of reconstruction. In Beirut, this involved privatizing virtually everything. The historical downtown, which Arabs throughout the region refer to as Al-Balad (literally “the country”) was transformed into Solidere, the private company founded by the Hariri family. This “actually existing neoliberalism” was sugarcoated in a language of hope: the narrative was that only through business ties could the menace of the civil war be kept at bay. This was the time that our generation was born—the postwar generation that I like to refer to as the “afterthought generation.” We grew up hearing stories of “the good old days” prior to the war, when Beirut had a tramway and people could sell merchandise in public spaces. Needless to say, that rosy picture of the pre-war years glossed over many crises at the regional and national levels, crises that ultimately led to the civil war in 1975.

But the 1990s also saw other developments. The parliament passed an amnesty law in 1991 forgiving most of the crimes committed during the war, enabling those with established power to get into government. Most of the current political heavyweights were warlords or related to warlords, or else became active in the postwar era either in its first days or after the 2005 Cedar Revolution that expelled the Syrian army.

These political figures include Nabih Berri, leader of the Amal movement since the 1980s and speaker of parliament since 1992; Michel Aoun, president of the republic, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) who returned from exile in 2005, and father-in-law of Gebran Bassil, who is also a leader of the FPM as well as the foreign minister; Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces (LF) since the 1980s, freed from prison in 2005 and historical rival of Aoun; Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah since 1992; Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Progressive “Socialist” Party (PSP) since 1977; and Samy Gemayel, leader of the Kataeb party and nephew of Bachir Gemayel, a warlord who was assassinated in 1982 while president-elect. In addition, we can count Future Movement (FM) leader Saad Hariri, repeat prime minister and son of assassinated prime minister Rafik Hariri, as one the most prominent oligarchs of the postwar era, alongside Tammam Salam, former prime minister and the son of Saeb Salam, six-time prime minister before the civil war, and Najib Mikati, also former prime minister and usually cited as the richest man in Lebanon.

In short, Lebanon is ruled by political dynasties that were forged in the fire of the civil war or during its postwar “reconstruction.” This is who protesters in the northern city of Tripoli addressed on November 2 with the chant “we are the popular revolution, you are the civil war.”

Tripoli, Light of the Revolution

Tripoli, Northern Lebanon’s biggest city, has been at the forefront of the uprising. Nearly every day since October 17, thousands of protesters in Tripoli have taken to the streets to demand the fall of the sectarian regime. To quote one 84-year-old participant, “There is so much poverty and deprivation here that, no matter how this turns out, things will be better.” In addition to the spectacular displays of popular mobilization, *kellon yaani kellon* and “the people want the downfall of the regime” ring out on a daily basis.

Tripoli, a Sunni-majority city, has been openly defying the sectarian narrative by declaring that they stand with Nabatiyeh, Tyre, and Dahieh—all Shia-majority. When Hezbollah and Amal *shabbiha* (government thugs) attacked protesters in Nabatiyeh on October 23, Tripoli responded “Nabatiyeh, Tripoli is with you until death.” The “popular revolution vs. civil war” chant, quickly adopted in the rest of Lebanon, presents a narrative in which those who still cling to their sectarian identities as relics of the civil war oppose those who are trying to build a future that is inclusive of all regardless of religious sects. Tripoli’s protests indicated early on that this uprising would be different.

Tripoli has maintained a distinct momentum because of the organizational structures that have emerged. As in Beirut, protesters in Tripoli have set up people’s hospitals and discussion forums in addition to occupying the municipal building. The mobilizations have been so inclusive that, for the first time I know of, protesters from elsewhere in Lebanon have gone to Tripoli to participate in the protests there, in response to an open invitation. On October 22, just before protesters started chanting “the people want the downfall of the regime,” a man with a megaphone declared “if they [the government] shut down all the squares, you are all welcome in Nour Square [the main square].” For the first time, Tripoli became the center of national Lebanese outrage. Nour means “light” in Arabic; the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury named Tripoli the light of the revolution.

To grasp the significance of this, it is necessary to understand that parts of Tripoli and the Akkar district north of it have historically borne the brunt of state violence while being demonized by the public and media as hubs of Sunni extremism. Both the Lebanese state and Hezbollah have adopted their own versions of the post-9/11 “War on Terror” narrative, and the Sunni-majority areas of northern Lebanon, among the poorest of Lebanon and close to Syria, have become scapegoats. Yet despite these attempts by the sectarian parties, the scapegoating of the North has failed to hinder this movement. One can find sectarian comments online, usually mingled with anti-refugee comments, but they have not significantly impacted the momentum on the streets.

This is why the status of Tripoli as the de facto capital of the revolution has made political actors like the FPM very uncomfortable. The FPM television station, OTV, has regularly demonized protesters in Tripoli and Akkar, engaging in a disinformation campaign from the start. One headline claimed that Tripoli was “copying” the Syrian city of Homs (brutally crushed by the Assad regime in 2014), suggesting that militants from Idlib were making their way there. Another pundit on OTV proclaimed “just as we went to Syria and buried their revolution, we will bury this revolution in Lebanon.” (The FPM never militarily participated in Syria, but its ally Hezbollah

obviously did). When an activist in Beirut responded to anti-Syrian refugee sentiments by chanting “Bassil out, refugees in,” OTV took that footage and added the headline “American training, Saudi incitement, Syrian infiltration.”

The Syria connection runs deep. Protesters in Tripoli have chanted “Idlib we are with you until death,” in reference to the Syrian city that continues to be bombed by the Russian and Syrian air forces; Syrian chants have been adopted and re-purposed throughout Lebanon. As one Syrian activist wrote, “Lebanon’s political establishment, particularly the part of it that is still in power, is increasingly annoyed by Tripoli and going to lengths to paint in a bad light the city and its inhabitants.” The scapegoating of Tripoli could be seen as an extension of the Lebanese government’s response to the Syrian revolution, especially on the part of Hezbollah, Amal, and the FPM. Although officially unaffiliated, the Lebanese government has taken a hardline turn against refugees since Aoun’s election in 2016—not that the government was pro-refugee before. Bassil especially has associated himself with this rhetoric, hence the anti-Bassil pro-refugee chant.

The district of Akkar has arguably been scapegoated by politicians and media outlets even more than Tripoli. Although protests there began alongside the rest of Lebanon, media coverage remains minimal. On October 30, protesters in Akkar, as elsewhere in the country, echoed the famous Syrian chant “yalla erhal ya Bashar” (hurry up, leave Bashar [Assad]), adjusting it to “yalla erhal Michel Aoun,” as first heard in Beirut. That same night, security forces attacked a march in Akkar as protesters tried to block the roads. The violent response by security forces led protesters to contrast the relatively mild response by security forces in Beirut to their response in Akkar.

The South and East Rise

The other part of the story here is set in the South, especially in Nabatiyeh and Tyre (known as *Sour* in Arabic), as well as the Bekaa Valley in the East.

Protesters in Nabatiyeh were among the first to demonstrate on the night of October 17. By October 18, some were already challenging long-standing taboos. The very suggestion one protester made on live television—that Nabih Berri, whose Amal movement dominates the region politically alongside Hezbollah, has been Speaker of Parliament for too long—terrified the journalist interviewing him; the tweet documenting this has since been deleted. To understand why this occurred and why what is happening in the South and East is so important, we need to discuss the *shabbiha*.

The *shabbiha* have historically been a Syrian phenomenon. The word itself comes from “ghost” or “shadow”; it is often associated with black Mercedes S600 cars (called *al-shabah*) which have been used for kidnapping Syrian dissidents and protesters. Later on, the term took on a more general connotation, describing men willing to be violent on behalf of their *zu’ama* (singular: *za’im*)—local warlords or chieftains—who often receive orders from above. This can be anything from beating up protesters to kidnapping, torturing, even killing them. The latter isn’t as common in Lebanon anymore, which is why the term *shabbiha* now means any pro-government actor willing to inflict violence on protesters.

One image, for example, shows armed pro-Amal *shabbiha* in Tyre on October 19; a video from that same morning shows these *shabbiha* attacking protesters. Due to their nature, it is often very difficult to identify *shabbiha*, and almost impossible to “prove” a chain of command. But for both

historical and contemporary reasons, they have become associated with the Amal Movement and Hezbollah (although armed FPM *shabbiha* have also attacked protesters on at least one occasion).

Although Beirut also experienced two major attacks by *shabbiha*, it is worth noting here that even the events of October 29, when hundreds of Amal/Hezbollah men went to downtown Beirut to beat protesters and journalists and destroy tents set up by protesters, pale in comparison to what they have been getting away with in the South. On October 23, Amal/Hezbollah *shabbiha* attacked protesters in Nabatiyeh, injuring over 20 of them. This so shocked protesters that half a dozen municipal council members resigned the next day under pressure. In response to the October 23 attack, October 24 was called “the day of solidarity with Nabatiyeh” and a meme was passed around with the words “Nabatiyeh doesn’t kneel, ask the Zionists.” On the “Sunday of Unity” (November 3), protesters in Kfar Remen, historically known for its communist resistance to Israel’s occupation of southern Lebanon, met with protesters from Nabatiyeh. Some protesters fleeing Nabatiyeh’s Hezbollah-affiliated police went to Kfar Remen to join the protests there.

This is an extraordinary turn of events for a region of Lebanon that is often considered Hezbollah and Amal’s unchallenged territory; the same goes for the Bekaa valley. But the challenges to the dominant powers have continued. We’ve heard chants such as “We don’t want an army in Lebanon except the Lebanese army” (a challenge to the actual dominant military power, Hezbollah) as well as in solidarity with Tripoli and the rest of Lebanon. We saw violence by *shabbiha* in Bint Jbeil, a town on the southern border which suffered greatly under Israeli occupation and then during the 2006 war. Tyre also joined on the first evening, chanting “the people want the downfall of the regime”; by October 19, *shabbiha* were violently attacking protesters. Journalists were forced to flee the scene as *shabbiha* were indiscriminately beating anyone in their way. One witness described how the *mukhabarat* (secret police) were following protesters alongside the *shabbiha*.

As for the Bekaa valley, media coverage has been relatively low. There have been protests in Zahleh, Baalbek, Taalbaya, Bar Elias, Saadnayel, Chtoura, Majdal Anjar, Al-Fakeha, Hasbaya, Rashaya, and Al-Khyara, among other places.

The reactions to these *shabbiha* attacks were an early sign of the proverbial barrier of fear being broken. Protesters in Beirut chanted “Tyre, Tyre, for you we will rise” (which rhymes in Arabic), a chant that rapidly became common throughout the country.

Since then, we’ve seen a now-familiar pattern repeat itself: repression is followed by resistance, which is sometimes followed by sectarian supporters turning out in large numbers, but other times results in protesters gaining the upper hand. This is an important part of the uprising; there is also a very clear attempt by protesters to “convert” sectarian party supporters under the unified banner of anti-sectarian politics. Up to now, this has proven relatively successful: while we can never assess who officially supports sectarian parties and who does not, anecdotal evidence and direct testimony suggest that a majority of the population would at least agree with the broader discontent motivating the protesters.

The Establishment Fights Back

These attacks could be described as the stick part of the government’s carrot and stick strategy. As for the carrot part, it’s been rather confused. The main actors have been struggling to offer a coherent response to the protests, largely because they disagree among themselves and are

trying, as usual, to navigate their own politics on a daily basis. The decentralized and horizontal nature of the protests has hampered the state's attempts to demonize or co-opt them.

Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, gave a speech on October 19. As of this writing, Nasrallah has spoken four times since the beginning of the uprising already, an unusual phenomenon in itself. Although Nasrallah holds no official position in the Lebanese government, he is seen as a de facto kingmaker due to Hezbollah's military power. But despite having a reputation among his followers of being relatively sober in his speeches, his first speech was characterized by unadulterated rage, arrogance, and condescension. He directly told protesters that they are wasting their time and that this "mandate" (his choice of words could also be translated as "era" or "covenant") will not fall, in reference to the 2016 deal that led to Michel Aoun becoming president and Saad Hariri becoming Prime Minister (Remember, Nabih Berri has not left his position of Speaker of Parliament since 1992.) He even accused protesters of being funded by foreign embassies, leading protesters to respond by saying "I am funding the revolution," which has since become a meme and appeared on street signs as well. One Lebanese videographer responded by posting a video of Nasrallah himself saying that Hezbollah is 100% funded and armed by Iran.

By maintaining support for the government, Nasrallah threw his weight behind two of the most unpopular men in Lebanese politics: the FPM's Gebran Bassil and the FM's Saad Hariri. This exposed the establishment as opportunistic and corrupt. Just as the sectarian political parties united in 2016 to defeat Beirut Madinati in the municipal elections, they were now once again uniting to defeat the popular uprising. But Nasrallah made a grave error. By saying that this government will not fall, he added pressure on Hariri to resign. Hariri was already the weakest link in this coalition, as he had to appeal to his rivals the FPM and Hezbollah to stay in power against his own supporters' wishes. On October 29, Hariri finally resigned, apparently surprising Hezbollah. In thirteen days, protesters had forced the collapse of a government that had taken months and months to be formed.¹ In the weeks since the revolution started, the warlord-oligarch class has been scrambling to address a crisis they never anticipated.

But as mentioned above, other political parties have been trying to ride the wave of the revolution. This has been especially obvious with Geagea and the LF, the FPM's historical rival—a rivalry that dates back to the bloody Geagea-Aoun battles during the civil war and was rekindled after 2005. The LF saw a golden opportunity when the revolution started: by quitting and leaving an unpopular government, the LF believed it could weaken its rivals, as both groups appeal to the same sectarian votes. There have been LF supporters blocking the roads as well; this has posed a conundrum for anti-government protesters. Following Hariri's resignation, some protesters prefer to focus on the big players currently in government—Aoun and Berri, respectively president and speaker of parliament—yet the slogan *kellon yaani kellon* continues to dominate protests. Despite what supporters of the FPM/Amal/Hezbollah want to believe, the LF is not popular among protesters; it has negligible support in most places that have seen protests. There is a strong consensus that no sectarian political party will be supported, no matter how hard they try.

It is still too early to know what the government's next steps will be. As of this writing, the caretaker government has yet to appoint new ministers and the parliament is planning to discuss a law that would grant a general amnesty covering crimes such as abuse of authority, negligence, and environmental crimes. The situation is developing very quickly.

¹ You can read a detailed summary of the 72 days before October 17 here.

Creative Energy

The protests in Lebanon have been incredibly creative. Students in Tripoli have used cranes to get other students out of class; sandwiches were handed out in Beirut labeled “funded by Saudi Arabia/France/US” to mock those alleging that the protesters are funded by foreign powers; one of the many roadblocks was turned into a public salon with couches, a refrigerator, and people playing football, and featured on AirBnB (for free); protesters occupied Zaitunay Bay, a private waterfront built on top of Beirut’s stolen coast, and screened the film *V for Vendetta* (on November 5, obviously); images of sectarian leaders have been taken down and burned; people have banged pots, echoing Chile’s cacerolazos, on the streets and from their homes; volunteers have established soup kitchens in Beirut and Tripoli; a historic abandoned cinema was reclaimed and repurposed as a cinema, classroom, and gathering spot for artists; people formed a human chain from the north to the south; protesters blocking roads sang “baby shark” to a child stuck in traffic; protesters regularly wear masks of Guy Fawkes, Dali, and the Joker; organizers have arranged open forums to bring together protesters from Tripoli, Saida, Nabatieh, Zouk, Aley, and Beirut. Protesters “blocked” a railway station as a joke, to make a point: Lebanon’s railways were destroyed during the civil war and never rebuilt. The privatization of the 1990s came at the expense of public spaces and services, which is why a big part of the protests have sought to reclaim them, engaging in guerilla planting and the like.

The general idea here is that protesters have to re-invent their tactics constantly in order to make it difficult for the state to keep up. For example, there is an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of roadblocks. The chief objection is that politicians are not as affected by them as everyday people trying to go to work or send their kids to school. As of now, this tactic is still being used, but it’s no longer the main one. In recent days, protesters have moved to occupy or protest in front of government buildings and other symbols of power: everything from politicians’ houses to national power stations (most of Lebanon still does not have 24/7 electricity), passing the main telecommunications and data operators, banks, municipalities, and so on. There are now dozens of different actions on a daily basis, with most actions announced only a day before. As of this writing, high school and university students—and some even younger students—have been protesting for three days in Saida, Beirut, Jounieh, Tripoli, Koura, Bar Elias/Zahleh, Mansourieh, Hadath, Baalbek, Nabatiyeh, Al-Khyara, Al-Eyn, Mazraat Yachouh, Furn El Chebbak, Akkar, Tannourine, Batroun, and Byblos/Jbeil, among other places.

There has also been an online effort to counter fake news spread by supporters of the government and the political parties themselves, as well as to help protesters stay informed more generally: el3asas (“the city watch”) is verifying news spread on social media and by official news outlets; a directory called Daleel Thawra (“directory of the revolution”) is keeping track of the various actions, activities and initiatives; TeleThawra (“revolution TV”) offers an alternative to Lebanon’s government-owned Télé Liban; Fawra Media (“Outburst Media”) aims to document “the individuals and groups that are sustaining the Lebanese Revolution”; Sawt Alniswa (“Voice of Women”) is a women-run magazine published weekly; and Megaphone News has been a leading independent media outlet since 2017.

Subterranean Shockwaves

These developments have opened up a space for people and narratives that are usually suppressed at the national or party level.

In addition to the aforementioned, Palestinian and Syrian activists have actively participated in the protests, particularly in the two biggest cities, Beirut and Tripoli. Elements of the sectarian media took advantage of this to reiterate their allegations that the protests are “infiltrated by foreigners.” Aware of this, many Palestinians and Syrians have since learned how to navigate Lebanese politics, chiefly by keeping a low profile. Besides a protest in Ain El Helweh Refugee Camp, where Palestinians directly expressed solidarity with the Lebanese protests, the Palestinians in Saida, Beirut, Tripoli, and elsewhere who have participated so far have been careful to “keep to the sidelines in the Lebanese demonstrations to avoid being accused of instigating or usurping the protest movement.” This, notably, has made it more difficult for the xenophobes to play their usual game, given that it is impossible to differentiate between Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian people unless they wave their respective national flags. (This text offers some background on the scapegoating tactics.)

We’ve also seen, to a lesser extent, chants from protesters in solidarity with Egyptians, Sudanese, and other Arab parts of the Middle East and North Africa region, and there is some awareness, mostly expressed on social media, of ongoing protests and violence in Iraq, Hong Kong, Rojava, and Chile. Although quickly forgotten at the national level, we also saw riots on the first day in Zahle and Roumieh Prisons in solidarity with the protesters, as well as to bring attention to Lebanon’s horrific prison conditions and to repeat calls for a general amnesty law, as many people are arrested for supposed links to jihadi groups, drug possession, and so on.

As of now, there’s been no major participation by migrant domestic workers, who are generally confined to Lebanese family houses or else are languishing in horrific underground prisons with little to no political rights under the country’s notorious *Kafala* (sponsorship) system. That is unlikely to change in the near future, given the restraints imposed on them, but if the momentum of the protests continues, it could open up enough political space for new political connections to form.

The Revolution Is Feminine

Up to now, the protests have focused on tackling widespread corruption and the sectarian system. But the role of feminists, including LGBTQ+ and/or non-Lebanese activists, suggests an attempt by segments of the protesters to create a more progressive and inclusive movement. Feminists have held separate marches to highlight the patriarchal structures that disproportionately oppress women and LGBTQ+ people—notably, the fact that Lebanese women still cannot pass on their nationality to their spouses and children and the fact that the country’s sectarian laws governing such affairs as marriage, divorce, custody and so on discriminate against women. Both women and men have marched for the right to pass on nationality, in Tyre and Tripoli, and elsewhere.

Women have also used their bodies to protect other protesters from the police and prevent violence from escalating. As Leya Awadat, one participant in these “feminist walls,” put it, “In this

chauvinistic society, it is badly seen for men to publicly beat women” (emphasis on *publicly*)—so they have been using that to their advantage.

LGBTQ+ people have also been the target of homophobic insults. One *shabbiha* attacking protesters on October 29 was heard on live television yelling, “Men are fucking men!” A guest on OTV claimed that protesters want to destroy sectarianism in the name of some kind of “gay agenda.”

The feminist marches always meet up with the main marches. The idea is not to create separate movements but rather to make their presence known within the wider demands for justice and equality. Feminists have led many of the roadblocks and many chants as well as maintaining an active presence in day-to-day activities that help maintain the momentum of this uprising. One way they have accomplished this is by reclaiming chants and songs—both traditional and recent—and removing their sexist connotations. The popular “hela hela” song against Gebran Bassil insulted his mother—it is very common in the Arabic-speaking world to use women or their genitals as insults—so feminists changed it to insult both Gebran and “his uncle” (the president, Michel Aoun) instead, creating a chant that has since caught on. They also reclaimed a traditional song used to send women off to marriage, changing the lyrics to “she went to protest, she went to close the roads, she went to bring down the government.”

What Comes Next?

Contrary to what some have assumed, the elephant in the room is not sectarianism as of now. While the risk of sectarian tensions will likely remain for the foreseeable future, the more immediate risk is the looming economic crisis. In my opinion, this is why more radical forms of politics are only timidly surfacing. The fear that things will get much worse is both real and realistic; it is very difficult to speak of alternative ways of organizing ourselves, even transcending the petty (and dangerous) Lebanese/non-Lebanese distinctions, when most people’s primary concern is the likelihood of medicine and fuel shortages and possibly even food shortages. While more radical politics may organically develop if the economic situation gets worse, it is also possible that the more nationalistic and sectarian elements of Lebanese politics will be strengthened instead. The latter tendencies have decades of experience in power, whereas the kinder forms of politics are relatively new, just being built on the streets and online.

Consequently, a dominant perception among protesters is that we need to be both angry and careful.

That being said, the soup kitchens, the free healthcare tents, and the reclaiming of privatized historical sites and coastal areas are all initiatives that implicitly affirm what we can call the commons. This is crucial to understand in a country that has had no commons in recent memory, where they dominant “pro-market” ideology predates the establishment of the nation state of Lebanon.

Although the main actors could be argued to be roughly a dozen or so public figures, the reason the clientalist networks have so far worked also has to do with the existence of a subset of the population which benefits from these networks. They place themselves as intermediaries between the oligarchs and those seeking *wasta* (bribes, nepotism, “who you know”) to receive services not provided by the state. In other words, some people have financial incentives to maintain clientalist networks against the establishment of anything that might be called public institutions.

Overhauling and then overthrowing such a system will be difficult. Overthrowing such a system while confronting the state's brutal potential will be even more difficult.

But if the loose coalition of anti-sectarian progressives doesn't tackle this issue, it is likely that the state will scapegoat those it has already been targeting: Syrian and Palestinian refugees and workers, migrant domestic workers (mostly from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, and overwhelmingly women), LGBTQ+ people (citizens and non-citizens), sex workers, and the like. Any individual who doesn't fit the dominant patriarchal-capitalist-sectarian paradigm is at risk of physical, psychological, and symbolic violence.

Finally, and this is related to the previous point, defeating political sectarianism and "the sectarian way of doing things" is seen as an immediate priority. This system, which dates back to the 1860s in one manifestation or another, has been losing its aura of being untouchable with the postwar generations, both Millennials and, especially, Generation Zs—those who have lived their entire lives hearing their parents complain "Where is the government?" when they have to pay two separate bills for electricity (private and public) and three separate bills for water (private and public running water, private bottled drinking water). As the warlords get older—two of the most powerful ones, Aoun and Berri, are 84 and 81 respectively—we will see the inevitable decline of the sectarianism of the civil war era.

But while this might be inevitable, the question is whether anti-sectarian progressives will succeed in building sustainable alternatives that can challenge the old order.

We have many reasons to hope, as Bassel F. Salloukh wrote, because "the October 17 revolution marks the definitive end of the civil war, and a genuine bottom-up reconciliation between one-time warring communities."

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



CrimethInc.

Lebanon: A Revolution against Sectarianism
Chronicling the First Month of the Uprising
November 13, 2019

Retrieved on 17th June 2021 from crimethinc.com
Report courtesy of Joey Ayoub, writer.

theanarchistlibrary.org