Protests in Lebanon: The Rebirth of the Lebanese Unity

Jana Samadová

Annotation

On October 17, 2019, spontaneous and peaceful protests erupted all over Lebanon demanding the resignation of its political class. As protests quickly spread throughout the country, tens of thousands of people united in Beirut, Tripoli, Zahle, Nabatieb, Jalal-Dib, Tyre, Sidon, Batroun, Byblos and Baalbek, under the Lebanese flag and anthem instead of the political parties’ emblems and chants. The people gathered regardless of religious affiliations to stand against the politicians who, in their eyes, have long been dividing them and stripping them of rights and well-being. As of November 19, the demonstrations are still not waning off despite the resignation of the PM Saad al-Hariri and his government and promises of economic, political and social reforms.

Protests Erupt in Lebanon

An unprecedented unity, long overshadowed by political and religious divisions endorsed by politics, only encouraged more people to join the protests and made them more resilient due to a wider social and civil base. The youth and students, joined by people from various professions, backgrounds and social status, chant “Kellon Yaani Kellon” (All of them means all of them), targeting not only the whole ruling elite with no exceptions, including Hezbollah, but also the Lebanese political system as such. Apart from property destruction, the protests have been short of major violence for the most part, with demonstrators clashing several times with the army or the police for different reasons. On occasion, some political partisans, such as Hezbollah supporters, attacked protesters and ransacked demonstration sites in Beirut.

The demonstrations should not come as a surprise since major aspects of the public life have been deteriorating for decades. They are the escalation of people’s steadily growing grievances against the ruling elite that has “amassed wealth for decades but has done little to fix a crumbling economy and dilapidated infrastructure.”

On the night of October 14, Lebanon was hit by extensive wilderness fires described “as the country’s worst wildfire event in decades.” The disaster sparked a wave of criticism over the government’s response, its ineptitude to handle the crisis and a new instance of alleged corruption. In fact, the country has received three firefighting helicopters as a donation in previous years, but the government failed to fund their maintenance, thus preventing their use during the fires. In the days that followed, political figures completely neglected to address the issue that sparked public outcry. On the contrary, the government spoke only about levying new taxes, including those targeting widely used internet communication applications and social media platforms, such as WhatsApp (a $0.20 daily charge on voice calls through WhatsApp was introduced).

The government’s inadequate response to the fires coinciding with the austerity measures, triggered the mass protests on October 17. Demonstrations pushed the government into agreeing on political reforms in the record time of 72 hours compared to the eight months it took the PM just to form that government. The refusal of the reforms, however, led to the resignation of the government on October 29.

The protests have no apparent leaders, which may be perceived as a downside since they do not offer an alternative leadership to the current elite which, according to the demonstrators, is to blame for the country’s issues and should be removed from power. Thus, the question is whether there is going to be a genuine elite change or a mere reshuffle. So far, demonstrators have refused to moderate their
uncompromising stance and continue with rejecting any solutions that would keep the same people in power.

The Reaction of the Political Elite

The PM Saad al-Hariri was among the first to react. On October 18, he addressed the nation acknowledging the protests and the popular anger building up throughout the years. He, however, shifted the blame to his rivals accusing them of stalling and obstructing his reforms to decrease the budget deficit, tackle electricity shortages, overhaul the political system including the outdated laws from the 1960s and revive the economic growth of the country. These reforms were supposed to pave the way for foreign donor pledges and investments. Therefore, al-Hariri asked his government, partners and rivals alike, to agree on a reform package within a 72-hours deadline, suggesting that he might otherwise resign.9

On October 21, al-Hariri announced the reform plan agreed on by the government. It included a 2020 budget with a 0.6% deficit; no new taxes imposed; increased taxation on banks that would contribute with $3.3 billion to the ‘near-zero’ budget deficit; a 50% salary cut of current and former presidents, ministers and MPs; the abolishment of several government institutions (such as the Ministry of Information); budget cuts for other state agencies such as the Fund for Reconstruction and Development by 70%; reducing the electricity deficit; the endorsement of insurance pension and poverty-support plans; or a law to restore stolen, misused or corrupted funds.10

However, the reform plan was rejected by the protesters and al-Hariri resigned on October 29. As much as this plan looked promising while offering comprehensive measures, its cornerstone - a budget with 0.6% deficit - was hardly feasible in the short term. Such deficit equals to $340 million (the amount is calculated from the $57 billion GDP in 2018).11 In contrast, in 2018, the deficit amounted to $6.5 billion (11.5% of the GDP in 2018).12 Moreover, the government claimed to be able to shrink the deficit without more taxation falling directly on the citizens.

The tax reforms the government had introduced prior to the protests were precisely aiming at reducing the deficit but only to less than 9% of the GDP in 2019.13 This argument alone undermines the credibility of al-Hariri’s reform plan, introduced hastily under the pressure of the masses.14

As for the presidency, it took Michel Aoun a week to address the protestors. On October 24, he praised his achievements in fighting corruption and sectarianism while reassuring the nation of his continuous commitment to anti-corruption measures and condemned ‘other’ politicians for corruption and money embezzlement. He hinted that he does not plan to step down and the regime would not be changed in the streets, but through constitutional institutions.15 Aoun’s speech was met with disdain and his son-in-law, the now former minister of foreign affairs Gebran Bassil, remained one of the main targets of the protests.16 He reappeared on October 31, with another pre-recorded speech commemorating the end of the first half of his term, again listing his achievements.17 President Aoun then addressed the protesters calling for the establishment of a new technocratic government without sectarian- and political affiliation-based allocation of posts. He identified the previous power-sharing practices as the main cause of failure of many state projects.18 In his latest appearance on November 12, Aoun expressed, among other comments, that “if the people do not find decent leaders in power, let them immigrate,” further fuelling public outcry prompting the protesters to block key roads throughout the country.19

Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, spoke three times, addressing the demonstrations. He backed al-Hariri’s reforms package, refusing the fall of the presidency nor the holding of early elections, and warned the protesters from the risk of pushing the country into chaos and potentially a civil war. According to Nasrallah, the government’s resignation would create a power vacuum that could possibly lead the country into “civil unrest similar to what’s happening in the region,” arguably referring specifically to recent developments in Iraq.20
Hezbollah is perceived as the most powerful force in Lebanon since it emerged, with its partners, as a major winner in the parliamentary elections of 2018. Hence, the protests and an interim political vacuum would negatively affect Hezbollah, already put in the spotlight by being an Iranian proxy and having arms outside of state structure.

The Lebanese Forces led by Samir Geagea announced on the onset of demonstrations, already on October 19, its withdrawal from the government citing lack of confidence in the current cabinet. Whether this was an attempt to quickly appeal to the protesters or a well-thought strategy to avoid the blame thrown at the government, no other political party or politician joined them in their move before the resignation of the PM.

In general, the political elite reacted in various ways. Some refrained from openly addressing public demands or explicitly refused the resignation of the government. Others have been trying to appease the angered demonstrators by supporting the reform plan but still lobbying for their power positions. Some politicians tried to join the protestors but to no avail, for example in Tripoli, Mosbah al-Ahdab, a former MP, which led to clashes. In other words, existing political actors across ideological and sectarian landscape have been unable to hijack the protests, despite some’s recurrent attempts to threaten and scare off the protestors.

**The Systemic Issue Leading Up to October 17**

Basic social services in Lebanon suffer from systemic shortcomings including unequal access to medical treatment, social security and pensions. The healthcare system and particularly the hospitalization sector, suffer from insufficient funding, causing inflated private services and in turn inefficient public hospitals lack equipment and staff. Without centralized health insurance system citizens are forced to rely on private operators. However, a significant portion of the population cannot afford full coverage. Existing public welfare institutions such as the National Social Security Fund is in deficit and fail to provide pensions for population over 64. Furthermore, the government does not provide retirees from the private sector with social security. This leads to a large portion of the population with low income making them susceptible to falling into poverty.

In turn, salaries of the Lebanese president, ministers and MPs are among the highest in the world compared to the minimum wage in the country. Additionally, they cash in on various benefits, dispensations and provisions. For instance, MPs no longer in office keep receiving remuneration ranging from 55 to 75% of their former salaries according to the number of terms served. Their families keep collecting the money even after the former MP's death. Moreover, Lebanon scores 28 points out of 100 in the Corruption Perceptions Index of 2018 (0 is attributed to the most corrupted countries).

Lebanon’s economy is also highly burdened with debt as the balance-of-payment lingers in red numbers and the fiscal stability depends on external and domestic borrowing. Foreign borrowing is then conditioned by the ability to maintain macroeconomic stability, ensured by cutting expenses and raising tax revenues. The public debt has reached $80.39 billion in 2018, witnessing an upward trend in the past five years, or staggering 150% of the GDP, making Lebanon one of the most indebted countries in the world. Despite the 2019 budget that was supposed to kick start a five-years economic recovery plan to reduce deficit and prevent financial crisis, the economy is now on a verge of a currency crisis. For twenty years, the Lebanese pound (LBP) has been pegged to the US dollar to avert currency devaluation, consequently raising prices of imports in a country highly dependent on imported goods and foreign remittances. Due to several reasons that go beyond the scope of this article, in late September 2019, Lebanon suffered from shortage of hard currency, causing a spike in the exchange rates and hindering the purchasing power of the people. While the central bank fixed the exchange rate at 1507.5 LBP/USD, the market rate reached 1595, causing urgency among the citizens, who fearing devaluation, wanted to buy US dollars and withdraw savings in US dollars from the banks. The economic
instability and the remittances drop, in an economy highly reliant on expatriates’ money being sent home, led to the decrease of the LBP demand.\(^3\)

Finally, the citizens still deal with an acute garbage crisis, since the government failed to commission a company for garbage collection and disposal. As a result, garbage was scattered across seashores and mountains, causing health and environmental hazards.\(^4\) Electricity blackouts for several hours every day are also ever-present, forcing people to pay yet another bill for private generators.\(^5\) In addition, people struggle to put their kids in costly private schools and universities given the low quality of the public institutions. The economy suffers from high unemployment rates, especially among youth (the official youth unemployment rate is 37\%\(^6\)), forcing many to look for jobs abroad and thus draining the country from educated and competent people. The poverty rate keeps increasing throughout the years, from 27.4\% in 2011-2012 to approximately 30\% in 2018 and risks rising to 50\% if the ongoing economic crisis worsens.\(^7\) Furthermore, the GDP per capita growth has been witnessing negative numbers since 2011\(^8\), concurrently with the Syrian war that has also taken a toll on the Lebanese economy – the influx of refugees to an already saturated job market and a hit to the Lebanese exports seen that Syria was one of its main trade partners.\(^9\) Lebanon ranks as 91\(^\text{st}\) in terms of the GDP per capita (2018), compared to the rest of the world.\(^10\)

The list of grudges of the people against their government goes on but in conclusion, the authorities failed to satisfy basic needs and deliver public services while also fuelling religious and party-backed division in the society. The Lebanese electoral system guarantees that all the eighteen confessions are represented in the parliament according to their demographic weight and that the 128 parliamentary seats are equally divided between Christians and Muslims. These divisions also translate into sectarian quotas in the bureaucracy and the executive branch, for example the president must be a Maronite, the PM a Sunni and the speaker of the parliament a Shiite.\(^12\)

### The Way Forward

The people’s demands include the resignation of the government, new parliamentary elections and the retribution against the corrupted within the political system. Some demand the separation of religion from politics along with calls to implement economic and social reforms by a smaller technocratic cabinet.\(^13\) The streets demand long-term and systematic changes. However, the political dynamics in Lebanon are rather slow hallmarked by carefully negotiated sectarian compromises among elites which tend to stall and obstruct the political process. Albeit there is still hope that this time the situation will result in genuine change, in line with protestors’ demands.

Unlike other Arab Spring countries, Lebanon already has a relatively liberal Constitution, amended at the end of Civil War in 1990. It ensures the constitutional, democratic and lawful means to reach the demands being chanted in the streets. After the resignation of the government, the president is supposed to lead parliamentary consultations to form a new government (Article 53\(^14\)). A power vacuum would not take place as the resigned government keeps performing some governmental tasks and duties under the temporary status of a caretaker government, until a new government is formed (Article 64, Paragraph 2\(^15\)). The latter should be established based on technocracy, in a compact format and outside of the current political spectrum.

The parliament would entrust the new government with new legislation acts: a law ensuring the independency and competency of the judiciary system to punish corruption, abuse of power, embezzlement of public funds and other unlawful conduct. The other act should introduce a new electoral law separating the sectarian affiliations from the equation of power division, according to which elections should be held. This would align with the Constitution and would only be an application of the constitutional amendments. For instance, the Article 95\(^16\) declares that the parliament should take the appropriate measures to eliminate political sectarianism.
In this scenario, people could choose their deputies according to electoral programs and competencies regardless of religious affiliations. The newly elected parliament would then elect a new president who would then name a new PM who in turn would form a new government. However, there is a risk that the same actors would remain in power since the same parliament would be consulting with the president regarding the new government. There are already talks that the political parties would rename al-Hariri as PM and are lobbying for seats in that new government.  

Here lays the crucial importance of the pressure exerted by the protesters and the public opinion on the leadership. Consequently, the people would regain trust in the ruling elite and in the implementation of reforms and measures against corrupted politicians and fraudulent officers. At this point, the new political system should come forward with reform plans to address all the economic, financial, monetary, social and environmental issues mentioned throughout this article. For instance, authorities could address the fiscal problems by raising the tax-to-GDP ratio, increasing the revenues through direct taxes such as those on wealth and property, reducing the reliance on public debt, creating job opportunities and generating real economic sustainable growth. Finally, the ruling class should hear out the demands of the people now and at all stages of dealing with the current events. However, politicians seem very attached to their seats and reluctant to abandon their positions. Thus, the question remains to what length are they willing to go to preserve those positions?

---

**Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?**

- Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”

**Two Decades Is Under Siege**

- Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”

**Not Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?**

- Hannes Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”

**Washington Post, October 22, 2019**

- Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”

**On the Occasion of the End of the First Half of His Presidential Term (In Arabic)**

- Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”


**Protests”**

- Hannes Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”

**Not Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?**

- Hannes Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”

**On the Occasion of the End of the First Half of His Presidential Term (In Arabic)**

- Hannes Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”

**Not Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?**

- Hannes Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”

**On the Occasion of the End of the First Half of His Presidential Term (In Arabic)**

- Hannes Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”

**Not Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?**

- Hannes Baumann, “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Didn’t Happen Overnight. So How Did It Get to This Point?”