

[opendemocracy.net](https://www.opendemocracy.net)

Lebanon: a revolution redefining a country

Walid el Houry

13-17 Minuten

It has been over three weeks since protests erupted in Lebanon on the night of October 17. The revolutionary wave continues to grow to include wider sectors of society. Protesters keep surprising themselves and everybody else as they lead a popular uprising that has swept across the country, breaking taboos, stereotypes, and the centrality of Beirut as the only place that matters in the Lebanese political, economic and cultural narratives.

The revolution – and the choice of the term here is a political one – has also exposed the shortcomings of the common narratives about the country. For instance, when Lebanon appears on international news, it is usually covered, understood, and presented as part of a story on geopolitics, sectarianism, and violent conflict. Indeed, the country is governed by political forces sponsored by, or aligned with one state or another taking part in various international and regional conflicts, from Iran, to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Syria, Turkey, the US, Russia, etc...

Since the eruption of the revolution, international media outlets have struggled to cover the massive and historic

protests in the country. Like most people, they were taken by surprise and could not make sense of what is happening.

This is not to say that the country requires more visibility (Lebanon has historically been over-represented in both media and academia compared to its neighbours for reasons that could relate to accessibility but also to class), Lebanon compared to the rest of the region is extremely accessible to foreign correspondents and there is a massive production of images from the ground, nonetheless coverage has often failed to escape the common tropes that determine the media coverage of the country.

But why is it then so difficult for the international media to grasp what is taking place in Lebanon?

For decades, Lebanon has been understood and analysed through three main lenses or tropes:

- Geopolitics: the country is a space of conflict between regional and international players, and any event taking place internally pertains to the balance of power in the region. Local political parties act as clients to major international and regional powers.
- Sectarianism: the Lebanese political system, social fabric, and cultural identity revolves around a number of competing sects with competing interests.
- Armed conflict and war: Lebanon as a location of internal armed conflicts, or regional wars.

These lenses while often reflexive of some realities on the ground, are certainly reductive and limiting to any analysis of the country as a whole, and certainly the ongoing

revolutionary movement.

Interestingly enough, these are the same lenses through which the Lebanese political establishment has dealt with the ongoing events. I use the term political establishment here to refer to the totality of the sectarian/political network of forces that are referred to by the slogan of the revolution “all of them, means all of them”. That is to say the ruling political class and its networks of corruption and power including bankers, partisan media, business people, etc... regardless of their disagreements on matters of geopolitics or local interests.

Since the eruption of the protests, the Lebanese political establishment has been incapable of responding to the demands on the streets. The schism between the protesters and the discourse of the political parties in government has never been so wide with each side speaking in another register.

This incapacity to look outside the aforementioned lenses has shown the bankruptcy of the sectarian political parties who used what suddenly seemed very archaic methods to quell protests: thugs, rumours, social pressure, sectarian tensions, emotional blackmail, fear of economic collapse, promises of reform, conspiracy theories, accusations of treason, threats, etc...

The political class in its totality has failed to respond according to the importance and gravity of the protests and the severe economic crisis that provoked them. This crisis is the result of the economic policies and entrenched corruption that has defined Lebanon's post-civil war decades.

The speeches of all major politicians or leaders who spoke

since the start of the revolution, most notably president Michel Aoun, PM Saad Hariri, or Hezbollah's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah, have essentially said exactly the same thing: "We are the good guys, we are with you but the others are the problem. We will support reform. We have always said we need to fight corruption. Give us another chance. There is no alternative. etc."

On the ground, however, a clearly orchestrated campaign to suppress protests with violence, rumours, fear, and fake news and a push for sectarian divisions was underway with the full force of the state (with the army, and internal security forces), the partisan media, and the various political parties and their militias or thugs.

Hezbollah and Amal movement thugs attack protestors and destroy the protest camp site in downtown Beirut, while the police and army watches.

Each attempt to suggest a fix, or contain the protests has been a new boost for those who no longer buy into the same lies. With the trust in the political establishment lost, each attempt simply showed that this political class is incapable of reform and simply seeking to gain time in order to suppress the movement.

What is done is done

The reality on the ground is that the revolutionary movement does not resemble any previous protest movement in the country, and it has already achieved much more than a resignation of a government.

- It is a revolution against icons. With the prevalence of insults

and so-called vulgarity of much of the slogans, the sanctity of the untouchable political leader has been broken. Insults have been a crucial aspect that breaks taboos, and reflects the organic anger that has been the driving force behind the revolution.

Protestors in the southern city of Tyre chant: "Thief, Nabih Berri is a thief"

- It is a revolution of the peripheries, one that is truly decentralised and led mostly from outside of Beirut. In fact, Beirut has been perhaps the least important location in terms of mobilisation, in a country where almost half the population lives in the capital city and its surroundings, which monopolises most business, cultural, and political activity.

Tripoli has witnessed massive rallies daily since the start of the revolution

- The creation of a Lebanese national narrative that is not reactionary, and one that, as a friend noted, is no longer defined in relation to the Palestinian and Syrian neighbours. This might also help tame the toxic levels of racism that have defined 'being Lebanese' in relation to migrant workers and refugees. Perhaps, we can hope. This is in common with Iraq, another country whose national identity has been shattered by the primacy of sectarian identities.

- A reconciliation with a new emerging national identity that is not sectarian, and the growing popularity of the demand for a non-sectarian system among previously skeptical segments of the society.

School and university students take to the streets in Saida

- A rare cross-regional solidarity that broke much of the sectarian and regional divisions in the country and has established a solidifying national cohesion and class awareness, and has also fed the agency of protestors across the country through emerging professional unions, a spectacular student movement, and neighbourhood groups.

Protestors in Tripoli chant for other regions across the country

- An ethical revolution: in a country where daily aggressions and violence, corruption and racism seemed to have become the norm, it is striking to see aspects of self organising that relate to mutual help, solidarity and care (cleaning streets, recycling, soup kitchens, group demands, care for the most vulnerable, etc...).

A revolution of attrition

For now there is no signs that any political party is willing to learn or understand what is happening on the streets, or take any form of responsibility let alone make any concessions. It seems like the revolution and the political establishment are living on different planets at the moment. This however is part of a strategy, betting on de-mobilisation and fatigue.

Many figures both from within and without the political establishment are of course attempting to ride the revolutionary wave. But till now people have shown great resilience at having their force tamed or represented.

What has been crucial is that the movement is decentralised both in the sense that it is spread all across the country but also that there is no central leadership. The latter aspect has confused the political establishment as it cannot find anyone

to bargain with, pressure, or target in order to break the ranks.

It is also important to note that many who are demonstrating are partisans, and are likely to remain so, however it is the very concept of being a partisan that is being transformed. Partisan is not longer a follower of a particular leader but a voter who expects and demands their rights from the state and the party they vote for.

This will be a game of attrition and will require a lot of resilience from the protestors. The revolution requires endurance.

The reality in Lebanon is that all aspects of the state from economy, to judiciary, police, banking, etc... are controlled by the same rhizomatic network that we call the political establishment. Essentially it is a network of warlords, business men, religious figures, bankers, and landowners, etc... It is not easy to counter this network, with its financial, military, and social capital. And it is certainly not a fair competition if the location of the confrontation is on its turf.

At the moment, the momentum seems to continue and it will be crucial for it to continue while facing the campaigns that are seeking to end the protests and safeguard whatever is left of the sectarian status quo.

Creating alternatives

Some of the means to weaken the ruling network and endure the long revolutionary process is by creating alternative structures for survival instead of competing with the centralised power on its own turf.

The creation of alternative economies can weaken the control

of the capitalist class over the livelihood of people and the economic life of the country, while also preparing to respond to the severe economic crisis which has provoked the revolution in the first place and which will certainly not be resolved by those who made it happen and profited from it.

Some of these methods were used in Greece, Mexico, and elsewhere and we can be inspired by them to create our local practices: Informal economic exchange where local producers in the industrial or agricultural sectors in various regions can sell products directly to people in cities, the establishment of new informal markets to avoid big distributors, establishing informal funds and financial support systems that can protect the most vulnerable people who might suffer from the long revolutionary process, funded through donations from the diaspora and the more financially capable people in the community, care centres, providing medical services, alternative education for students, etc...

Informal community led alternatives that bypass the centres of power in all sectors will have the impact of safeguarding the endurance of the revolution while weakening the political establishment and providing a true alternative to the failed economic and political model that has led Lebanon to its current economic crisis.

A revolution for all

Furthermore, there is a space in the revolution for the rights of all people, and not only for the Lebanese. Establishing the shared interests of all workers living in the country will be crucial for the fight against the entrenched racism in Lebanese society. This is the moment to advance anti-racist,

feminist and queer discourses and practices of solidarity and to create connections between all groups suffering under the current social and political system and the wider public: from domestic workers, to refugees, to the LGBTIQ community, etc...



Vigil for the two Syrian workers who were killed on the first night of protests. “The street of martyrs: workers Ibrahim Hussein and Ibrahim Younes” | Picture by Walid El Hour

Furthermore, we have seen already a fast developing local political organising as well as cross regional coordination with alternative communication networks and new independent alternative media which are decentralising the power structures in the country and solidifying the movement without having to become a uniform or homogeneous one.

The media will be a crucial aspect of the confrontation since Lebanese media is completely controlled by the same ruling establishment with varying political agendas and have actively contributed to the protection of the corrupt ruling forces and often been the spearhead of hate speech, sectarianism, and the cult of leaders.

From Chile to Iraq, passing by Algeria and Sudan, and many

other places, we are seeing leaderless movements sparked by anger, frustration at the levels of injustice, unaccountability, and utter disdain from those in power towards people and environment. Iraq and Lebanon share the fact that sectarianism has been the weapon used to divide and rule over people. But it was people's livelihood, taxes that target the poor while the rich can evade any fiscal responsibility, the absence of rights and care in exchange for these taxes, that made people rise in what can be described as a class uprising.

Today it is a struggle over meanings: the meaning of citizenship, of class and sect, of resistance, of imperialism, of religion, etc. But it is also a struggle against the dark cloud of failure, that feeling of demotivation when power pushes us into a fight of attrition, into depletion and disappointment. There is no quick gratification, this will be long, and a regime as old as the Lebanese one will not go without a fight. But for now many seem to be more than ready to face the challenge.