



Diwan

Out With the Old, In With What?

Maha Yahya

More than protests, Lebanon today is witnessing a profound social revolution.

December 16, 2019 Comments (+)

Lebanon's protests, which began on October 17, have focused on the need to change the country's power-sharing system and reverse the rapid deterioration in the quality of daily life. But something more profound is taking place. We are witnessing a social transformation, a revolution in the norms underpinning Lebanese society.

Demands by protestors to bring down the regime are an indictment of the catastrophic political and economic mismanagement of the country by its political class. Most of the wartime militia leaders came to power after the end of the civil war in 1990, moving into state institutions. A key component of the Taif agreement that helped facilitate a postwar settlement was the dismantling of Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system. However, this was never implemented. An amnesty law passed in August 1991 forgave perpetrators of wartime crimes, and was based on the logic of no victor, no vanquished.

What ensued was a profound abuse of the political system, which effectively divided the national pie between sectarian leaders. The net result was catastrophic. Today, the budget deficit is around 152 percent of GDP and net foreign reserves have declined dramatically. According to a 2016 World Bank report, patronage politics have cost Lebanon an estimated 9 percent of gross domestic product annually. This is in part due to the fact that the state rarely punishes corruption when it is associated with sectarian political elites. While public servants and their political sponsors directly pocket around 25 percent of public-sector funds, perhaps up to half of the population today is below the poverty

line. Inequality is rampant with the richest 1 percent of Lebanese receiving 25 percent of national income. The healthcare system is broken with 52 percent of the population lacking proper health insurance. Around 50,000 children were out of school in 2016. And while the national electricity utility costs the country 11 percent of its budget deficit, the Lebanese pay twice the regional average for electricity. Pervasive inequalities in access to fundamental services such as health and education are evident across the country irrespective of region or geography.

In this broader context, protesting against political sectarianism does not mean that people have dropped their sectarian identity. Rather it signals that the Lebanese have decided to privilege a broader national identity and their rights as citizens. This has come with a realization that sectarian communities have not protected or preserved the dignity of their members or guaranteed their rights. Rather it has allowed a narrow group of leaders to prevail, usurp communal representation, propagate a siege mentality among followers, and generate equal opportunity abuse among all communities.

What has emerged since the protests began is a revolt against the system and a complete collapse of trust in all institutions—state institutions, political parties, the banking sector, and professional associations. This revolt has been accompanied by an expanding sense of national solidarity and recognition that the “us versus them” formulation is no longer about sect, ethnicity, class, or gender. It is about a corrupt political class versus the rest of the country.

Along with this national awakening, the moment is also about upending social norms. What is taking place is partly an uprising against a patriarchal system that maintains unequal relationships among citizens, especially its women. Women have been at the forefront of demonstrations, mobilizing, forming lines of defense between protestors and the security services, organizing events, and leading efforts to decrease sectarian tensions between neighborhoods. They have also demanded equal rights in a country where the relationship between citizens and the state is defined by the personal-status laws of sectarian communities. For women this means they are subjected to one of eighteen different systems of communal law with regard to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody.

Similarly they have also protested against other discriminatory laws to which they have been subjected. To maintain a demographic balance in Lebanon’s sectarian system, women are denied the right to pass on Lebanese citizenship to their children if they were born from a non-Lebanese father. Women have angrily denounced this flagrant denial of equal status under the law.

The protest movement is also about generations. The large number of high school and university students participating shows that they are fighting for their future. Unemployment is high, the prospects of pursuing satisfying and enriching careers is low, and on top of that the young cannot vote until they are 21 years old. This generation is a post-ideological generation that believes in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and many young people blame their parents for ceding them a Lebanon that is broken and from where they must emigrate so as to improve their prospects. They want to be defined by ideas, not their identities. The country is laden with a debt that will affect the young for decades, it lacks basic infrastructure, and its environment has been poisoned through the pursuit of mercenary practices, provoking protests in the past.

This movement is also about the systematic exclusion of the country’s impoverished populations, whether they live in Lebanon’s geographic peripheries or on the edges of major towns and cities. Populations are protesting their continued marginalization from political and economic life in a country that has historically centralized such activities in Beirut.

In Tripoli, which has been dubbed the “bride of the revolution” because of the high participation rate in demonstrations, 51 percent of residents live in extreme poverty on less than \$4 a day for a household of five, compared to the national average of about \$15 a day. Unemployment levels in

some of the city's neighborhoods have reached 55 percent. In Nabatiyeh, in southern Lebanon, 25 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and unemployment stands at 13 percent. In 'Akkar, 13 percent of children work. Given the economic crisis and the tens of thousands of people losing their jobs as a result of businesses closing, more and more protestors from such areas and across Lebanon will take to the streets.

The protests are also about opposing the privileging of connections and sect over merit. Professionals and expatriates are playing a key role in this process, supporting or organizing protests, debates, and discussions. They have been disenfranchised for decades by a system that fails to award jobs and contracts on the basis of ability. In contrast, many Lebanese are very successful abroad even as they have been unable to make a difference at home.

The movement is about a rediscovery of the public realm as well, a reassertion of notions of the public good and reclaiming the rights of citizens to their towns and cities, where entire neighborhoods have been cordoned off for security purposes or under the pretext of urban rezoning. Public squares, abandoned theaters, pre-civil war architectural icons, and private parking lots in the once historic center of Beirut have been opened up. These have been transformed into spaces of discussion on topics that were once limited to academia or civil society activists. Lawyers, student organizations, labor unions, university professors, some political parties, and civil society organizations have been organizing these discussions daily across the different spaces of protest. They are tackling topics as varied as electoral laws, the role of media, economic options for Lebanon, the public good and shared commons, how to deal with trauma after the civil war, and what a new Lebanon might possibly look like.

For the first time in the country's history, this new sense of empowerment pushed representatives of around 500 private-sector companies to stage a demonstration with their employees recently. They declared that they would refuse to pay taxes and, instead, divert the sums to their employees, in that way avoiding having to lay them off. This took place outside the purview of traditional chambers of commerce, trade associations, and other representative institutions related to the private sector. Similarly many of these individuals have now turned to creating alternative and independent associations capable of representing their interests.

How this new sense of social solidarity and the upending of norms will stand the test of time is unclear. But a fundamental societal shift is taking place in Lebanon that will have repercussions down the road. Women will play an even more visible role in public affairs, as will youths who are the country's future. Lebanon's downtrodden will determine the nature of the country's political leaders, who will be publicly held accountable. Lebanon's politicians have to accept that as far as they are concerned it is no longer business as usual. In order to survive, they need to account for new social realities.

Solidarity is what has enabled the Lebanese to gain ground in their protests and score important victories. But more importantly, it is necessary to protect the nascent sense of national awakening as the Lebanese navigate the turbulent months ahead, that will be characterized by considerable economic and political uncertainty. The political leadership may increasingly try to inflame sectarian tensions because it has little left to offer. The instinct to turn back to those sectarian leaders may increase should those leaders miraculously manage to provide some forms of economic relief. But appealing to those who brought the country to its knees will not bring a better life. For that, the Lebanese can only rely on their fellow citizens.

More on:

LEBANON

Carnegie Middle East Center

Emir Bechir Street, Lazariéh Tower
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061
Riad El Solh, Lebanon

Phone

+961 1 99 15 91

Fax

+961 1 99 15 91

Contact By Email

© 2019 All Rights Reserved